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The Voice that Carries Everything: History and Confession in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*

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Installation at the Viet Museum of San Jose, CA. (All photos are my own)

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A note on use of diacritical marks

Vietnamese is a tonal language. Its vowels and consonants are written in a Latin script based on Romance languages with additional diacritics. Such diacritics denote the six tones of Vietnamese language and other vowel qualities. This means that a given Vietnamese signifier can stand for several meanings depending on the way it is written—the classic example being the word "ma," which, depending on the tone, can mean "mother," "rice plant," "grave," "horse," "but/that," or "ghost." Over the course of this study, I keep the diacritics in the case of direct quotations, personal names, name places, historical characters (e.g., "Hồ Chí Minh," "Ngô Đình Diệm"). To make the text more accessible, however, I chose to omit them, as with the original syllable division, in the case of widely known toponyms ("Hanoi" in lieu of "Hà Nội," "Saigon" instead of "Sài Gòn", "Vietnam" instead of "Việt Nam", etc.). The same goes for those authors who adopted the Westernized spelling and dropped the diacritics from their names (e.g., "Ocean Vuong" instead of "Ocean Vương"). Similarly, I keep both the Eastern order that puts the last name before the middle and the first, and the Vietnamese custom of referring to a person using their given name (e.g., "Thiệu" in the case of "Nguyễn Văn Thiệu"). However, I address diasporic authors and individuals who adopted Westernized naming conventions by their last name, according to their own practice and preference (e.g., "Nguyen" for "Viet Thanh Nguyen," "Viet Thanh Nguyen" in lieu of "Nguyễn Thanh Việt"). While I understand that my choices may prove to be confusing for the general reader, I also believe that by respecting such customs I will concur to provide another small window into the complexities of studying the Vietnamese diaspora and its literatures.

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1. An Aesthetics of Distortion: An Introduction

The focus of the present study is Viet Thanh Nguyen's debut novel, *The Sympathizer* (2015), in its double capacity of historical novel and confessional narrative. A milestone of Vietnamese American literature, *The Sympathizer* has won several accolades including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and is currently being adapted into a miniseries for HBO. Since opinion has it that the book deals with a time in history (the war in Vietnam) that has been rarely addressed from the one perspective that the book channels (that of the Vietnamese), the idea has taken hold that the aim behind the novel was that of countering American memories with Vietnamese ones. That is not entirely accurate. First of all, one must keep in mind that there is no such thing as a single "Vietnamese side of the story." The war in Vietnam was a long-winded massacre that lasted decades and saw involved a variety of state and non-state actors. Primarily, it was a fratricidal struggle between a communist North and a capitalist South Vietnam. Behind the two Republics stood a plethora of Cold War patrons who supplied both with weapons. Despite American help, the outcome was a resounding defeat for the South. In 1975 the country was reunified under Hanoi's rule. A long period of poverty and political repression ensued, igniting a mass refugee exodus that displaced millions. The new regime soon imposed its own version of history through statues, plaques, and school syllabuses that erased any trace of its vanquished foes. Roughly at the same time, Hollywood started to turn war trauma into spectacle with the release of high- and low-budget movies that retold the conflict as a multiple act, all-American tragedy in which the Vietnamese were mostly sidelined if not altogether erased from the picture. In the newly formed diaspora, scores of exiled opponents formed parties and ragtag armies bent on infiltrating the homeland and leading impossible counterrevolutions. Theirs was a virulent anticommunist rhetoric, founded on a refugee nationalism "rooted partly in Reagan-era policies

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favoring anticommunist guerrilla 'freedom fighters'" out of which "emerged fascist organizations willing to kill their Vietnamese critics" (Nguyen 2017, 12).

This crossfire of memories is the very foundation upon which Viet Nguyen built *The Sympathizer*. It is not accurate to herald the novel as an instance of someone telling a story known by all, but by a fresh perspective (the fabled "Vietnamese side of the story"), as the subject of the war in Vietnam has been addressed by nearly four decades of Vietnamese and diasporic literary works that long predate Nguyen's novel. Nor is it correct to approach it like one would approach a historical novel centered around a specific time and place. In fact, *The Sympathizer* is not about the war in Vietnam as much as about its afterlives in memory. It does not deal with war as much with war narratives and with the power rationales that allow for their (unequal) dissemination. As a 1.5 generation refugee from South Vietnam and a leading scholar in the field of Asian American literature, we could say with Ben Tran that Viet Nguyen "is a product of the Vietnam War in two senses: the historical events of the war forced Nguyen and his family to resettle in the United States as refugees, and, equally significant, the solidarity struggles of ethnic studies in the universities during the 1960s and 1970s proved to be formative for Nguyen's entwined politics and aesthetics" (2018, 417). Indeed, *The Sympathizer* is unapologetically political in tone, and it is quite inevitable to read it under the light of Nguyen's own scholarly work. In this respect, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (2016), a non-fiction essay about the role played by industries of memory in reshaping war narratives, offers a fundamental key to interpreting the novel's themes and messages. At its core lies the idea that each one of the three versions mentioned above (the Vietnamese communist myth of national resistance and liberation, Hollywood's "all-American tragedy," and diasporic revanchism) is founded on the erasure of the other two. It follows that all the cultural artifacts addressing the war's memory are to be seen as fabrications that always convey

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partial perspectives. All kinds of Vietnam War narratives, says Nguyen, are based on distortions, manipulations, and erasures. This study claims that his answer to this state of things was devising a fiction that was in turn based on distortions, but *deliberately* so. This fiction is informed by a logic according to which the only way to expose the power (un)balances underlying the industries of memory is to fight fire with fire by putting together an implausible narrative that with its own existence questions the reliability of the others. In the case of *The Sympathizer*, as this research will demonstrate, this is accomplished via a patent rejection of realism. All of Nguyen's creatives licenses, I argue, are part of an overall design. By bending the facts, by stuffing the story with historical impossibilities (and occasional anachronisms), Nguyen brings into question the power circumstances that make misrepresentation possible. This is not to say that he is the first writer coming from this war to embrace antirealism. In this instance, however, aesthetic (un)representability of war it is not intended as a philosophical matter as much as a political issue. The question is not "is the war in Vietnam representable?" as much as "*whose* representations of the war in Vietnam get passed down?" In other words, the issue at hand is not representability but *representations*.

Nguyen's rejection of realism takes many forms. Stylistically, the book rests on a baroque, whimsical prose timbre specifically engineered to enhance the story's farcical undertones. As we are dealing with a spy novel, the structure is overloaded with knotty subplots that dovetail one into another. However, spy novel tropes are but screens concealing a more challenging class of narrative. *The Sympathizer* is a self-labeled "thriller of ideas" thinly disguised as genre fiction—a piece of criticism written in form of a novel. By pairing the work with the essay/manifesto *Nothing Ever Dies*, we derive a picture in which Nguyen's fiction and nonfiction are part of one same "fict-critical" project. Every oddity within *The Sympathizer* is thus to be explained as a *strategy of implausibility* meant to sewing political discourses into the

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story. By having a spy protagonist from the 1970s that thinks like an ethnic studies professor from the 2000s, by merging plots of cinematic classics and B-movies, by showing Vietnamese communists dressed as mad scientists using CIA methods of torture, and a number of other such oddities, the novel goes far beyond the mere necessity of opposing hegemonic memories with suppressed histories, to embrace instead an aesthetic of distortion and infidelity meant to unsettle easy dichotomies of victims/victimizers typically found in other Vietnam War narratives.

Key in this respect is also the adoption of the confessional mode. Vietnamese American literature at large is not devoid of first-person narratives and epistolary novels. As a literary genre, confession lends itself well to a diasporic community rife with buried stories, divided loyalties, and family secrets dating back to wartime. Self-writing is also an established staple of the American and "ethnic" American literary canon. As I will demonstrate throughout the study, Nguyen's innovation consists in 1) using confession as a metafictional frame; 2) tapping into at least five cultural frameworks by referencing as many meanings of the term "confession"; 3) introducing an unreliable narrator into the picture. By means of metafiction, he devises a subversion of what the literary marketplace would expect from a former Vietnamese refugee committing pen to paper. As a coerced confession written under duress, *The Sympathizer* is structured as an "ethnic" first-person narrative in which the hostile circumstances that ignited the autobiographical impulse are made evident by the textual frame itself. Crucial in this respect is also the use that Nguyen makes of Vietnamese history by putting his narrator-protagonist into a communist reeducation camp where self-criticism sessions are held daily. As we will see, Nguyen's metafiction revolves around a co-option of the confession papers historically used in such prison facilities as a metaphor for publishing industry standard regarding minority literature. Thus, my idea is that Nguyen uses an unreliable confession as a

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means to reframe (and reimagine) history. Through what I call the "confession-as-a-frame," he rewrites postwar Vietnam using satire and avant-garde solutions in lieu of period realism. His is a deliberate fabrication, a game of historical refractions conveyed by the voice of a deranged narrator who hides theory and ideas beneath the cover of genre fiction. Nguyen's rejection of realism is therefore to be understood as intentional and as part of a political/aesthetic project aimed at rethinking the war and its afterlives in memory under a new critical light. A coerced confession penned by an unreliable narrator and addressed to a hostile audience is the narrative pretext for a metafiction aimed at exposing the invisible connections that tie stories with power. In essence, the novel is a parable, the parable of a prisoner forced to write his own history until he becomes an artist that sees through the limits of language and audience reception. This parable underlies the idea of a scholar/novelist grappling with the expectations of a publishing industry that pigeonholes every "ethnic" American author into the ill-fitting role of a memoirist/representative authorized to speak on behalf of a whole community.

To prove the above, I divided this study into two parts. In the first one, "A Game of Refractions," I focus specifically on *The Sympathizer* as historical novel. Over the course of seven sections, I go into detail about all the distortions and diversions put into place by Nguyen, his using history as raw material for his twofold "fict-critical" project.

Section 2.1, "Reeducation literature," provides an overview of those Anglophone memoirs written by reeducation camp survivors that the author used as a source for the novel. My point is that by reading this neglected corpus of texts one may derive a picture of the historical context channeled by the novel, a context which is still unknown to most outside of the Vietnamese diaspora. As cultural vectors designed to engage with unaware readers, reeducation memoirs provide a window on a distant time and space that is key to understand *The Sympathizer*. Not

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only that, but they also breathe new life into conversations around the role of testimonial literature and the possibilities of language. To engage with this corpus, I channeled Ben Tran's concept of "literary dubbing," that is, that which occurs "when an author translates characters' speech and thought from the implied or referenced language, within the diegetic frame, to the language of representation or the reader's language" (2018, 414). By means of literary dubbing, Anglophone reeducation memoirs make postwar Vietnam "legible … in the linguistic paradigm of English" (2018b, 158). To approach these texts I also made use of Hayden White's notion of "figural realism," that is, the way in which testimonial literature presents facts as "sequences of figures [that the memoirist] creates by which to endow the facts with passion" (2004, 119).

Section 2.2, "A refugee chronotope," begins with a brief summary of Vietnamese American narratives with special regards to literary images of reeducation camps. Throughout the section, I question whether *The Sympathizer* is to be seen as a "reeducation fiction." My idea is that Nguyen renovated the diasporic canon by reclaiming the camps as a place of the imagination. Building on Pierre Nora's and Mikhail Bakthin's respective definitions, I argue that Nguyen turned a "site of memory," namely, a "significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of [a] community" (Nora 1996, XVII), into a "chronotope," that is, a "connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships … artistically expressed in literature" (Bakthin 84). By doing so, Nguyen had the freedom to reimagine a reeducation camp as a Modernist space, the ideal background for the absurdist theater chapters that mark the last leg of the novel at the center of the first part of this study.

In section 2.3, "The confession-as-a-frame," I take into account the first three connotations of the term "confession" and the resultant cultural frameworks it encompasses: 1) the historical documents produced in reeducation camps, upon which Nguyen had based the textual frame of

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the novel; 2) the Christian sacrament; 3) the conversion narrative. In the case of the first, using various sources I reconstruct the role and function of self-criticism papers in the "reeducation" process. My point is that Nguyen took the idea of using these papers as a narrative device from an obscure episode he found in a reeducation memoir called *Lost Years*. My following argument is that "confession," in *The Sympathizer*, is more likely to be a reference to religion than to bureaucracy. The Nguyenian idea of Catholicism and communism as comparable ideologies based on penance and self-criticism leads us to the possibility of seeing *The Sympathizer* as a conversion narrative that ends abruptly. To further ground this connection, I made use of theologian Adrienne Von Speyr's writings concerning the institution of confession, as well as philosopher María Zambrano's essay on the confession as a genre. After having provided a short list of literary influences for the "literary dubbed" voice of the narrator, I return to the concept of "frame" by reading Nguyen's device as a novelistic spin on Judith Butler's idea of war narratives as ones determined by a "mandatory framing" (71) that limns them. In my interpretation, *The Sympathizer*'s is a self-imposed "frame of (post)war," a textual device that with its own existence gestures towards what is outside of it, that is, towards the industries of memory that retain the "means of representation." At the end of the chapter, I also lay out a tentative outline of the diegetic manuscript at the center of *The Sympathizer* and of its sequel novel, *The Committed* (2021).

In section 2.4, "Autobiography as guided Little Saigon tour," I deal with the two remnants "confessional" frameworks addressed by the novel: 1) the American 2) and Asian American autobiographical tradition. The chapter title itself refers to a famous essay by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong which traces a years-spanning debate on fiction, authenticity, and community, centered around the works of writer Maxine Hong Kingston. My reasoning is that Nguyen inserted himself into a rich lineage of Asian American authors that resist exoticization and white

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acceptance. This resonates with *The Sympathizer* as a metafiction, as the novel (ironically) co-opts the layout of the self-criticism essay as a way to ridicule the American publishing industry's presumptions regarding memoirs and writers of color. To shed some light on this dynamic, I made use of Hans Jauss' concept of "horizon of expectations."

In section 2.5, "Strategies of implausibility," I argue that many characters in the novel are susceptible to be seen as allegories, personified concepts, mouthpieces that give voice to conflicting political perspectives. Not by chance, they often bear names-function (the General, the Chair, the Auteur, etc.). My contention is that Nguyen's usage of stock characters is deliberate. In this section, I also discuss Nguyen's use of modernist solutions in the latter end of *The Sympathizer*, reading this choice under the lens of Hayden White's theories. White maintains that modernist techniques de-fetishize historical atrocities, clearing the way "for that process of mourning which alone can relieve 'the burden of history' and make a more, if not totally realistic perception of current problems possible" (1996, 32). Moreover, I posit that Nguyen's literary rendition of a reeducation camp as non-geographical site steeped in Eliotian images finds parallel in the "shadowy sublime" and "wretched aesthetics" concepts that he himself describes in *Nothing Ever Dies* with regards to Southeast Asian war museums. Then, I read Nguyen's use of history in light of categories like Elodie Rousselot's neo-historical novel and Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, testing the extent by which the novel could or could not fall into such definitions. My conclusion is that *The Sympathizer* shares some traits with both but lacks key aspects such as the "aesthetics of nostalgia" (Rousselot 5) of the first, and the emphasis put on paratextual elements typical of the second.

Section 2.6 deals with what I call "refracted history," that is, the way in which Nguyen turns the 1970s into a test bench for modern reckonings about power, memory, and empire. My claim is that *The Sympathizer* reimagines the war in Vietnam as a Petri dish for America's

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"forever war" by putting the emphasis on a common genealogy of interrogation methods that recur from Saigon to Guantánamo. In the novel, history becomes a circus of atrocities in which the oppressed and the oppressors keep trading places. To enforce this, Nguyen recenters the violence by having Vietnamese communists using CIA torture techniques. Thus, the novel reframes history by outlining unseen continuities. In doing so Nguyen also references Hollywood's own history of "re-racialized" violence as expressed in Vietnam War movies. Then, I run a comparison with another Vietnam War narrative, Tim O'Brien short story "In the Field." My contention is that a passage from O'Brien's story mirrors another from *The Sympathizer*, and that by placing them face to face one can derive a picture of two conflicting paradigms regarding issues of culpability during wartime. While O'Brien's narrative focuses on combat decisions, in Nguyen's framework history becomes a chain of casualties and causalities in which yesterday's wars and today's are one the mirror of the other. To root my argument, I also make partial use of Paul Ricoeur and Hanna Arendt's theories on guilt and responsibility.

In section 2.7, "A thought experiment," I go back to historical sources. In this section I explore how Nguyen founded his "thriller of ideas" not only on historical distortions but especially on historical *diversions*. My case is that Nguyen based the outline of the novel on a real story, that of communist double agent Phạm Xuân Ẩn, a *Time* Magazine journalist working undercover for the Politburo. Ẩn was a "poetic spy" in love with American culture. Loyal to the Party yet full of affection for his American and South Vietnamese friends, he was a man torn between divided allegiances. After the war ended, as his side eventually prevailed, he could finally break his cover. Notwithstanding his hero status, he lived a recluse life and was put "in the political deep freeze for a decade" (Bass 2009, 224). I argue that Ẩn was the inspiration for 'the captain,' Nguyen's narrator-protagonist, as both are American-educated communist spies

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who see things from both sides. In 1975, Ẩn was originally supposed to leave Vietnam to spy on American soil, but he was stopped in his tracks by order of his superiors. Nguyen's protagonist is thus an alternative version of a real character, a Phạm Xuân Ẩn that got the task and left the country. To prove my point, I reference Catherine Gallagher's ideas on counterfactual narratives, with special regards to her definition of "thought experiment," which is key to understand the use that Nguyen makes of historical facts to build his narrative. I also contend that Nguyen recontextualized Ẩn's story in fiction by channeling the tropes of John Woo's cinema, all the while devising an allegory of diasporic subjectivities as strangers in the house of their parents and perpetual foreigners when outside.

The second part of this study is titled "A Gallery of Stills," and deals specifically with *The Sympathizer*'s satire of *Apocalypse Now* and of Hollywood Vietnam War movies. Nguyen's criticism of Francis Ford Coppola owes a debt to Chinua Achebe's critique of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Coppola, Nguyen argues, treated the Vietnamese as props, the colorful backdrop of an all-American tragedy. The Hollywood subplot is the one moment in the novel in which Nguyen's fiction and critique overlap the most. Here, the aesthetics of distortion is not applied to historical sources but rather to movie plots. Nguyen devises a fiction in which he can put a stand-in of himself on the set of a cinematic (mis)representation of the war in Vietnam in order to shed critical light on Hollywood's "simulacrum vision[s]" (Gradisek 15). By making his protagonist a movie consultant on the set of an *Apocalypse Now*-esque work titled *The Hamlet*, he puts his theories on power and stories into practical test. Through fiction, he has the chance of addressing such issues in real-time rather than forty years later behind the walls of a university classroom.

Over the course of this part, I make my case that 1) the fictive movie seen in the novel is not a send-off of *Apocalypse Now* as much as a Frankenstein monster made of bits and

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elements of seven other films; 2) Nguyen's satire does not target Coppola's movie as much as the everlasting mythos that surrounds it; 3) *The Hamlet* is not Francis Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* but a counterfactual, never-made version of the same story partially based on the original 1969 screenplay. In section 3.1, "Fantasies of revenge," I reconstruct how Hollywood's Vietnam came to be by interweaving its history with that of South Vietnamese actress Kiều Chinh, a movie-star-turned-refugee who was supposed to work as an adviser for Coppola when the latter was shooting *Apocalypse Now* in the Philippines. Then, I lay down the basics of Nguyen's Achebe-derived critique of Coppola's masterpiece. My idea is that Nguyen's idea of placing an alter ego of his on the set of *Apocalypse* can be seen as a fantasy of revenge in its own right, not unlike those of the Hollywood directors that refought the war in memory during the 1970s/1980s.

In section 3.2, "*The Green Berets*: A film by Francis Ford Coppola," I posit that Nguyen's fantasy of revenge also consists of having Coppola directing a poorly-written, jingoistic extravaganza in lieu of the cinematic oeuvre that made him world-famous. I begin the section by reading *Apocalypse Now* under the lenses of John Bryant's theories on the "fluid text." My idea is that *Apocalypse*'s "narrative of revision," that is, all the counterfactual, never-made versions of the movie, also informed Nguyen's satire. Ultimately, however, I argue that the main blueprint for *The Hamlet* is actually John Wayne's *Green Berets*. To demonstrate it, I run a comparison between the two, going into detail about the characters and the characters-behind-the-characters. My contention is that by comparing a revered work of art such as *Apocalypse Now* to rightwing fantasies like Wayne's movie or the *Missing in Action* saga, Nguyen suggests that the distance between the two is shorter than commonly appreciated.

In section 3.3., "Of extras and corpses," we see how Nguyen undermines the Hollywood legend surrounding the troubled making of *Apocalypse Now.* To prove how the prestige aura of

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Coppola's work all but conceals a neocolonial logic of exploitation, Nguyen devises a fiction in which he superimposes that very aura to the making of a shoddy B-movie, thus stripping the mythos of *Apocalypse* as a 'Hollywood miracle' of its anecdotal allure. To accomplish that, by means of fiction he reminds us that 1) Coppola struck a deal with an authoritarian regime, thus mirroring U.S. policy in South Vietnam and recreating the same situation he was trying to expose; 2) employed real Vietnamese refugees, thus forcing them to play a part in their misrepresentation; 3) stole corpses out of a local graveyard and used them as dummies, thus literally fulfilling the Achebe-derived critique of *Apocalypse* of a work that reduces Asian bodies to the role of props.

In section 3.4 I put forward the hypothesis that *The Hamlet* is in fact John Milius' original version of *Apocalypse Now*—a more psychedelic, racist, and unequivocally prowar version of the story. I contend that Nguyen merges Coppola and Milius in the character of the Auteur, and that *The Hamlet*, as a crass B-movie filmed with mastery, is a Hollywood impossibility. To make my case, I return to Gérard Genette's theories on transtextuality; using Genettian terms, I define *The Hamlet* as a *devaluating hypertext with more hypofilms*; that is, a derived *text*, made of elements from several *films*, meant to demystify its models.

Finally, in the conclusion, "What Exceed the Frame," I postulate that the key element to consider is the ultimate unreliability of Nguyen's narrator. My contention is that all the oddities we have seen so far can be accounted for by bearing in mind that the whole novel takes place inside one man's head. All the stock characters, names-function, and general weirdness of the story can be explained by the fact that the novel is structured as a first-person narrative written under specific circumstances. The returning metaphor of the narrator-as-book serves to illustrate this unspoken connection between voice and text. In the metafiction of *The Sympathizer*, reeducation camps become MFA workshops, commandants become teachers, and

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political commissars become demanding editors willing to revise people through the words they produce. The fact that every dialogue is reported without quotation marks suggests that the narrator's voice contains every other, that all the characters are to be seen as literary recreations of 'real' people filtered by his unbridled imagination. To conclude, my claim is that all implausible elements, ironies, and modernist/expressionist solutions one can find in the novel should always be read in the context of a narrative that is intradiegetically "artistic." Simply stated, the character arc of the narrator is that of a memoirist that is slowly morphing into an artist. His is a *reimagination* rather than a chronicle: his deranged state of mind, the material conditions he finds in, and the fact that he is writing to a hostile audience, all concur to prove it. But in order to make sense of this, we shall begin at the beginning. That is, from the building blocks of Nguyen's metafictional parable—the reeducation camps.

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2. A Game of Refractions: *The Sympathizer* as Historical Novel

2.1 Reeducation literature

"[A]nd he who hated oppressors, is become an oppressor himself," H. Melville, *Mardi* (526).

In Vietnam, there are places one will not find marked on the maps of a Lonely Planet guidebook. Grim, deserted military installations, long since converted for different uses, that once went by science fiction-ish code numbers such as TH-188 or Z-30D, lie scattered all over the Southern countryside, or deep into the jungle of nature reserves bordering Cambodia. Names like Xuân Lộc or Bù Gia Mập are now just green highway signs flowing out of the window, evoking hardly more than quiet, charming landscapes punctuated by banana groves, green paddy rice fields, and sparse herds of cattle. But once, these names were associated with one of the many tragic pages of the bloody, not-so-short Vietnamese Twentieth century: the reeducation camps, built by the Communist victors on the aftermath of their triumph on the American-backed Southern regime, to imprison hundreds of thousands of their defeated enemies.[1] The

[1] "Vietnamese communists," historian Christopher Goscha sums up, "were not content to simply lock [their adversaries] up; they also wanted to reform them ('*cai tao*'), to purge them of their erroneous thinking, and, theoretically, reinsert them in the new socialist society" (2016, 382). For rank-and-file soldiers and lower-level civil servants, the whole affair rarely took more than a year or two. Top-ranking officers, on the other hand, were subjected to "countless sessions of brainwashing, rectification, new hero emulation, and propaganda … [while] performing forced labor in harsh, disease-ridden parts of the country" (383). The victors, as wartime correspondent Neil Sheehan summarizes, "thought at first that they really could change minds," but later, especially at the outbreak of the Third Indochina War, "decided that their defeated enemies were another potential fifth column and had to be placed under close watch. … What started as a wartime measure then acquired a bureaucratic inertia … and the experiment at changing minds degenerated into simple punishment" (1991, 118; 120). See Canh 1983, 188 ff for a comprehensive—if dated—overview of the reeducation camps system. See also Sagan and Denney; Vo;

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reeducation camps are not mentioned in the exhibitions of the War Remnants Museum in Hồ Chí Minh City's District 3.[2] Nor, for that matter, are they included in the schedules of the historical tours departing the Backpack District for the countryside—tours in which, however, local guides do not certainly shy away from showing foreigners the full measure of past atrocities. An unspoken, uncomfortable legacy of the long civil war that torn apart the country, the camps are rarely acknowledged in public memory. In fact, if one would seriously attempt to document their vestiges, one would have to do it at risk of getting in trouble with the police. Not unlike the embarkation points that saw the departure of countless oceanic refugees after the reunification of the country, today the camps are hidden blemishes on the shiny gold-starred flag of the Socialist Republic. And this notwithstanding the fact that Vietnam, a Southeast Asian emerging economy power favored by international trade and by international tourism, is now a very different place compared to the isolated, war-ravaged nation it once was.

When it comes to the Vietnamese diaspora, however, it is quite a different matter. In the overseas communities grown out of the ashes of South Vietnam, the memory of the reeducation camps has in fact become a genuine cultural aggregation factor. Along with the three-striped Yellow Flag of the Republic—a banner that has now waved in foreign winds for more than twice the time it was actually raised on Vietnamese soil—or the nostalgic, pre-1975 'Yellow Music,' kept alive by California-based direct-to-video variety show series, the cultural memory of the camp and of the boat exodus is inextricably part of the glue that ties such communities together. And that is particularly the case for Vietnamese Americans, a demographic that, in

Ha 21 ff. To be fair, it should be mentioned that systematic political repression took place in South Vietnam as well, especially during the times of the First Republic. See Goscha 302.

[2] On military museums and war memory in contemporary Vietnam, see Schwenkel 145-175.

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the words of journalist and essayist Andrew Lam, can be described as "an exile culture, built on defeatism and on a sense of tragic ending" (68).

It is commonly said that for many first-generation Vietnamese Americans—and especially for the men that have served in the military—the war has never really ended. Similarly, for those of them that underwent reeducation, the bamboo sheds, the concertina wire, and the stained concrete floors of places like Trảng Lớn or Hàm Tân are not a thing of the past as much as an open wound that will never completely heal. One can tell just by strolling around the stalls of community fairs such as the annual UVSA Festival in Costa Mesa, OC. Here, it is easy to come across colorful stands, wrapped in the flag of the Republic, where camp survivors hand out political pamphlets, leaflets, and human rights petitions. Or to bump into the touring collections of the Vietnamese Heritage Museum, where the personal belongings of prisoners are displayed for all visitors to see. To get a sense of this collective trauma, one could also take a four-hundred mile drive up north and take a look at the dioramas and dolls representing camp atrocities prominently featured in the small, volunteer-run Viet Museum that stands on the edges of San Jose's History Park. Looking up, one would see glass cases displaying the ragged prison clothes of camp survivors, hung on the high walls of the main hall among vintage rifles, pennants, and military uniforms. Local media companies, for their part, still follow the editorial policy of putting the word itself, "reeducation" ("học tập cải tạo"), strictly between quotation marks. The intent, as TV host/journalist Đỗ Dzũng, face of the Westminster-based *Người Việt* evening newscast, personally told me (Dzũng 2022), is to dismiss any possible claim to legitimacy on the part of the now-passed Vietnamese Communist 'thought reform' program.[3] In Little Saigon, wartime correspondent Neil Sheehan's assessment that the victors—as he

[3] For a summary of the Vietnamese thought reform program, see Canh 152 ff; Vo 143 ff. See also Lifton.

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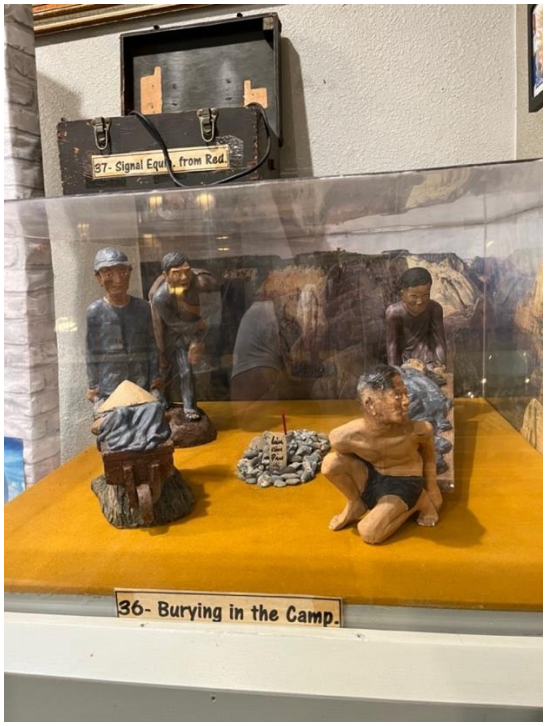
noted upon returning to Vietnam at the turn of the 1990s— "behaved with comparative restraint toward their defeated opponents" (1991, 79), would not meet the slightest shred of approval.

Prison clothes from reeducation camps exposed in San Jose's Viet Museum.



Reeducation camps dioramas in San Jose's Viet Museum.

23:6932690107

The main hall of San Jose's Viet Museum.

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A South Vietnamese flag (*cờ vàng*, “Yellow Flag”), in front of the Vietnamese Community Center in Houston, TX.

25:4360864771

The presence (and the presentness) of the prison camps in the Vietnamese American collective memory is thus practically visible. In fact, as Tuan Hoang argues, "the carceral experience crucially shaped the development of diasporic anticommunism," as "[i]t led to the resettlement of tens of thousands of former political prisoners," whose arrival in the U.S. "renewed anticommunist activism in diasporic communities" (2016, 49). In the years following their resettlement abroad, those among them "eager to write these memoirs as soon as they escaped" (67), were to produce elaborated accounts detailing their tribulations. Often, as Subarno Chattarji summarizes, they did that in the fashion of "American-mediated" memoirs meant "for American audiences," centered on a "victim-as-hero"-driven teleological narrative, in which the memoirist-character "re-enters history and ideological space as the bearer of communal memory" (41-43).[4]

Even setting aside the thriving publishing industry that revolves around the memoirs, essays, and political magazines written in Vietnamese—readily available in local bookstores—there is no shortage of Anglophone reeducation memoirs. In fact, it is not far-fetched to speak of a veritable literary subgenre. Works like *Lost Years* (1988) by Tran Tri Vu, or *South Wind Changing* (1994) by Jade Ngọc Quang Huỳnh, are all part of a small corpus of "testimonial literature" (Andén 199), that, not unlike that of Soviet Gulags' survivors, "holds a place between tribunal testimony, historical testimony and literary testimony."[5] In the next pages, I will focus briefly on these works, listing their salient features and providing an overview of

[4] As some claim, the collaborative/mediated nature of early Vietnamese American memoirs shows the "invisible power differential between the benefactor and the refugee" (Pelaud 2011, 30), with the second cut out from the publishing world and from the academic workshop model and its "literary industrial standard … with authorial credentials being the baseline BA and the preferable MFA" (Nguyen 2016, 207).

[5] According to scholar Quan Manh Ha, the number of dissident memoirs about postwar Vietnam written/translated in English and published in the United States is approximately around a dozen. See Ha 19. So far, not many scholars have attempted an extensive examination of such works. A notable exception is Subarno Chattarji's *The Distant Shores of Freedom* (2019), which devotes the whole second chapter to Anglophone reeducation memoirs written for the American market. Reeducation literature written in Vietnamese would deserve a separate discussion; for a brief overview of such works, see Hoang 2016; see also Hoang 2019 for a general overview of South Vietnamese political, military, and cultural memoirs.

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some of the issues that they raise. The aim is to define how a prototypical Anglophone reeducation memoir depicts the nexuses between language, politics, and violence. This effort will allow us to better understand the same nexuses when presented in fiction—especially considering the massive influence that Vietnamese testimonial literature had on the work of fiction at the heart of this research.

Reeducation memoirs, it should be said, are not the earliest Vietnamese American literary works to address the memory of the war. Indeed, dating back to the very arrival of the first wave of refugees, many self-published nationalist narratives, "heavily invested in home politics and marked by an intense longing for a lost past" (Pelaud 2011, 24) had already appeared. Generally, however, they encountered poor reception—as, after the war, "Vietnamese Americans were the only Americans who did not want to forget Viet Nam" (Pelaud 2011, 26). Moreover,

> [t]he few texts published in English had difficulty finding an audience, either among Vietnamese Americans or others, on the right or on the left. First-generation Vietnamese Americans preferred reading texts written in Vietnamese because they were more direct, expressed more anger, and did not expend as much effort explaining Vietnamese culture to non-Vietnamese audiences. Other Americans on the right did not want to read books written by Vietnamese American authors … since these works might provide vivid reminders of military loss and guilt over America's abandonment of its South Vietnamese allies. Americans on the left, on the other hand, were not particularly keen on reading about human rights abuses committed by a leftist regime. (Pelaud 2011, 25).

Anglophone memoirs published in the U.S. in the late 1980s and early 1990s gained a little more traction. They could be seen as a subset of an even larger genre of Vietnamese testimonial literature, that of "life writing dealing with existence under communism" (Chattarji 35), or,

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according to Quan Manh Ha's Kalì Tal-derived definition, of "Vietnamese American survival literature" (Ha). Personal accounts like Nguyen Long's *After Saigon Fell* (1981), Truong Nhu Tang's *A Vietcong Memoir* (1986), or Doan Van Toai's *The Vietnamese Gulag* (1986), along with anthologies like Huỳnh Sanh Thông's *To Be Made Over* (1988), may be said to fall under this wider umbrella. At the time of publication, these works were indeed "largely ignored by the American political left" mainly because of the abovementioned "general amnesia … regarding the Vietnam War" (Chattarji 35) that took place in the U.S. after 1975. In this respect, narratives like Truong Nhu Tang's, or Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989), were significant exceptions, inasmuch as they were perceived as "atypical texts that offered a North Vietnamese perspective" (Pelaud 2011, 26). According to Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, works that conveyed this kind of perspective "began to attract the interest of large publishing houses" only around the mid-1980s because, at the time, "[b]oth the Americans who fought in Viet Nam and those who protested the war showed more interest in the North Vietnamese than in the Vietnamese U.S. allies in the South" (2011, 26). In fact, dissident memoirs such as Tang's—or Toai's *The Vietnamese Gulag*—may even be said to constitute a whole other subgenre of their own, the 'disillusioned Vietnamese Communist memoir,' comprised of Arthur Koestler-like narratives of conversion that, as Viet Thanh Nguyen himself puts it, usually "end with the disillusioned communist [betrayed by the revolution] embracing America, or capitalism, or the West" (Funk 2020).[6]

[6] One could even speculate that the fascination for this 'with-a-happy-ending' kind of memoirs among American audiences could date back to the seventeenth century trope of the conversion narrative and, possibly, of the classic frame of the 'captivity tale.' See Yagoda 51-52. Intriguingly, notwithstanding their former Communist background, both Truong Nhu Tang and Doan Van Toai would eventually become involved in diasporic Vietnamese exile politics. In the 1980s, they founded an organization called the Committee for National Salvation that, however, failed to gain substantial community support. In fact, in 1989 Toai was even subject to an attempted murder at the hands of anticommunist extremists. See Thompson; Nguyen 2018, 76, 81.

28:5511443986

Understandably, reeducation memoirs tend instead to offer a less shaded portrait of the Communist rule in Vietnam. They are politically driven narratives, in which "the battered human body [is used] to image and discuss the postwar abuse of human rights" (Ha 20). Thus, theirs is often a "simplistic us-versus-them template for the remembrance of the Vietnam War from South Vietnamese perspectives" (Chattarji 62), where the times preceding the fall of the South are frequently romanticized, and the shortcomings of the leaders of the Republic, as well as American-committed war atrocities, are often glossed over.[7] As with most first-generation diasporic Vietnamese memoirs, these works are apt to depict wartime South Vietnam as a paradise lost, when in fact, "[f]or all its brief life, [it] was never anything but a state of emergency" (Nguyen 2012b, 930). Occasionally, however, memoirists do not flinch from addressing political ambiguities. Nor do they refrain from embracing a more adorned and flowery prose, that one does not always expect to see in testimonial literature. The stark reality of barrack life, in some of these works, is often described not without a touch of poetry. Take for example this passage from *South Wind Changing*:

> The bamboo poles looked like the bars of an enormous bird cage. How nice it would be, I thought, to fly up high in the sky, to smell the air after it rains. … The sun reflected through the water, sparkling as if it was a whole diamond forest. The water trickled down onto the golden, dead leaves on the ground. I could hear the drops of water as they struck the leaves, musical gems that sounded like beautiful notes as they soaked the earth. (62; 70).

Undoubtedly, Jade Ngọc Quang Huỳnh's melancholic description of the surroundings of Hà Tiên's camp contrasts with the harshness of the situation it depicts. His, like similar accounts,

[7] In this respect, Tran Tri Vu's *Lost Years*, and especially the section devoted to 'Vu''s time in the Z-30D camp, is rather an exception. In most cases, however, it should be noted that Vietnamese survival literature invariably tends to convey a "strongly pro-American political message," emphasizing "issues of democracy and freedom that corroborate the U.S. government's reports of violation of human rights in third-world countries such as Vietnam," a subtext that is clearly "flattering to the targeted Western audience" (Ha 31).

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can be said to fall within J. Arch Getty's definition of "history-by-anecdote" (1985, 5), a genre of testimonial literature that, while primarily based on concrete, firsthand experiences, rests also inevitably "on rumor, hearsay, and personal impression" (219). Its ensuing 'literariness,' as Hayden White argues with relation to the writings of Primo Levi, "has the effect of actually *producing* the referent rather than merely pointing to it … much more vividly than any kind of impersonal registration of the 'facts' could ever have done" (2004, 119; my italics). Reeducation memoirs are packed with what White defines "figural realism," that which is, the place that literary writing holds "in historical and other kinds of scientific writing by virtue of its power of figuration" (2004, 119). No Vietnamese reeducation camp was comparable to Auschwitz, but White's assessment regarding Levi holds true even in the case of postwar Vietnam: "The most vivid scenes of the horrors of life in the camps … consist less of the delineation of 'facts' as conventionally conceived than of the sequences of figures [the memoirist] creates by which to endow the facts with passion, his own feelings about and the value he therefore attaches to them" (2004, 119). With this in mind, passages such as the one by Jade Ngọc Quang Huỳnh quoted above "can be said to be even more 'objective' than any attempt at a literal description would be" (2004, 122).

Reeducation memoirs do shed light on the inhumanities of the Vietnamese concentrationary universe, with tales of hard labor, malnutrition, and lack of medical care—all common among former camp detainees, for which "[h]umiliation went hand in hand with physical deprivation" (Hoang 2016, 69; see also Vo 62 ff). Ultimately, however, they are individual narratives centered around a narrating self. As reliable as they are, they are always to be read *as stories*. When 'Tran Tri Vu' recounts his political discussions with Chin in the Z-30D camp—or, for that matter, any other equally articulated dialogue he reports in the memoir—the reader is always conscious that 'Vu''s is unavoidably nothing more than a literary

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re-imagining of a past autobiographic episode. Memory, as a century of psychanalysis demonstrates, "is itself a creative writer" (Yagoda 103). Every memoirist has to confront the "irresolvable conflict between" its "capabilities … and the demands of narrative" (109), producing a "subjective, impressionistic testimony" that in fact "doesn't pretend to offer *the* truth, just the *author*'s truth" (265, in italics in the text). Faithfully reported as it may be, every dialogue has still to be recalled, re-structured, and re-arranged by the witness. Concurrently, it must be also translated into English—often with outside help—in order not to get stuck within the limits of diaspora politics. Names can be changed, scenes can be conflated, apocryphal episodes can be designed to convey political messages. Cultural references have to be put into context for clarity's sake, as the reeducation memoirist who writes in English is usually (implicitly) addressing an American/Western audience. Inescapably, the author could indeed get some minor facts wrong because of the passage of time.[8]

Thus, as political testimonies, reeducation memoirs are in fact something more than "neutral attempt[s] to remember," bound to adhere to the "ironclad accuracy" (Yagoda 110) that would be demanded in a courtroom. They are not evidence in the strict sense of the term, as much as attempts to obtain a "larger symbolic truth" (Gilmore 2001, 4) that transcends the experience of a given individual. And, inevitably, the distance between the (foreign) reader and the facts they present is a wide one. In every autobiographical writing, as Ben Yagoda remarks, "[b]eneath the account of every… episode… is one's interpretation of one's life," and "[o]nce you begin to write the true story of your life in a form that anyone would possibly want to read, you start to make *compromises with the truth*" (110; my italics). Reeducation memoirs are no exception; from the beginning, raw facts are always encircled by the impressions of the

[8] I am personally acquainted with at least one factual inaccuracy regarding family matters as depicted in *South Wind Changing*. Information provided by Ms. Huỳnh Thi Bích Lan, incidentally my mother-in-law.

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narrating self. But in reading them as non-fictional, politically committed narratives, we unavoidably approach them with higher expectations, as in the culture of the West "truth is axiologized as more valuable than fiction," because of the "transcendental value" (Jędrzejko 109) traditionally accorded to it.[9]

Interestingly, however, even a factographic work like *Lost Years*—a work that makes no apparent distinction between author, witness, and literary persona—begins with several disclaimers warning readers about deliberate textual omissions. As one can read in the "Preface," and in the "Translator's Note":

> I finished this memoir [in] … 1982. I then showed it to friends, who suggested that I condense it … My reluctant abridgment was completed in … 1984. … Reading this abridged version, I feel that … it lacks cohesion in some places. My greatest regret, however, is that I have been able to write only briefly about so many of the people that I have known. *Their names, even if I used their true names, would mean nothing to most readers*… How can I describe it all, the hunger, the sickness, the despair, the desperation, when I am not a trained writer … I hope my former companions in suffering and misfortune will forgive my shortcomings. (xiii, my italics)

> Done by a person whose mother tongue is not English, the translation must sometimes seem "un-English" to readers … However, the "un-Englishness" of the style is intentional on a number of occasions … especially when rendering the peculiar way the Vietnamese communists express themselves. … *The names of the author and the translator are pseudonyms*. (xv, my italics)

Thus, as both author and translator openly make it clear, some bits of *Lost Years* are purposefully left unsettled. Maybe, as with Gulag memoirists, whoever 'Tran Tri Vu' really

[9] Often, in some reeducation memoirs the text is alternated with pictures and sketch drawings, almost like courtroom evidence meant to emphasize the reliability of the witness. A prime example of this is *The Dark Journey* (2010) by Vietnamese Australian memoirist Hoa Minh Truong.

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was had "to navigate between revealing the atrocities of the camps and shielding those still subjected to them" (Andén 199), withholding truths that could cause harm to the companions left behind. What is certain is that, for his own admission, the memoirist is forced to make emplotment choices for reasons of space and pacing. He mentions revisions and abridgments. However, even if every narrative is in itself an act of storytelling, a memoir is not a novel—one cannot just rearrange truth on the grounds of cohesion. 'Vu,' in other words, has to leave out people and stories. Of all the prisoners he met in the six reeducation camps he was sent to, he declaredly mentions only a selected few. All the names we read, he warns, are pseudonyms—including his. So, while on the one hand 'Tran Vu,' for the sake of his companions, is forced to sacrifice little pieces of his story, he has, on the other, to do the same with theirs', for the sake of his prose. In both cases, the memoirist must put the truth in second place; in the first case, because the truth is 'too true'; in the second, because the truth, in a sense, is not 'true' enough.

Moreover, from the very outset 'Tran Vu' deplores his inability to describe the horrors he witnessed. His, apparently, is not a ritual attempt at winning the goodwill of the reader as much as genuine regret, as every traumatic experience by definition "defies communicability" (Wajnryb 85), its magnitude outstripping "language's ability to represent it." In his own perception, 'Vu''s words "fail to capture fully the reality they purport to represent," not so much because of "the *inability of language*" per se, but rather because of his being an "ordinary individual rendered extraordinary only by what had been done to" him (Wajnryb 85, italics in the text). In fact, much of *Lost Years* and, at large, of Anglophone reeducation literature, has to deal with the failings of language(s). As in the rest of American war literature, [10]

[10] Given the historical implications, I do not see why first-generation Vietnamese American reeducation literature in English should not legitimately be seen as part of American war literature.

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[t]he pervasiveness of the adynaton trope …. is consistent with the notion that where violence and brute force prevail, language—the instrument of intersubjective communication par excellence—falls silent. Acts of violence can be described, of course, but they are felt to be that which language cannot contain. (Mariani 2015, 60)

In the case of most first-generation Vietnamese American survival literature, these failings are extended to at least two separate textual levels. On the one hand, one has the published English text; on the other, the unmediated, unpublished *Ur*-memoir in Vietnamese, inaccessible to the reader. Besides the "adynaton trope," which by the way, as we have seen, is clearly present in the "Preface," *Lost Years* is also marked by similar kinds of linguistic short-circuits. In fact, in Tran Tri Vu's memoir, as in similar works, the nexus between violence and language is explored not so much as a Foucaldian/Derridian matter of (un)representability of horror and atrocities (Mariani 2015, 55 ff), but rather as a practical necessity of having to overcome language/translation barriers in order to make a distant reality manifest to an unaware audience. As 'Nguyen Phuc' states in his "Translator's Note," both him and the author put a particular emphasis on rendering "the peculiar way" Vietnamese communists talk. In this respect their purpose is clearly political. When 'Vu' recalls a lively debate among the prisoners of Hàm Tân camp, he makes Old Nam—himself a former NLF[11] militant—scornfully say that "[a] true communist has a limited vocabulary regardless of whether he is a lowly cadre or Prime Minister Pham Van Dong" (323). In the described context of postwar Vietnam, as it is presented and decodified for the English/Western reader, this kind of remark seems logic and ordinary. But, despite the efforts of translator 'Nguyen Phuc,' the translated text does not make this kind of linguistic nuances particularly clear. In fact, the reader is evidently supposed (and required) to

[11] The National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (Mặt trận Dân tộc Giải phóng miền Nam Việt Nam), or Việt Cộng (short for "Vietnamese Communist"), as they were—and are—commonly referred to by their enemies. In the anticommunist diaspora, the term "Việt Cộng" is often extended to any Vietnamese communist, regardless of geographical origins (Nguyen 2017, 150).

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take further leaps, suspending his/her disbelief, like when watching a Holocaust flick in which Nazi officers are portrayed by English-speaking American actors using pseudo-German accents. And indeed, a prime example of the nexus between language and violence typical of reeducation literature in English is observable during a brief, striking episode recalled in *Lost Years* that revolves around a similar situation—the movie night at Bù Gia Mập that opens the fifth chapter.

In this episode, the prisoners are summoned at the regimental headquarters to watch an East German movie about Nazi concentration camps. Ironically, 'Vu''s notes, for him and his companions the scenes projected on the screen prove to ring familiar. For the convicts seeing barbed wires, inspections, and shouting guards has the opposite effect to what was intended by their captors, as they find themselves recognizing the gestures and behaviors of the communist *bộ đội* in the mannerism of the fictional Nazi soldiers depicted in the movie. As 'Vu' puts it, "[W]hat was being shown before our eyes to expose the criminal doings of the German fascists were the very things to which we had been subjected" (195). Despite the parallel, however, the scene is still relatively light in mood. Some inmates stand clapping their hands, pointing out the analogy with a loud voice, noting how the Nazi wardens and the *bộ đội* are one and the same—"[p]erfectly identical" (195). According to the intentions of the officers that have organized the movie night, as former supporters of a right-wing regime the inmates were probably supposed to see themselves reflected in the Nazis. But the situation experienced by the ARVN[12] detainees clearly mirrors that of the fictional Jewish *häftlinge*, and the analogy is not triggered only by the looks of the soldiers. As 'Vu' reveals, the German movie is not subtitled, nor dubbed: the original audio track is topped by a single Vietnamese voice-over, thus creating an uncanny (bilingual) double dialogue, that, in the peculiar context of the screening, takes on an

[12] The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (Lục quân Việt Nam Cộng hòa).

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unexpected meaning. Because of the voice-over, in the eyes of the prisoners the German guard in the movie is yelling in Vietnamese—in all likelihood with a Northern accent—the very same orders that the Bù Gia Mập detainees are accustomed to hearing, on a daily basis, on the part of the communist guards.[13]

In comparing the tangible Vietnamese reeducation camp with the fictitious German extermination camp, and the real-life *bộ đội* with the cinematic Nazis, 'Vu' adheres to the well-established, Western cinema-induced cultural frame of the 'yelling-Nazi-as-the-bad guy,' that has undoubtedly a familiar ring to his targeted American/Western audience. However, once again the language-based association that set the comparison off is ultimately lost on the reader. The latter is in fact confronted with a ready-translated memoir, in which English is supposed to stand for Vietnamese, and in which the lingo of the communist officers is supposed to be markedly different from the regular way of talking of other Vietnamese nationals. So, if the Nazi/*bộ đội* analogy is indeed prompted by the similarities between the tone/accent of the voice actor and that of the guards, as the memoirist seems to suggest, that is essentially left for the reader to imagine. This leveling is made inevitable by the necessity of having a Vietnamese voice reshaped and reframed into an English-language translated narration, to make the characters "legible … in the linguistic paradigm of English" (Tran 2018b, 158), in order to convey the political testimony to an audience that goes well beyond the Vietnamese diaspora.

[13] Indeed, the postwar southern Vietnam depicted in reeducation literature is a scenario in which the nexus between language and violence is occasionally *accent*-based. It is true that the bulk of the fighting on the communist side, at least during the initial phase of the war, was mostly led by southern militia troops. It is also true that approximately a million North Vietnamese refugees had resettled in the South following the partition of the country in 1954—comprising among others notable members of the future anticommunist diaspora such as the former prime minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, or the famed singer Khánh Ly. And in reeducation camps, the leadership was often split between southern military officers and northern cadres appointed by the Party. This dynamic did not fail to cause tensions and problems; for a brief outline of such internal divisions see Vo 61; 79 ff. There is no doubt, however, that in a southern reeducation camp during the late 1970s the (simplistic) equation between "northern accent" and "Communism" was not that far-fetched, considering that, according to a 1983 CIA memorandum, "out of 1.6 million Communist Party members, only 200,00 to 300,000 are from the South" ("Vietnam: Integrating the South. An Intelligence Assessment." Retrieved from https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84S00553R000200090004-5.pdf).

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Borrowing from Ben Tran, from this point forward we shall define this process as "[l]iterary dubbing" (2018, 414; 2018b):

> Literary dubbing occurs during the writing process when an author translates characters' speech and thought from the implied or referenced language, within the diegetic frame, to the language of representation or the reader's language. The target language may not be comprehensible to the represented characters, but it does make the characters legible to a reading audience.

In a factographic, politically driven narrative centered around the archetypal Vietnamese "bearer of communal memory" memoirist-character theorized by Subarno Chattarji, literary dubbing is nothing more than an unintended consequence. However, in a modern, nuanced, and multi-layered piece of fiction, this technique could be instead used to reframe said communal memory in a decidedly less accommodating fashion, with an equally political, but decidedly different agenda in mind. In such a fictional world, as Ben Tran remarks, "all is translatable [and] [t]he fiction itself becomes actualized as a parallel universe conditioned by the English language" (2018b, 154), allowing the author to find creative ways to expand "the scope of English-language literature," "deorientaliz[ing]" (170) it in the process. But we shall deal with such a kind of literary work later on.

In conclusion, let us return one last time to *Lost Years*' "Preface." In reading it, one will not fail to note how 'Tran Tri Vu''s profession of inadequacy is not addressed to the reader but to his lost "companions in suffering," as to demonstrate whom the survivor/memoirist evidently cares about the most. This is because 'Vu' does not perceive himself as a writer, but as a witness. He is responsible not only for his own story, but also for those of the people he had to leave behind. His narrative ends with the desperate pleas of his companions: "[T]ry to find a way to tell the world how they detain people here" (374), "Leave this bloody land of ours … to

37:5303602395

be able to tell the world the truth" (375). The rhetoric of the text, author and translator imply, is therefore directly put at the service of its politics. Nonetheless, the reader cannot help but notice the declared 'literariness' of the memoir, as s/he is confronted with a *mediated* text whose implied language was intentionally re-molded by the translator for artistic reasons, as clearly specified by 'Nguyen Phuc' in his "Note."

However, at a closer look, it is precisely its literariness that paradoxically proves the text 'true.' In fact, the author's reluctance in using real names or in revealing too many details—supposedly, as it is often the case, out of fear of reprisals and consequences—demonstrates how these reprisals and consequences are indeed a concrete possibility. In a way, his reluctance is the most convincing proof of the dangerousness of the subject matter. Hence, despite their small liberties and artifices, texts like *Lost Years* and *South Wind Changing* are indeed to be seen as pieces of evidence. Reeducation literature, for all its disguises, additions, and omissions, is still one of the few existing windows on the state of the 1970-80s Vietnamese concentrationary universe, as "[t]he overall picture of the camps to this day is far from complete" (Vo 1) and one can only rely on testimonies produced by survivors—or by defectors—that inevitably date back to the time. Besides those, one can count on dossiers made by foreign observers such as Stephen Denney and Ginetta Sagan's, declassified records accessible via the Library of Congress, or reports in the likes of Nguyen Van Canh's *Vietnam Under Communism, 1975-1982* (1983), published under the auspices of conservative American intellectuals willing to "justify the war post-facto and demonise the communists" (Chattarji 36). More recently, testimonies of survivors have been collected in podcasts, YouTube channels, and oral history projects led by

38:2165182746

universities and non-profit organizations, such as the *Viet Stories* platform curated by UC Irvine's Southeast Asian Archive, or the Vietnamese Heritage Museum's *Oral History* series.[14]

In the final analysis, however, other than essays like Nghia M. Vo's *The Bamboo Gulag* (2004), that, anyway, draw heavily on such kinds of first-person accounts, reeducation memoirs are still to be seen as the best source of information regarding the camps on which a scholar can rely. Especially considering that when one deals with non-democratic governments, memoirs and pieces of testimonial literature are still more reliable resources than state-sanctioned texts and official documents, as historian Robert Conquest argues in the case of Soviet Russia (qtd. in Andén 216). When one deals with historical events that, for one reason or another, are only marginally studied, sometimes even scouring through countless history books proves to be pointless. Therefore, reeducation memoirs remain essential reading for anyone willing to learn about the matter.

With this short overview of Vietnamese American reeducation literature in English, I have tried to show how this little-known set of texts can still provide fertile ground for reflection. In studying these works, and in questioning their critical reception, one can shed a light on the nexuses/disjunctions that stand between memory, politics, language, and violence, inherent in the diasporic Vietnamese way of remembering (and memorializing) collective trauma.

To read reeducation memoirs, in other words, is to stir things up. To browse their pages is to lift up a little, neglected corner of the American multicultural patchwork to show the cracks hidden beneath it. Reeducation literature, especially when compared to the other literatures

[14] I hereby express my gratitude to the founder of the Vietnamese Heritage Museum, Mr. Chau Thuy, for showing me a private collection of sketches made by former inmates.

39:5710668709

centered around the memory of the war in Vietnam,[15] offers no easy path to reconciliation. Paradoxically, the perspective it conveys, as (justifiably) partisan and black-and-white as it often tends to be, leaves readers with more questions than answers. Such a perspective forces them to engage with newfound, unwanted, and dangerous complexities. When paired with opposite versions of the same story, each one staunchly bound by what the author we will discuss extensively in this section defines the "ethics of remembering one's own" (Nguyen 2016, 9), reeducation literature makes it harder to pass judgment. It raises the necessity, especially for the 'on-the-outside-looking-in' class of scholars to which I belong, to approach the matter with caution and respect, as is always the case with texts nestled at the sensitive junction of politics, memory, and literature. It drives one to question his/her previous certainties. It raises the necessity, if you will, to linger as little as possible, like when pausing before some stranger's funeral during a casual walk. It compels one to realize that if there is no single way of writing the war in Vietnam, there is no single way of reading it either.

And indeed, a reeducation memoir is still poised to be the ideal starting point for an author bent on writing a very different kind of literary artifact—a reeducation *novel*. It will not come as a surprise, thus, to see *Lost Years*, *South Wind Changing*, and *To Be Made Over* listed in the "Acknowledgments" of one of the most disruptive retellings of the war in Vietnam to have emerged in the last decade, Viet Thanh Nguyen's Pulitzer-winning debut *The Sympathizer* (2015). The novel is a multi-faceted literary object—a witty, sharp, and unapologetic indictment of the power mechanisms underlying the industries of memory, cleverly disguised as genre

[15] Here, I make my own the definition of the Vietnam War/American War as "the war in Vietnam," as postulated by Viet Thanh Nguyen himself and adopted by others. "To deny [this war] a name," Nguyen suggests, "clears a space for reimagining and remembering [it] differently" (2016, 8), going beyond the binary and simplistic juxtaposition between two belligerent sides— "America" and "Vietnam"—when, in fact, this war involved a far greater number of players, fronts, and theaters. The misnomer "Vietnam War," one could argue, is thus in itself a process of erasure. To call the war this way is to center American involvement as the defining factor, when in fact the U.S. committed boots on the ground for less than eight years (1965-1973) of a civil conflict that spanned decades.

40:1369668315

fiction. It is "a chronicle of war wrapped in a spy thriller and tucked inside a confession" (Britto 2019b, 371), a vitriolic satire, a "nonteleological critique of misrepresentation" (Shostak 228) rife with intertextual references, written with the declared aim of challenging the way in which the war in Vietnam has been 'fought again' in memory.

The after-effects of the American military involvement in Southeast Asia are the backdrop against which the plot is set. In the novel, the late history and the enduring legacies of the conflict are distorted into a feverish waking nightmare from which the unnamed narrator/protagonist tries in vain to wake up. The book tells the story of an unnamed communist Vietnamese double agent, 'the captain,' whose mission is to follow abroad the defeated remnants of the American-backed South Vietnamese army on the eve of the country's collapse. Upon his arrival in California, 'the captain' finds himself embroidered in refugee diaspora politics, reluctantly becoming a political assassin in order to protect his cover. Then, the novel takes unexpected turns, with the character-narrator employed as a movie consultant by an egotistical Hollywood auteur determined to craft a movie about his war and his country. Back from the Philippines, he decides to follow back into Vietnam the ragtag army of counterrevolutionaries he was tasked to spy. In the homeland, he is apprehended and detained in a communist reeducation camp. There, his best friend and handler, of all people, tortures him with CIA techniques to force him to give up on their shared political dreams, to then set him free again. The novel ends with the narrator and his friend Bon embarking on a perilous journey through the South China Sea as a part of the huge refugee exodus that marked the history of the country.

More than mere sources, reeducation memoirs are fundamental pillars on which the bulky structure of *The Sympathizer* rests. Hidden pillars, if you will—bamboo stilts, emerging from the blood-stained waters of Vietnamese history, but just as important as the European novels,

41:9512836381

the African American classics, and the Korean and Hong Kong movie flicks that Nguyen often cites as his main influences. As Lovisa Andén argues in relation to Soviet Gulag fiction, "[o]ne of the most important functions of testimonial literature might be its making the experience of the camps possible to imagine, possible to tell," thus creating "a narrative of the camps onto which other stories could later be inscribed" (208-9). *Lost Years*, likewise, made *The Sympathizer* possible. The final section of Nguyen's novel—the focus of this study—is specifically centered around a fictional reeducation camp, in which the confession(s) of the narrator-protagonist are being written as we read them. *The Sympathizer*, among other accomplishments, has recently been optioned by A24 and HBO to be adapted as a TV miniseries (Sharf), starring an A-list actor such as Robert Downey Jr. and with the critically acclaimed Korean director Park Chan-wook at the helm. Therefore—save for independent productions such as Ham Tran's *Journey from the Fall* (2006)—this would mark the first time that mainstream audiences would have seen a Vietnamese reeducation camp depicted on the silver screen.[16] Hence, to state that Nguyen introduced a large (and mostly non-Vietnamese) audience to this forgotten chapter of the history of Southeast Asia would be no exaggeration. But the question arises: Is *The Sympathizer* to be considered part of the "reeducation literature" canon? And if so, to what extent?

[16] Even if, apparently, the shooting will not take place in Vietnam, according to a recent decision of the Vietnamese government (Nguyen 2022). To this very day, because of government censorship, "Vietnamese American filmmakers … must avoid subjects that are taboo, such as the American war, re-education, Vietnamese refugees, South Vietnamese resentment, and anti-communist feeling" (Duong 158). On the current situation of movie censorship in the country with regards to foreign productions, see Tuan 2022. On censorship in general see Bass 2017. On the difficulties encountered—and the benefits reaped—by returning Vietnamese American filmmakers working in the homeland, see Duong 2016. When I say that this will mark the first time that audiences would have seen a Vietnamese prison camp on the screen, I am of course not considering generic Hollywood depictions of POW camps such as those seen in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) or in the *Missing in Action* saga. In fact, both in the first and second installments of the saga (1984; 1985), the character of Braddock is also shown freeing South Vietnamese servicemen from a prison camp. However, the liberation of these prisoners is shown as a randomic 'side quest' of Braddock's main mission—freeing American POWs.

42:5744358168

2.2 A refugee chronotope

To be fair, Viet Nguyen's debut novel would not be the first work of fiction written by a Vietnamese American author to politically reclaim, and to subvert, the concept of 'reeducation' itself. To give but one example, in Aimee Phan's *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* (2012)—a decade-spanning family saga of betrayals, exile, and divided loyalties that covers three continents—the word 'reeducation' stands for a literal and metaphorical journey of self-discovery (Bui 2015; August 2021). Phan's novel is a classic coming-of-age narrative, an epistolary novel, and a reckoning with Vietnamese American identity all rolled into one. In this context, the term itself, "a term that exists solely to veil ideology's work upon individuals … despite [being] code for punishment" (Bui 2015, 89), gets a fresh meaning.[17] *Reeducation*'s title itself signals an act of cultural reappropriation; an act, if you will, not dissimilar from that of Cherry's brother, Lum, a good-for-nothing that manages to get himself a second chance at life by becoming a successful entrepreneur in Vietnam.[18] As the head of a housing company that targets Vietnamese American returnees, Lum embodies the quintessential parable of the rich *Việt kiều*[19] that reverses the exodus of his elders. Raised in America as a son of unwanted refugees, he returns to Asia as a welcome expat that capitalizes on exilic nostalgia. But as Lum remakes himself, he also remakes the homeland. His "New Little Saigon," a gated community located in the outskirts of Hồ Chí Minh City, is modeled on Westminster, the most famous

[17] Speaking of the way in which language reshapes violence, it must be noted that "[t]he term 'reeducation,' with its pedagogical overtones"—as editor Huỳnh Sanh Thông observes in the "Introduction" to the anthology of testimonies *To Be Made Over* (1988, x)— "does not quite convey the quasi-mystical resonance of *cải-tạo* in Vietnamese. *Cải* ('to transform') and *tạo* ('to create') combine to literally mean an attempt at 'recreation,' at 'making over' sinful or incomplete individuals."

[18] I have already discussed some of the content of this paragraph in my essay "Reverse Exoduses" (2021).

[19] "Overseas Vietnamese." Although in the homeland the term does not necessarily hold a derogatory connotation—and is still widely used—the more neuter "kiều bào" is now preferred in the official jargon. For two perspectives on the character of the returning *Việt kiều*, see Lam 115-130; Wang 2013.

43:6435430922

diasporic enclave of Southern California. Its buildings are named after Orange County toponyms such as "Bolsa" and "Brookhurst," in an effort to attract Vietnamese American buyers. In doing so, Lum is "transforming recognizable Asian American coordinates into transnational spatial signifiers" (August 2021, 96), engaging in an "act of refugee mapmaking" (87), that covertly reverses the street-renaming effort that took place in southern Vietnam after the Communist victory.[20] Where the victors had rechristened cities and boulevards after their pantheon of heroes, here we see a young businessman superimposing names of American strip malls over Vietnamese geography, giving life to a "dizzying space of diasporic fantasy" (Britto 2019, 210) which does not fail as well to gesture towards the Paris-centered "colonial nostalgia" (Lieu 92) which is integral to a great part of the overseas Vietnamese imaginary. To turn Saigon into Little Saigon, as Lum does, is to quietly claim back the land, turning the country that casted out one's people into the one place in which that very people are still running the show. In this sense, Lum's is an act of literal reappropriation, or co-option. His is a way of resuming fighting the wars of his forefathers from a position of defeat, winning them with different means: American dollars, succeeding where American arms had failed.[21]

And what the character does in the fiction, the author does outside of it. Aimee Phan's use of the term "reeducation" as a synonym of self-discovery is not to be taken lightly. The weight that the word carries both in Vietnam and in the diaspora, as we have seen, is heavy. When one speaks with most 1.5 generation and second-generation Vietnamese Americans, one can see that they grew up with stories hanging over their neck; above all, that of the boat

[20] After 1975, in the city of Saigon—which was in turn renamed Hồ Chí Minh—the new authorities replaced 26% of the topography "to both de-commemorate the previous regime and celebrate the new national identity" (Hương and Kang 69). As exiled intellectual Nguyen Long recalls in his memoir *After Saigon Fell: Daily Life under the Vietnamese Communists* (1981), the name-changing could lead to unintentional ironies. "Công Lý (Justice) is now Nam Kỳ Khởi Nghĩa (Southern Uprising) and Tự Do (Liberty) is now Đồng Khởi (Simultaneous Uprising). As I walked I often remembered a popular jingle about the name changes: 'The Southern Uprising has destroyed Justice, /The Simultaneous Uprising has killed Liberty'" (61).

[21] On the concept of "fighting the wars of one's forefathers," see Scurati 2021; Mariani 2021; Traina 2021b.

44:1156656506

exodus—the "internal hemorrhaging of modern Vietnam" (Goscha 386)—a collective tragedy marked by tales of hope like the one told in Barre Fong's documentary *Finding the Virgo* (2018), or by horrific episodes like the one described in Duc Nguyen's *Bolinao 52* (2008).[22] In the peaceful gardens of community temples like Santa Ana's Chùa Bảo Quang, simulacra of the rickety boats that carried hundreds of thousands on American shores are forever anchored into small ponds. Printed on the keel, the words "Chúng tôi cần có Tự Do" ("We need Freedom") stand out as a reminder of the crossing from oppression to the siren songs of the American Dream. Just beyond the parking lot, disused military vehicles dating back to the times of the Republic gather dust, waiting to be displayed during the annual Lunar New Year parade on Bolsa Ave. Fluttering between cream stucco pagodas and ranks of smiling statues, the ever-present *cờ vàng*, the flag of South Vietnam, long banished in the homeland, casts its flickering shadow over the fences. These flags, boats, and jeeps are all part of a narrative—a refugee parable of glory, loss, and eventual success, modeled on the "crisis-rescue-gratitude … story line" which "constitutes the long-standing triad of popular accounts of refugee lives" (Espiritu et al. 2022, 87). This narrative is perpetually made visible by war monuments and other "strategic memory projects" (Aguilar-San Juan 88) dotted across the diaspora. Bronze soldiers charging an invisible enemy tower over the strip malls of Bellaire Boulevard, in the western outskirts of Houston, Texas. Marble statues of great kings from an ancient past observe the traffic going by from Garden Grove to San Jose. A reproduction of the iconic façade of Saigon's Bến Thành Market watches over the shops and restaurants of the Eden Center mall, in Falls Church, Virginia. Dozens of parking lanes, walks of fame, and commemorative plaques take

[22] As with reeducation literature, one might well speak of *boat literature* as another (and vaster) subgenre of diasporic Vietnamese literature. As regards the memoirs, suffice it here to mention just one anthology of testimonies, *Voices of Vietnamese Boat People* (2000), edited by M. T. Cargill and J. Q. Huỳnh. Besides academia-driven oral history projects, one of the most complete collection of interviews can be found browsing the episodes of Tracy Mang Nguyen's podcast *The Vietnamese Boat People* (2018-).

45:7864012909

the names of eight South Vietnamese military martyrs that one will not find mentioned anywhere else. All these strategic memory projects are molded by "the exile perspective" of the first generation, that still "defines and dominates the path that Vietnamese American memory-making must take" (Aguilar-San Juan 88). It is no accident that most of the literature produced by 1.5 and second-generation authors directly addresses this perspective. As Viet Nguyen himself puts it in "On Victims and Violence," a chapter of his nonfiction book *Nothing Ever Dies* (2016) that is at once a personal manifesto and an overview of his Vietnamese American literary forebears:

> [t]he refugee, the exile … can be heard in high volume only in … the enclaves they carve out for themselves. Outside those ethnic walls, facing an indifferent America, the other struggles to speak. She clears her throat, hesitates and, most often, waits for the next generation raised or born on American soil to speak for them. Vietnamese American literature written in English follows this ethnic cycle of silence to speech. (198)

Bảo Quang Temple, Santa Ana (CA).

46:8954381289

ARVN military vehicles ready to be displayed in the Lunar New Year parade in Bolsa Ave, Westminster, CA.

47:1149283107

The Vietnam War Memorial on Bellaire Blvd, Houston, TX.

Carrying this burden of stories, American-raised artists had to confront both South Vietnam's "absent presence" (Bui 2017, 22) and the first generation's "refugee nationalism" (Nguyen 2017, 135). The war looms over their works even when they try to avoid it, as "the refusal to discuss the war can still be seen in light of the war itself" (Nguyen 2016, 213; see also August 2021, 107-108). Many of these retellings come in the form of hybrid texts, "[p]art memoir, part novel" (Espiritu 2014, 165) like lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003), or part memoir, part verse novel such as Thanhha Lai's *Inside Out & Back Again* (2011), in which the "exile perspective" is that of a child. Or maybe in the guise of graphic memoirs like G.B. Tran's *Vietnamerica* (2011) and Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* (2017), in which *autoarchetypical* "I-as-characters" (Groensteen 5.2.1) depicting 1.5-generation authors are made carriers of transgenerational trauma and memories.[23] The ghosts of war hover

[23] With the additional aspect of the graphic transposition, that allows the artist to play with reader perceptions and expectations regarding facts and fiction. Interestingly, both Tran and Bui skillfully break midway what comics theorist Scott McCloud famously defines the "masking" (30) effect—the technique of drawing characters plainly,

48:5624421964

over muddy thriller plots such as that of Vu Tran's *Dragonfish* (2015), or over domestic dramas like Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997), rustling the pages of found letters that bring a dark past to light. And sometimes the war is implicitly foreshadowed in the plot even when the narrative time predates its outbreak, as in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* (2003).[24] In fact, the postmemorial (Hirsch) imperative guides the hand of many, "giving rise to often-haunting artistic and cultural representations that imagine, remember, and trace the complex genealogies of war and forced displacements that precede and shape Vietnamese resettlement in the United States" (Espiritu 2014, 165).

Reeducation camps, for one, have been featured, mentioned, or evoked in novels (Andrew X. Pham's *Catfish and Mandala*), poems (Bao Phi's "Everyday People"), graphic memoirs (*Vietnamerica*), and even *shojo manga* graphic novels like Trung Le Nguyen's *The Magic Fish*, over the course of the past twenty years.[25] Their unique nature of (im)material *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1989; Nora 1996), "topographical" (Nora 1989, 22) in theory but inaccessible in practice, distinguishes the reeducation camps from similar sites. One could call them in a variety of ways: (non)sites of (post)memory, *a*-topographical sites of memory, long-distance sites of memory… Pierre Nora's definition of a *lieu de mémoire* as a "significant entity,

with basic facial features, as to paradoxically elicit more empathy on the part of the reader. Introducing real family pictures in an advanced point of the narrative, the two cartoonists shuffle the cards, causing a "semiotic break" (Groensteen 5.2.1; Earle 68) akin to those present in A. Spiegelman's *Maus* and M. Satrapi's *Persepolis*. Thi Bui justified her choice with these words: "[T]here are so many stereotypes and terrible clichés about Vietnamese people from bad Vietnam War movies … that I had to do something visual to replace those stereotypes. Photographs are not always good at doing that, because … photographs of refugees kind of dehumanize them too in a way. So I drew my characters so that I could try to get to people's hearts and show Vietnamese people as whole human beings. Hopefully by the time you see those photographs of my family as refugees from the refugee camp, that ties us to reality but you've also had a chance to get to know us as human beings first and hopefully like us" (Bui 2019).

[24] In the case of the latter—a critically-acclaimed historical fiction marked by 'reversed Orientalism' set in Paris during the 1920s—the shadow of the war is foretold by the fortuitous encounters of narrator Bình with a young, world-traveling Hồ Chí Minh, credited in the novel as the 'Man on the Bridge.'

[25] The scope of this study is limited to American-born artists. However, it goes without saying that the camps are also heavily featured in works made by other diasporic authors. To name but an example also in the realm of graphic narratives, one could take *Quitter Saigon* (2010), the first installment of French cartoonist Clément Baloup's series *Memoires de Viet Kieu*, in which the 'autoarchetypical I-as-character' collects accounts and testimonies of diasporic subjects related to camp life, boat escapes, and resettlement in the West.

49:5630206477

whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of [a] community" (1996, XVII) would only fit them so much.[26] If nothing else, it applies well to the diasporic museums, with their attempt to "block the work of forgetting, … to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial," since the diasporic "imagination invests [the belongings of prisoners therein collected] with a symbolic aura" (Nora 1989, 19). Due to its inaccessibility, the reeducation camp is *at once* material and immaterial. And until *The Sympathizer*, no diasporic author has dared to dispel the aura of sacredness that lingers around it. This is not to mention that no one went as far as employing the camps as the backdrop of a Beckettian/Kafkaesque piece of absurdist theater, like Viet Thanh Nguyen did with the final chapters of the novel. Many have attempted to represent the camps in their art, but when it comes to *using* them in such a way, the conversation starts and stops with him.

And indeed, at the risk of ruffling a few feathers, Nguyen reclaimed the camp as a place of the imagination. Without sacrificing its historical gravitas, he made it the end point of his narrative, and the center of a larger discourse whose implications reach way further than Vietnam and its wars. Drawing from forgotten histories, he turned uncomfortable legacies into fiction. He transformed the *lieu de mémoire* into a *chronotope*, that is, into a "connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships … artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin 84). In *The Sympathizer*, the inaccessible site of refugee memory becomes a symbolic space, a place "half-real, half-metaphorical" (244), not different from the classic examples of the road, the castle, the parlor, and the threshold as provided by Mikhail Bakthin. The refugee chronotope of the camp makes an "epoch"—postwar Vietnam—become "graphically … [and] narratively

[26] On the other hand, as Viet Nguyen himself argues in *Nothing Ever Dies* (42), the definitions would fit perfectly other forms of diasporic "memory-making," such as the annual 'Black April' commemorations held in Vietnamese American enclaves to remember the Fall of Saigon.

50:8883139007

visible" (247). It is a "means for materializing time in space" (250): "[a]ll the novel's abstract elements—philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect—gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work."

In the novel, Nguyen toyed with this chronotope. He clothed it in Modernist garbs, reshaping it into a T.S. Eliot-ish landscape of horror, barren land, and lost souls. The unnamed camp of *The Sympathizer* is the terminus, the one place where all the novel's threads converge: the "organizing center" (Bakhtin 250) of the narrative, "the place where [its] knots are tied and untied." Here is where ends the parable of the man with two faces, the spy turned movie consultant, the movie consultant turned assassin. Here is where his dream of revolution comes to a (momentary) stop: in the same flies-infested barracks where the cause he served showed its more horrid face. Put simply, in *The Sympathizer* the location and the locus of the final crisis are one and the same.

But more than everything, being the novel a second-degree narrative (Genette 1972, 228; Prince 2003, 86), the camp is the "lieu narratif" where the narration/confession take place. This is one of the cases in which the "déterminations spatiales" (Genette 1972, 228) of the narrative instance are as important as the temporal ones:

qu'un récit « à la première personne» soit produit en prison, sur un lit d'hôpital, dans un asile psychiatrique, peut constituer un élément décisif d'annonce du dénouement: voyez *Lolita* (228).[27]

The Sympathizer belongs to this class of narratives. From the very beginning, the *space* of the isolation cell is the textual element that foreshadows the ending of the novel. Here, we see the

[27] "[F]or 'first-person' narrative to be produced in prison, on a hospital bed, in a psychiatric institution, can constitute a decisive element of advance notice about the denouement: see *Lolita.*" Translation by Jane E. Lewin.

51:8187411151

narrator jotting down draft after draft of his manuscript, including the one we are reading. "The narrator's confession," Anjali Prabhu argues, "becomes linked to his material reality in an extreme and vivid form … and consequently generates the narrative from the knowledge that his bruised body allows his mind to piece together" (388). As Joshua Parker puts it,

> [w]henever two clearly distinct terms (or places) exist in our consciousness at once, we instinctually explain their coexistence by imagining a temporal relationship between them, then suppose that one follows another not only in a temporal but also in a causal chain. (183)

This causal chain, in *The Sympathizer*, is manifested from the outset. Chapter 2 begins with an "Even now" (*TS* 19), that clearly establishes some temporal distance between the *story time* and the *discourse time* (Prince 28). In the narrative "now," the narrator is held captive by a "baby-faced guard" (*TS* 19), in an undisclosed place of imprisonment that seems to strongly hint at the Vietnamese communist carceral system. We learn that the (supposed) narratee/confessor is an unnamed "Commandant." The "narrator-as-detainee" (Stefan 2021, 219), for his part, speaks of Saigon as part of "this" country (*TS* 19), while at the same time describing himself fleeing it on the eve of the collapse of the Southern regime. The narrative, we are led to believe, is thus eventually going to circle back to Vietnam. Apparently, the political allegiances of the character will be eventually called into question—but the circumstances of his arrest and captivity will only be revealed towards the end of the book. All of this, it is worth specifying, is made clear by a singular "élément décisif d'annonce du dénouement." Which is to say, that the narrator is writing his manuscript from a "solitary chamber of three by five meters" (*TS* 70) located in postwar Vietnam.

But there is more. Reeducation memoirs, I argue, made *The Sympathizer* possible. They laid down—and 'translated'—the outline of the camp chronotope for outside, English-reading

52:5557988365

audiences. However, the influence is not limited to the details, to the brushstrokes, to the general authenticity of the narration. From reeducation memoirs Viet Nguyen derived more than descriptions of prison chow, topography, and camp routines. In fact, Nguyen's greatest intuition to date, the very foundation of the novel's structure, can be in turn traced back directly to these texts. An intuition, I might add, that at the end of the second installment of the ongoing novel series, *The Committed* (2021), has now developed into something completely different, and that—according to what Nguyen himself personally revealed to me when I interviewed him in Dallas (Nguyen 2022b →Appendix)—will have a critical role to play in the final volume of his "ghostcolonial" (Diaz) trilogy. This intuition is the following: to take a tool out of the Vietnamese communist 'reeducation' process (Vo 69 ff), the "self-criticism essay" (81), a 30-page paper produced by the inmates during the first stage of the process, and to turn it into *a literary device*. This intuition allowed Viet Nguyen to make the Vietnamese American "exile perspective" on "memory-making" world-famous, while simultaneously contesting its politics and exposing its flaws. In the following section, I will try to reconstruct the historical function of the confession papers as part of the 'reeducation' process, based on the descriptions one can find in the memoirs that Nguyen used as a source of information. Then, I will take into account the reasons and motivations behind his choice to use the outline of the reeducation confession paper as a frame. The aim is to understand how this choice effectively allowed Nguyen to devise and structure the worldviews and perspective of his character-narrator, in addition to performing another 'diasporic reappropriation,' or co-option, akin to the ones we have already seen.

53:9838049331

2.3 The confession-as-a-frame

In the main hall of San Jose's Viet Museum, mounted inside a decorated bronze casing, lies an old, yellowed piece of paper. On top of it, one may read a string of words that one would not expect to see in a room full of artefacts and memorabilia that go back to the times of the Saigon regime: "Cộng hòa Xã hội chủ nghĩa Việt Nam," Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Today, such words are printed on tens of millions of passports covers and are engraved on the red coat of arms that grace the fronts of hundreds of diplomatic facilities all around the world. But those are words one would not dare to say aloud when strolling under the brown arcades of Vietnam Town, or in the shiny-floored aisles of the Grand Century Mall, the main shopping centers of the not-too-distant San Jose Vietnamese business district.

In this district, a line of strip malls and restaurants that sprawls out over the edges of Story Road, it would not be impossible to run into some aged man that would remember having once held a similar piece of paper in his hands. The nearby museum is an Italianate style farmhouse which front yard harbors a landlocked boat, painted with Homeric eyes, meant to commemorate the refugee exodus. In the hall, the document hangs on an aged faux-brick-wall that looks like a sort of bas-relief. In its niches, cast figures depicting prisoners are frozen in various poses. Behind symbolic bars, metal canteens and hair combs donated by camp survivors shine in the dim light of back lamps. The at-a-glance reference would not be lost on any visitor of this small, jam-packed gallery located on the verge of Kelley Park. The installation, a mixture of artistic depictions and historical relics, is a visual *lieu de mémoire* meant to embody the idea itself of "reeducation." When gazing at it, it easy to realize why the author at the center of this study calls this small museum an "apt metaphor for exilic memory" (Nguyen 2016, 39). The

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diorama representing the desecrated ARVN cemetery of Bình An, for one, perfectly matches his description: it is indeed “as groomed and as green as it could be if the victorious state would allow it” (Nguyen 2016, 39). When looking at a gravestone with the words “Vô Danh” (“nameless”) carved on it, a gravestone taken from that same cemetery and put on display in the adjacent niche, one cannot help but think about his eponymous literary hero and his fictional confessions.

San Jose’s Viet Museum.

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The “reeducation” installation in San Jose’s Viet Museum.

The document.

56:1028860006

Indeed, as I approached the installation, I hoped for a split-second that the framed document hanging on that wall was one of the ones I had been looking for since my arrival on the West Coast. I had tried everything. I had contacted libraries, browsed collections, and asked museum curators across the state; I even wrote to a military archive in Texas. I knew that—as the narrator of *The Sympathizer* puts it—in postwar Vietnam "there was no shortage of paper" (*TS*, 364). Considering the sheer numbers of reeducation detainees, and the fact that self-criticism sessions were held by political cadres at a civil and criminal level all over the country, it is safe to assume that, somewhere in Vietnam, there would be an archive where one would find all the "confessions."[28] But apparently, of all the hundreds of thousands of self-criticism papers produced in Vietnamese prisons and reeducation camps, none is known to have arrived intact on American soil.

Yet, the document in front of me was from a reeducation camp. But the story told by those black, faded letters, typed in the camp of Xuân Lộc the third day of May 1982 by a "giám thị"—an 'exam supervisor'—was not a story of captivity and false repentance. It was a story of longed-for freedom; the very freedom paradoxically promised by the document header, the motto of the Socialist Republic, **"**Độc lập - Tự do - Hạnh phúc"—Independence, Freedom, Happiness. That old scrap of cheap paper, lost in the middle of a room full of uniformed mannequins, battle-pictures, and screaming statues, was not a confession, but a release document. It was a pardon. The man who carried it to the U.S., a Southern lieutenant colonel by the name of Huỳnh Văn Luận, had held on to it during the crossing, to then donate it years later to the museum. However, in reading it, one could still grasp the atmosphere of postwar

[28] In 2012, Lien-Hang T. Nguyen's groundbreaking *Hanoi's War* (2012) pieced together North Vietnamese wartime strategies and power struggles by relying on official archival records. In fact, Lien-Hang Nguyen was one of the first (Vietnamese) American scholar to have access to those kinds of documentary sources. Basing ourselves on the descriptions one can find in her book (11), one could speculate that the 'confessions' are to be found in Hanoi's Center 3 of the hard-to-access Vietnam National Archives.

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Vietnam through the lingo of its apparatuses and political bureaus. It gives one the feeling of a world consumed with hatred, suspicion, and retribution—a world in which terms like 'crime' and 'exam' were part of the same range of meanings.

Thus, it dawned on me that the story I was looking for was not encased in these rooms alongside these objects, as much as the other way around. For a moment, I saw that installation as a sort of extension of the novel—in a way, I saw the silhouette of the chronotope behind the contours of the site of memory. The key to understanding both, I realized, was to strip them of historicity to focus on the suggestiveness. That afternoon I was reminded of the rust on the American aircrafts stacked like cars in a junkyard in front of the Hanoi's Vietnam Military History Museum, and of the dark paint of the Soviet-made T-54 tank eternally parked in front of the Reunification Palace in Hồ Chí Minh City. I also remembered the mannequins depicting communist patriots exhibited in the prison of Hỏa Lò—the 'Hanoi Hilton'—and their plastic screams of pain, specular to those of the ones in the niches in front of me.

Gold stars and red stripes, glory and bitterness, spoils of war and shattered lives, winners and losers—both sides of the spectrum, with their conflicting perspectives and irreconcilable memories—were equally channeled (and challenged) by the dog-eared, heavily pencil-marked novel I was carrying in my backpack since I had started my coast-to-coast journey through Vietnamese America. There, just over a mile south from his childhood home, I realized the extent to which Viet Thanh Nguyen renovated both the diasporic and the American canon of the war in Vietnam by centering the plot of *The Sympathizer* around a salacious, disenchanted communist spy whose coerced memories were to become an autobiography. Years after my trip to Vietnam, I was finally seeing the other half of the raw material with which he built his 'thriller of ideas.' And on my way out, passing by an oil painting depicting President Reagan stoically giving his back to Mount Rushmore, and the cast-off coat and tie of exiled South

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Vietnamese President Thiệu, I realized that, instead of a confession in a frame, what I was really looking for was the confession *as* a frame. Which is to say, that the answer was not in that museum, but in my backpack. Yet, while flipping once more through the pages of *The Sympathizer* sitting on a Kelley Park bench, I could not help but keep asking myself the question I had become obsessed with since the beginning of my journey: where are all the confessions?

The confession, self-criticism essay, or autobiographical statement ('bài tự khai,' 'lý lịch'), was a document produced under duress during the repeated 'biography sessions' held in reeducation camps. "The inmates," in the words of Tuan Hoang, "were required to write 'confessions' of 'crimes' that they had committed against the revolution and, during political lectures and study sessions, to speak about those self-incriminating crimes" (71). To keep track, political commissars and cadres forced prisoners to get to the root of their family history, going back generations. Detainees were required to write these accounts over and over again, producing up to thirty versions of their autobiography (Vo 69). This exercise was not limited to the camps. Instead, it was common practice throughout reunified Vietnam, just as it has been across North Vietnam and across NLF-controlled areas during wartime. This kind of personal history statement, as ethnologist Ann Marie Leshkowich sums up, was "a socialist tool of classification to make the population legible through state categories … implementing a system of class restructuring through reform, reward, and punishment" (149).

On the one hand, Leshkowich argues, this practice was a legacy of Soviet and Maoist doctrines. In Russia, she remarks, "the personal history form (*lichnyi listok*) appears to have been used … to help identify 'deprived' classes of traders, clergy, and kulaks, most notably during the 1930s dekulakization campaigns … Depending on the political climate, individuals could be held responsible for the negative backgrounds and activities of their relatives" (151).

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Vietnamese self-criticism also owes a debt to the Maoist "speak bitterness" and "struggle" sessions—practices that, as Robert Jay Lifton summarizes, were purported to "the exposure and renunciation of past and present 'evil'" (5). However, as per Leshkowich the Vietnamese "method of scrutinizing a person through a dual process of confession and self-examination" (151) has deeper roots than Marxism-Leninism. As proof of this, she brings up the Buddhist tradition of composing life histories "to distill lessons for … disciples" (151), as well as the Confucian idea of inheriting one's fathers' merits and misdeeds. This change of perspective, she argues, would entrench the socialist confession custom in "Confucian familial morality, which inextricably bound the fate and talent of the individual to that of the family through ties of mutual responsibility and interdependence" (151). Such overlapping of practices, and decades of submitting "lý lịch" forms—even in the more relaxed political climate of post-1986 Vietnam—resulted in a well-engrained stylistic approach to life history that, as Leshkowich demonstrates, it is now virtually "structural" (152) when it comes to the ideal-typical Vietnamese writing self, as it is with other post-socialist societies, where neoliberal trends and transformations have "produced an obsession with the self, both as a subject of individual scrutiny and reform and as a target for assessment by a host of helping professions" (154). Such "technologies of the self" are the final expression of a deep-seated social conditioning due to years of filling autobiographical statements—with the understanding that, in a not-too distant past, submitting a "bad lý lịch" could spell the difference between getting access to the job market and being relegated to the lowest reaches of society.

In other words, in Vietnam, bureaucracy and self-history go hand in hand. In fact, one might be misled by the (Western) religious undertones underlying the English word "confession" as a translation of "bài tự khai" or "lý lịch." Whereas Viet Nguyen repeated use of the morpheme "confess" in the novel clearly gestures towards both domains, the original

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term is pure bureaucratese.[29] Indeed, "khai" means "to declare," as in filing documents or taxes, and "lý lịch" was—and still is—the Vietnamese word for "résumé." Such kind of apparently neutral language is far removed from the semantics intrinsic in the Nguyenian idea of 'confession' as shown in both 'ghostcolonial' novels, with their implied (and, at times, very explicit) references to confessional writing and Catholicism. Indeed, western autobiography owes a debt to the Christian sacrament as a "practice that institutionalizes penance and penalty as self-expression" (Gilmore 14). As theologian Adrienne Von Speyr puts it, "the institution of confession … is the fruit of the Cross" (166). "[T]hrough recognition of our sin and through confession, exhortation, and penance" she insists, "we had to objectify ourselves more and more, and in a certain sense even become depersonalized" (212). As a sacrament, Christian confession "is a process with clearly defined stages … from insight to contrition and resolution, from confession to absolution" (183). *The Sympathizer* is rife with references to Christian confession. The protagonist is born a Catholic, his tale is loaded with Christian imagery, and his (absent) father is a French priest who meets his demise while inside a confessional. Even if the faith in question is political in kind, recognition, contrition, and penance are there for all to see. In fact, from Nguyen's perspective Catholicism and communism are comparable ideologies. In his eyes, both are "based on power, on obedience, on repetition, on submission" (2016c). This especially resonates with Vietnamese history, which is equally replete with hardcore Catholics and communists trying to remake the country in their image. In an interview,

[29] In this respect, it proves instructive to pick up *The Sympathizer*'s bootlegged translation edited by dissident blogger Lê Tùng Châu, to see how he renders the various derivatives of the morpheme "confess." Intriguingly, sometimes, in lieu of "confession," the blogger writes "giải trình," "explanation," as in a letter of explanation—another bureaucratic term. Similarly, in order to render the repeated instances of "I confess," he often uses the verb "thú nhận," meaning "to admit, to avow," a term strongly related to the semantic realm of guilt inherent in a police state like postwar Vietnam, rather than a religious term such as, for instance, "xưng tội"/ "to repent" (in one instance, he translates "confession" with "lời thú nhận", as in another case he uses the precise wording for "self-criticism," "tự kiểm điểm"). On the other hand, the blogger translates the Catholic concept of "confessor" to the letter— "giáo sĩ nghe lời xưng tội." In doing so, he explicitly compares the Commandant-confessor to a priest ("giáo sĩ"), thus maintaining (and reinforcing) Nguyen's implied overlapping of (Vietnamese) Catholicism and (Vietnamese) Communism.

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Nguyen (himself born a Catholic) made clear how he purposefully devised two scenes of the novel as to make the equivalence explicit:

> there's a connection being made in the book between Catholicism and communism. At a certain point in the novel he has to undergo the Catechism, the Q & A structure of being interrogated as to who is God, that all of us who were Catholics had to deal with. Then by the end of the book he's interrogated again and the Communist vein in the Q & A mode is repeated at that time as well. (2016c)

This religious framework is thus pivotal to understand *The Sympathizer*. However, one will also note how the novel contextually *challenges* this framework. Confessional writing often revolves around the idea of conversion. Conversion narratives are "autobiographies of lives devoted to mistaken beliefs … written from the perspective of some subsequently discovered truth" that follow a "two-part, before-after" (Eakin 152) scheme of revelation. Nguyen disrupts this idea by devising a fiction in which the two-part scheme is retained without providing a grand, rock-solid truth to cling to. *The Sympathizer* is no Arthur Koestler narrative of disillusionment. At the end of the novel, the protagonist does not trade a faith for another. His rejection of Party orthodoxy does not lead him to embrace capitalism, or America, or the West. As we will see, he ends the novel as a blank slate, a revolutionary deprived of his revolution. In this respect, *The Sympathizer* takes only what it needs from reeducation memoirs. Unlike these latter, in Nguyen's reeducation fiction the "before-after" scheme of revelation is indefinitely postponed; the narrator's is an unfinished conversion, one that stops halfway in its tracks. As a literary genre, philosopher María Zambrano maintains, confession is the meeting point between life and though. Every conversion narrative from St. Augustine onwards rests on the assumption that "solamente descubriéndose a sí mismo se llega al descubrimiento de la

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verdad" (60).[30] This discovery leads to rebirth: "el hombre nuevo que renace de la Confesión … no anda ya desnudo porque tiene forma y figura; en suma, es un hombre completo…" (66).[31] In Christian theology, a sinner is a "person broken into a thousand pieces, incurably fragmented. Confession is there so that a person may collect himself" (Von Speyr 179). Quite the contrary happens to Nguyen's protagonist, who is reborn an *incomplete* man, a broken down, divided self, looking for new answers. In the second novel, he will find some; but at the end of *The Sympathizer*, 'the captain' is back to square one. The narrator's journey leads to a stalemate—his is a confession put on hold.

Nonetheless, this Christian framework is key to understand the novel. In fact, Nguyen's novelistic spin on the Vietnamese communist "technologies of the self" relies only so much on the actual forms and documents on which it was purportedly based. If anything, the outline of the novel—as we shall see—seems to allude more to the contemporary American publishing industry than to postwar Vietnamese bureaucratic apparatuses. In the fiction, however, Nguyen's literary rendition of the "lý lịch" is supposedly modeled on the peculiar version of self-criticism essays that was produced in the camps. All the sources highlight how such a document played a major role in the "reeducation" process. Unlike the personal family history statements considered by Ann Marie Leshkowich, this kind of "lý lịch" was structured as a three-part, 20-30 pages long paper, which consisted of a comprehensive life record of the prisoner, complete with family background up to the fourth generation, his/her wartime activities, and his/her list of assets. The completion of this form—i.e., the prisoner's 'self-incrimination'—was of paramount importance. Embellishments were considered 'decadent writing,' scribbling was deemed as a 'crime of the bourgeoisie,' discrepancies could amount to

[30] "Only by discovering oneself one does get to discover truth."
[31] "[T]he new man who is reborn from the Confession … no longer walks naked because he has a shape and a figure; in short, he is a complete man…"

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a crime. Revisions were imposed under threat of starvation or solitary confinement. Accounts too concise were viewed with suspicion. The wardens, however, were not interested in truth as much as in "what they believed to be true" (Vo 69). According to Tran Tri Vu, one lieutenant Thuong detained in the Southern camp of Trảng Lớn had to write by candlelight an account "as thick as a book" (*Lost Years*, 22). Every confession, Tran Vu claims, had to be copied three times, no later than ten days after the beginning of the first session. In the mind of the victors, the 'thought reform' program was a utopian effort to recast the nation in their own image, 'remaking' the enemy "as 'Socialist men and women' (con người xã-hội chủ-nghĩa), [that] will … pave the way to the Communist millennium" (Huỳnh 1988, x). But from the losers' perspective, the forced biography sessions were an act of "mental terrorism" (*Lost Years*, 22), and the confession paper an instrument of torture.

A sketch made by a reeducation camp survivor. Courtesy of Mr. Chau Thuy.

The "educational" nature of the process, however, was not entirely specious. "Camp leaders," as reported by Tuan Hoang "sometimes referred to inmates as 'students' and to

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themselves as 'teachers' [thầy], demanding respect from prisoners" (2016, 77). The intent was clearly 'didactic,' as the camp activities revolved around a "classroom curriculum" (Canh 208), divided into two parts. The first stage comprised eight subjects over a period of ten weeks.[32] The subjects ranged from the injustices suffered by Vietnam during the (neo)colonial years, to the bright, envisioned future of the country under the leadership of its new rulers. Then, an additional week was devoted to group discussions[33] of individual 'crimes committed against the people,' culminating with the composition of what refugee Le Kim Ngan remembers as a "written twenty-page report [in which the prisoner] describes all his past crimes, begs the Revolution for a pardon, and promises to study hard to become a good citizen of the socialist regime" (qtd. in Canh 209).

Memoirist Jade Ngọc Quang Huỳnh remembers the biography sessions held at the Hà Tiên camp as a daily activity. "We worked from five in the morning until seven at night," he recalls, "[and then] we came back to the camp for … confession time" (*South Wind Changing*, 57). In these essays, prisoners were expected to call themselves 'criminals,' 'puppets,' and 'American lackeys' (Hoang 2016, 77). Their crimes, however, were often trivial, if not indeed ridiculous. "Mail clerks, for example," Amnesty activists Ginetta Sagan and Stephen Denney noted, "were told that they were guilty of aiding the 'puppet war machinery' through circulating the mail, while religious chaplains were found guilty of providing spiritual comfort and encouragement to the enemy troops" (1982). Thanks to these 'confessions,' the new authorities could easily track down their opponents still at large, insofar the prisoners were pressed to

[32] The second stage was focused on other lectures regarding the country's leaders, and New Economic Zones (Canh 208).
[33] In fact, similar Maoist-style 'struggle sessions,' "highly ritualized act[s] of ideological contrition" (Goscha 2016, 295), were already occurring in the DRV since the days of the 1953-56 land reform.

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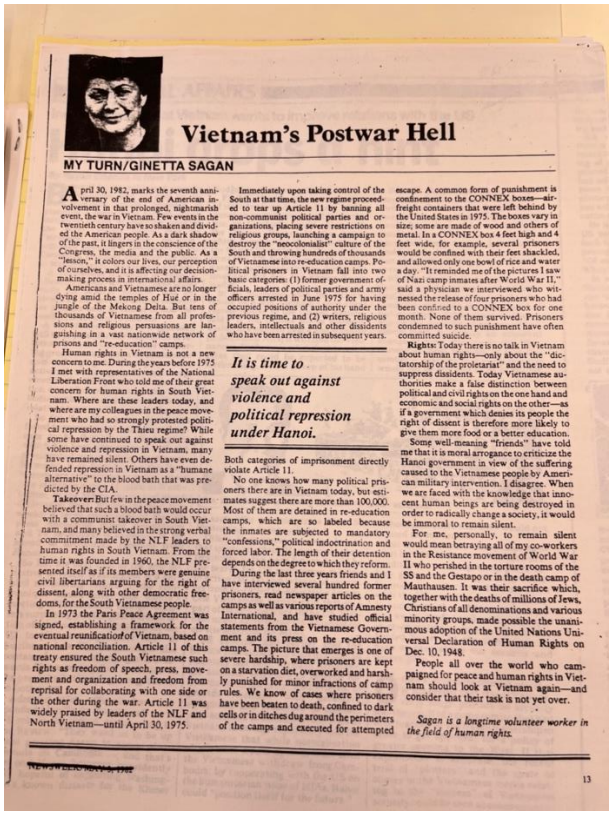
denounce other fellow soldiers or government officials that had failed to report for reeducation. But the main purpose, according to Sagan and Denney, was juridical:

Such 'confessions' provide the government with a retroactive justification of its decision to imprison hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese in the camps. It can point out … that the prisoners themselves had confessed to committing crimes. (1982)



Vietnam's Postwar Hell

MY TURN/GINETTA SAGAN

April 30, 1982, marks the seventh anniversary of the end of American involvement in that prolonged, nightmarish event, the war in Vietnam. Few events in the twentieth century have so shaken and divided the American people. As a dark shadow of the past, it lingers in the conscience of the Congress, the media and the public. As a "lesion," it colors our lives, our perception of ourselves, and it is affecting our decision-making process in international affairs.

Americans and Vietnamese are no longer dying amid the temples of Huế or in the jungle of the Mekong Delta. But tens of thousands of Vietnamese from all professions and religious persuasions are languishing in a vast nationwide network of prisons and "re-education" camps.

Human rights in Vietnam is not a new concern to me. During the years before 1975 I met with representatives of the National Liberation Front who told me of their great concern for human rights in South Vietnam. Where are these leaders today, and where are my colleagues in the peace movement who had so strongly protested political repression by the Thieu regime? While some have continued to speak out against violence and repression in Vietnam, many have remained silent. Others have even defended repression in Vietnam as a "humane alternative" to the blood bath that was predicted by the CIA.

Takeover: But few in the peace movement believed that such a blood bath would occur with a communist takeover in South Vietnam, and many believed in the strong verbal commitment made by the NLF leaders to human rights in South Vietnam. From the time it was founded in 1960, the NLF presented itself as if its members were genuine civil libertarians arguing for the right of dissent, along with other democratic freedoms, for the South Vietnamese people.

In 1973 the Paris Peace Agreement was signed, establishing a framework for the eventual reunification of Vietnam, based on national reconciliation. Article 11 of this treaty ensured the South Vietnamese such rights as freedom of speech, press, movement and organization and freedom from reprisal for collaborating with one side or the other during the war. Article 11 was widely praised by leaders of the NLF and North Vietnam—until April 30, 1975.

Immediately upon taking control of the South at that time, the new regime proceeded to tear up Article 11 by banning all non-communist political parties and organizations, placing severe restrictions on religious groups, launching a campaign to destroy the "neocolonialist" culture of the South and throwing hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese into re-education camps. Political prisoners in Vietnam fall into two basic categories: (1) former government officials, leaders of political parties and army officers arrested in June 1975 for having occupied positions of authority under the previous regime, and (2) writers, religious leaders, intellectuals and other dissidents who have been arrested in subsequent years.

It is time to speak out against violence and political repression under Hanoi.

Both categories of imprisonment directly violate Article 11.

No one knows how many political prisoners there are in Vietnam today, but estimates suggest there are more than 100,000. Most of them are detained in re-education camps, which are so labeled because the inmates are subjected to mandatory "confessions," political indoctrination and forced labor. The length of their detention depends on the degree to which they reform.

During the last three years friends and I have interviewed several hundred former prisoners, read newspaper articles on the camps as well as various reports of Amnesty International, and have studied official statements from the Vietnamese Government and its press on the re-education camps. The picture that emerges is one of severe hardship, where prisoners are kept on a starvation diet, overworked and harshly punished for minor infractions of camp rules. We know of cases where prisoners have been beaten to death, confined to dark cells or in ditches dug around the perimeters of the camps and executed for attempted escape. A common form of punishment is confinement to the CONNEX boxes—air-freight containers that were left behind by the United States in 1975. The boxes vary in size; some are made of wood and others of metal. In a CONNEX box 4 feet high and 4 feet wide, for example, several prisoners would be confined with their feet shackled, and allowed only one bowl of rice and water a day. "It reminded me of the pictures I saw of Nazi camp inmates after World War II," said a physician we interviewed who witnessed the release of four prisoners who had been confined to a CONNEX box for one month. None of them survived. Prisoners condemned to such punishment have often committed suicide.

Rights: Today there is no talk in Vietnam about human rights—only about the "dictatorship of the proletariat" and the need to suppress dissidents. Today Vietnamese authorities make a false distinction between political and civil rights on the one hand and economic and social rights on the other—as if a government which denies its people the right of dissent is therefore more likely to give them more food or a better education.

Some well-meaning "friends" have told me that it is moral arrogance to criticize the Hanoi government in view of the suffering caused to the Vietnamese people by American military intervention. I disagree. When we are faced with the knowledge that innocent human beings are being destroyed in order to radically change a society, it would be immoral to remain silent.

For me, personally, to remain silent would mean betraying all of my co-workers in the Resistance movement of World War II who perished in the torture rooms of the SS and the Gestapo or in the death camp of Mauthausen. It was their sacrifice which, together with the deaths of millions of Jews, Christians of all denominations and various minority groups, made possible the unanimous adoption of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights on Dec. 10, 1948.

People all over the world who campaigned for peace and human rights in Vietnam should look at Vietnam again—and consider that their task is not yet over.

Sagan is a longtime volunteer worker in the field of human rights.

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Ginetta Sagan's report on reeducation camps, retrieved from UC Irvine's Southeast Asian Archive.

Thus, the self-criticism report, as Nguyen Van Canh puts it, served as "a sentence by which [a prisoner] could be imprisoned for life in re-education camps," as "[n]o one, including his family, can protest the sentence, because the written admission is taken as proof of the

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accusation" (210).[34] Another important aspect—the one that matters most in the context of our discourse—was the emphasis put on the prisoners' life and family history. The confessions were short autobiographies: the cadres wanted the inmates to write down every detail regarding political allegiances and financial assets of their relatives. The victors wanted to know who to trust. Upon their release from the camps, those who had sided with the Americans paid a high price, as they were often forced into making a living by working a variety of menial jobs.[35] As mentioned above, the "lý lịch" was a way to profile every family going back generations. Thus, the general layout of these confessions must have resembled that of a (grotesque) family tale—and the bigger the family, the longer the confession. Every inaccuracy between the thirty odd versions of the confession that every prisoner was demanded to write was to be punished; some wised up, like Vietnamese Australian memoirist Hoa Minh Truong, who claims to "ha[ve] kept a copy of [his] first paper [in order not] to spend much time on it" (117). At all events, the repeated biography sessions must have been grueling: "[t]he incessant demand for confessions," Sagan and Denney observed, placed "much pressure on the prisoners, leading to insanity in some cases" (1982).

All these elements, in some measure, find their way into *The Sympathizer*. The premise of the novel is that the spark behind the creation of the text is ignited by an act of sheer coercion. 'The captain' is a man to "be made over." His first-person narrative is a long, brutal, and whimsical session of self-criticism, which produces a "memoir-like confession" (Kumamoto Stanley 286) not of the kind that his wardens "are more likely used to reading" (*TS* 70). At the

[34] Canh used a masculine pronoun, but female prisoners—especially sex workers and bar girls accused of mingling with the American enemy—were also detained in the camps. Unlike the NLF infrastructure that comprised many female fighters, the ARVN—as well as the PAVN, for that matter—was mostly composed of male soldiers. However, there were also women that served under the Southern regime. The very well-kept Vietnamese Heritage Museum's YouTube channel presents a series of features and interviews that revolve around some of them. On gender conditions in wartime Vietnam, see Goscha 2016, 366.

[35] See Bui 2017, 194, for the ARVN veterans forced to work as *cyclo* drivers in postwar Saigon.

67:1381485987

end of the story, the character-narrator has indeed become quite insane. After the torture, 'the captain' is a broken man, a shell of his former self. He is physically, psychically, and ideologically exhausted. In the last chapters, as Nguyen put it to me, "there's all kinds of dissociation happening" (Nguyen 2022b → Appendix). The intuition of making the character prone to an unspecified mental disorder allows Nguyen to occasionally turn him into a Greek chorus, or, as Caroline Rody puts it, into "a many-voiced American chorus, swelling 'I' to the Whitmanian brink of 'we'" (400). In the aftermath of the torture, his initial assessment about being a man "able to see every issue from both sides" (*TS* 1) acquires unexpected meanings.

In fact, the narrator's two-mindedness, his being "a man of two minds" (*TS*, 1) constantly torn between clashing sides is made *literal* by having him develop some kind of split personality.[36] Here, depersonalization as invoked by Adrienne Von Speyr as part of the sacrament of confession become a bonafide mental health issue. What the narrator experiences in the wake of the torture is a sort of novelistic version of real-life pathologies such as derealization, or dissociative identity disorder.[37] Images of duality, for that matter, are all over the novel. As both Pat C. Hoy II and Amanda R. Gradisek note, even the jarred "defoliant baby" (Hoy 690), a two-headed stillborn kept on the Commandant's desk, works as a correlative objective of the narrator's "fragmented, bifurcated self" (Gradisek 24). In addition to his (symbolic) condition of being mixed-race, and to his (allegoric) statute of being a breathing

[36] Frank Snepp, the former CIA Chief Analyst in South Vietnam turned whistleblower and then journalist—author of *Decent Interval* (2002), one of the sources for *The Sympathizer*—pointed out to me how the narrator's doubleness might also paradoxically lead to unintended echoes of American racist assumptions towards the Vietnamese during wartime. "The joke to me," he told me during out interview, "is that the narrator [himself] is the very quintessential [racist] stereotype" of the untrustworthy Vietnamese "hedging on his bets" without taking a side. As per Snepp, "Americans in Vietnam looked at the Vietnamese in those terms" (2022).

[37] It should be noted, however, that "psychic metamorphosis and collapse, paired with … a fear of losing one's very essence … and a severe fragmentation of one's mental functioning" (Hárdi and Kroó 133) as a result of torture are all common, and scientifically proven outcomes of such an experience. In *The Committed*, the narrator—now known as Vo Danh ("nameless")—will indeed show signs of "post-torture psychological sequelae" (Hárdi and Kroó 136), such as "sexual dysfunction … depersonalization and dissociation … fear of intimacy, and changes in identity."

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"17th parallel in the flesh" (Diaz), which is to say, a living embodiment of Vietnam's political divisions, the narrator's doubleness becomes thus a *condition* in the medical sense of the term.[38] As always, Nguyen's intent is both serious and satirical. As Caroline Rody notes, "[i]t is unusual, to say the least, for a fictional protagonist to arrive in his ending not at a new place but at a new pronoun" (402). In the specular diptych formed by *The Sympathizer*' last pages and by the "Prologue" of *The Committed*, the split-personality 'we' of the narrator, "the pronominal two-in-one" (Shostak 227) overlaps with the collective 'we' of the Vietnamese refugees. To this final 'we' "is given the last word" (Prabhu 394), the final line '*We will live!*' (*TS* 367; *TC* xiii), at once a personal cry for freedom and a *refugee paean* that, by extension, can be also made to include the 'I' of the author, himself a refugee at age 4.[39] Through the "literary pyrotechnics" of the refugee paean, Sunny Xiang argues, Nguyen as an "ethnic author" devise a narrator whose "irresolvable twoness yields an elaborate metafictional contrivance" (421), turning "the domain of representation into a trick mirror, one that reflects the multitude only by halving or doubling the authorial persona" (423).

This, however, only happens after Chapter 19, the watershed-chapter that signals the end of the initial 295-pages confession—the one written under duress. The narrator's record is then to be followed, "in a striking formal gesture" (Britto 2019b, 374) on his part, by the pages written (willingly) by him as "post-torture therapy" (Rody 397), in which the freed prisoner, "outside of the confessional structure" (Britto 2019b, 379) retells how the previous 295 pages

[38] With this reference, Nguyen also taps into a pre-existing Asian American cultural and literary lineage. The reference here is to the concept of "dual personality," of Asian American subjecthood understood as a pathologic condition of irreconcilable division (Fusco 2006b, 190), foregrounded by works such as Nie Hualing's *Mulberry and Peach*. Remaining within the Vietnamese American canon, a prime example would be Lan Cao's *The Lotus and the Storm* (2014), in which multiple personality disorder becomes a signifier of the diasporic Vietnamese condition of being torn between space and time.

[39] The impact is lost in the bootlegged Vietnamese translation by Lê Tùng Châu, where the narrator's pronominal-two-in-one "We" becomes "hai chúng tôi," that is, "the two of us," while the final "refugee 'We'" is simply translated as "chúng tôi," which is usually used to denote a collective group of people that does not include the reader/listener.

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had become "the subject [itself] of his interrogation" (374) while detained in the camp. Here, Anjali Prabhu maintains, the narrator "has enough distance from his discourse to … recognize himself in his text as he takes the role of its reader" (391). Thus, the bulk of the first novel—the 295-pages confession—could be safely put under the aegis of the letter 'I,' as per the roman numeral (the first confession), the pronoun (the first person), and—if you will—the unreliable, limited but all-encompassing 'eye' of the protagonist, in whose gaze the reader is inescapably trapped.

This first confession, the 'I-Confession,' or, according to the definition by Hayley C. Stefan, the "book-as-confession" (215), as literary as it is, is supposed to be based on the outline of the real-life "lý lịch" forms produced in the camps. As we have seen, the real confession papers are very hard to find. Viet Nguyen himself, as he revealed to me, has "no idea where they would be" (Nguyen 2022b→Appendix). Had the narrator really existed, he would be one of the few ones—if not the very first—ex convicts to have safely brought his confession to Western shores. Thus, it follows that, as a literary device, *The Sympathizer*'s diegetic "lý lịch" was modeled on the descriptions of such forms one can find when reading *Lost Years*, rather than on some irretrievable document. Specifically, one can speculate that it was based on that of lieutenant Thuong, a confession "as thick as a book." As Tran Vu remembers it, the story beyond this specific confession was a "ludicrous instance of black comedy" (*LY*, 22). Nguyen Van Thuong, a former recruiter officer at the Long An military subsector, broke all length records while having to report about the two women he lived with and their respective family trees up to their grandfathers' concubines. Thuong, like *The Sympathizer*'s protagonist, also had "special permission of the *bodoi*" to work after-hours at his 'manuscript,' spending an "enormous amount of time" (*LY*, 22) while copying it three times. Lieutenant Thuong was no communist double agent in need of an ideological purge. However, he and Nguyen's character

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share the common condition of being womanizers incentivized by camp wardens to produce unusually long confessions. In both cases, the label of "black comedy" fits the story and the circumstances in which the story is written. Therefore, it is not inconceivable that Thuong's story, to some extent, helped inspire the novel.

It follows that Nguyen built the whole foundation of the trilogy on a small episode taken from an obscure memoir. From *Lost Years*, he derived the intuition of having someone being forced to retell his story and to confront his demons, to then getting the hang of it, enjoying the process, and ultimately turning an 'instrument of torture' into a crash course of creative writing. Nguyen's structural device is thus not only a diasporic co-option of the notion of 'reeducation,' but also a way of wedging a new perspective into the literary canon(s) built around the war in Vietnam. And indeed, the voice of the unnamed narrator, overflowing onto the fictional "lý lịch," is arguably Nguyen's crowning achievement to date. His 'discovery' was the one invention that unlocked the creative streak that led to *The Sympathizer* (Fassler). As he put it to me, "when I came up with the opening line, I knew that was the DNA for the novel" (Nguyen 2022b →Appendix). Nguyen's books, as Jonathan Dee argued in relation to *The Committed*, are "essentially a delivery system for that voice, a series of pretexts for training it on forms of domination that have too long thrived without answering to it" (2021). His, Caroline Rody argues, is the literary voice of another "outsider American" akin to the creatures of Nabokov, Ellison, and Roth. Nguyen's sympathizer is but the latest addition to a crowded gallery of americanized 'I's, "most of them gendered male, … inviting a general American readership … intimately into the thorny terrain between alienation and identification" (397; 396).

To craft it, Nguyen threw into the kettle all kinds of literary 'I's he could. His unnamed narrator is a distillation of all the most brazen, irreverent, and disaffected *isolatoes* living on the edges of the Western canon. Joseph Heller and Louis-Ferdinand Céline's literary heroes are

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often brought up. In addition to them, one would not fail to recognize echoes of other "outsiders," Americans or not, in the literary dubbed voice of Nguyen's protagonist. Nguyen's list of declared sources spans decades and continents. As Yunior from Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008), Nguyen's narrator reports dialogues without quotation marks. As the self-despising veteran doctor from António Lobo Antunes' *The Land at the End of the World* (2011), he is also an unnamed witness-participant of neocolonial atrocities. As *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert, 'the captain' is writing during his imprisonment. As Ralph Ellison's invisible man, he will end up his journey in a white room replete with lightbulbs. And as with Philip Roth's Alex Portnoy, his is a continuous monologue addressed to an absentee interlocutor in which he recalls engaging in sex acts with food (the infamous squid scene).

Nguyen's narrator, however, differs from his literary ancestors in at least one respect. Compared to them, the way he tells his story is defined by the circumstances that made it possible to an even greater degree. The intuition of using the reeducation paper as a textual frame is what informs the narrative and makes it what it is. As with other kinds of frames, even a textual frame "tends to function," in Judith Butler's words, as a "self-commentary on the history of the frame itself" (8). Butler's analysis concerns the way in which politics and the media landscape represent war. She speaks of binary essentialisms according to which some lives are deemed "grievable" and others not. War narratives, in her eyes, are shaped by language and imagery to the point of distortion. To "call the frame into question," Butler argues, "is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside … something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality" (9). In this perspective, there is little to no difference between a photo/camera frame and a textual frame. In both cases, "the mandatory framing becomes part of the story… unless there is a way to photograph the frame itself" (71). What happens, though, when a "frame of (post)war" is *self-*

72:16400070051

imposed? In *The Sympathizer*, the frame itself gestures towards what is outside of it. By devising the novel as a coerced utterance, Nguyen puts the emphasis on the power structures that enforced the coercion and made the utterance possible. What exceeds the frame, in other words, is somehow already contained in it.

This allows Nguyen to call into question a great deal of historical forces and players. Above all, however, one must not forget that *The Sympathizer* is eminently metafictional. Even before getting to the American military industrial complex, Nguyen takes it out on the American literary marketplace. The confession-as-a-frame allows the author to play a joke on the publishing industry by the means of a metaliterary reenactment of its dynamics. Indeed, oftentimes the joke is apparent. The two (three?) novels are structured around a fictive manuscript hidden in the double bottom of a suitcase. This manuscript, that we shall call the 'confession-as-an-object,' is said to consist of a complex, stratified series of layered additions. The first two are comprised of the diegetic 295-pages confession, the I-Confession (which, in turn, is said to be but the last—and heavily edited—of several other versions; see *TS* 296), written under duress in the span of one year, and then rewritten again in fair copy (and, presumably, updated; see *TS* 357) in the span of some months. The second layer of the confession-as-an-object is instead comprised by the later additions presented in Chapters 19-23. This final cluster of chapters forms what I call 'the Coda,' that is, a section heavily informed by avant-garde stylistic solutions in which the narrator undergoes torture, experiences dissociation, and finally leaves the camp; a section that, in the diegesis, is said to having been written over a two-month period while in hiding in Saigon (*TS* 364). In *The Committed*, this first part of the codex—which, moreover, also exists in a fictive French translation drafted by

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Man's aunt—is said to amount to 367 pages (*TC* 29).[40] As with the classic Found Manuscript trope, Nguyen's text constantly makes itself physical. More than one found manuscript, one could call the fictive heap of sheets a 'carried manuscript,' as the collation of confessions, in *The Committed*, is shown to follow the narrator in his journey from Southeast Asia to France, lending the duffel bag "a demonic glow" (*TC* 122). As it turns out, the carried manuscript continues indeed to expand at a tremendous rate during the journey, slowly morphing into a more ordinary kind of first-person narration, as, in the sequel novel, the prisoner morphs into a refugee, and the refugee morphs into a drug dealer, with 'the captain''s examination and torture that become 'Vo Danh''s *self*-examination and *self*-torture, following "one intersecting loop" (Đinh 2021).

This, however, has implications that reach further than narratology and the curiosities of a critic. The symbolic connotation of the confession-as-a-frame allows Nguyen to go way beyond the 'regular' game of diegetic levels one would expect from a narrative structured around a fictive manuscript. To pick a reeducation camp confession as the vessel of (in this order) a spy story, a war story, a satire of Hollywood, a John Woo-esque story of blood brothers,[41] a minimalist piece of experimental theater—is to play on more than one table. "Nguyen," as Karl Ashoka Britto remarks, "juggles genres like so many flying AK47s … [and] his play with narrative allows for a profound reflection on narrative itself" (2019b, 371). With the confession-as-a-frame, the California writer could accomplish what he often claims, tongue-in-cheek, to be the main purpose behind the novel(s): "to offend everyone" (Nguyen 2016b). In other words, the confession-as-a-frame is a *political* vessel, a continuation of Nguyen's

[40] Not incidentally, the amounts of 295 and 367 pages perfectly match both the diegetical end of the I-Confession and the total number of pages of the American edition of *The Sympathizer*, thus carrying on Nguyen's metatextual game of overlapping between the fictive manuscript and the book-as-a-commodity itself.

[41] "[A]mong fans of Hong Kong cinema (at least in the U.S. and U.K.) to say a film is 'Woo-esque' brings to mind the distinctive way [John Woo] has juxtaposed, in his later films, frenzied and violent action with heartrending tales of betrayal, loyalty, and chivalry among men." Sandell 24.

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activism by other means. The frame allows the author—through the voice of the narrator—to challenge a great deal of perspectives regarding the war in Vietnam and its afterlives in memory. It allows him to fill, as Debra Shostak puts it, "the absent center created by the Western evacuation of 'Vietnam' into an abstraction" (217). But first and foremost, by means of it, Nguyen can, in the words of Subarno Chattarji, "resituat[e] … the implied reader … reimagining … a community that is not wholly determined by 'the literary industry' and its memorial gate-keeping functions, which serve to … exoticise the refugee 'other'" (185). To resist this exoticization, he uses diasporic sites of memory as raw material to craft a self-conscious, farcical metanarrative that targets the American publishing industry. We have seen how he co-opted communist and Christian "technologies of self" to structure his confession, merging them by means of language to prove a point. Now, let us see how he tackled the confessional mode understood as a literary staple of the Western canon. That is, how he devised the confession-as-a-frame around the confession as a genre.

2.4 Autobiography as guided Little Saigon tour

> "[A] novel in the form of a confession is not a confession in the form of a novel."
>
> Bernard Avishai, *Roth and Jewishness* (2018)

In choosing the confessional mode, Nguyen obviously tapped into a rich tradition. As a genre, the confession dates back to the dawn of Western literature. From St. Augustine onwards, the autobiographical impulse never truly waned, ebbing and flowing through the centuries. The confession as a genre, philosopher María Zambrano argues, reemerges periodically at times of crisis. A confession is a flight from oneself: according to Zambrano, "[s]in una profunda desesperación el hombre no saldría de sí, porque es la fuerza de la desesperación la que le hace

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arrancarse hablando de sí mismo, cosa tan contraria al hablar" (32).[42] The theological assumption that confession is "the fruit of the Cross" affects self-writing as a Western praxis. Despair leads to introspection, introspection leads to words, words lead to stories. "Autobiography," Paul De Man maintains, "is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts… Which amounts to saying that any book with a readable title-page is, to some extent, autobiographical" (921). In fact, "[g]iven the assumption that human existence is essentially non-narrative or even anti-narrative in character," Paul John Eakin argues, "the concept of an autobiographical narrative would be a contradiction in terms" (130). Yet, self-writing shows no signs of stopping. From chronicles to memoirs, from Rosseau to Malcolm X, the history of the West is rife with narrating selves committing words to page. The confessional mode has a particular connection with the United States. Autobiography is a well-established American tradition, dating back to the colonial era. "The 'founding' of autobiography as designated and conscious genre," Robert F. Sayre writes, "fell within the early years of the Republic, and its growth, coinciding with the spread of the romantic movement, has also coincided with the growth of the United States" (qtd. in Payne xi). American literature is loaded with success stories, tales of self-reliance, songs of myself. An invisible string connects the Puritans with Benjamin Franklin, Transcendentalism to confessional poetry, Frederick Douglass to Gertrude Stein. When it comes to minority 'I's, however, the idealtypical American coming-of-age of a white male whose path from innocence to experience mirrors "the maturing of the nation" (Sumida 219), tends to resonate less. This is especially evident when it comes to the literature of ethnic minorities. In recent times, practices of self-representation helped shedding new light on "suppressed histories" (Gilmore 16). Self-

[42] "Without deep despair, man would not come out of himself, because it is by force of despair that he drags himself to talk about himself, which is the very opposite of speaking."

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history is the gateway through which marginalized communities entered the world of letters. Asian American literature is no exception; from the personal writings of the first migrants arriving on U.S. soil, to trailblazers like John Okada or Carlos Bulosan, the early Asian American canon is replete with first-person narratives. However, this did not come without challenges. Thorny debates around issues of self-invention, fiction, and autobiography are now decades old. The pressure to become cultural informants providing mainstream audiences with ethnographic accounts of one's own country/community has been a factor, and, in some way, it is still very real. This demand for representativeness, Manuela Vastolo argues, effectively reifies minority experiences, re-hierarchizing diversity all the while celebrating it (51). Pigeonholed as representatives of entire cultures, "ethnic" authors found (and find) themselves relegated to the lowest rung of the ladder, steps below the highbrow literary classics sitting at the top (Vastolo 51). "The taint of tokenism," Shirley Geok-lin Lim argues, "is actually the transmuted stain of racism so long embedded that we no longer see it" (qtd. in Vastolo 51).

In this respect, one Asian American controversy over fiction and authenticity has made history. Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* came out in 1976 to wide critical acclaim, quickly becoming a staple of the Chinese American, Asian American, and American literary canon. In spite being labeled a memoir, as Sau-ling Cynthia Wong writes, Kingston's book "is at best only nominally autobiographical… The prose slips from the subjunctive to the declarative with but the slightest warning… Verifiability is virtually out of the question in a work so self-reflexive" (251; 252). This textual ambiguity did not come without consequences. Many Chinese American critics, including writer Frank Chin, took issue with Kingston's novel as one "written with white acceptance in mind" (qtd. in Wong 255). Chin also reprimanded "the very form of autobiography" chosen by Kingston "because of its association with the Christian tradition of confession" (255). The main point, however, was the idea that the ethnic American

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autobiographer was not supposed to "wash the culture's dirty linen in public" but to "provide a positive portrayal of the ethnic community through one's self-portrayal" (258). As Wong would have it, from Chin's "cultural nationalist" perspective, "an ethnic autobiography should also be a history in microcosm of the community, especially of its sufferings, struggles, and triumphs over racism" (258). This, however, at the risk of implementing a "new uniformity," whereby "one set of stereotypes is replaced by another" (260). In the end, Wong argues, "the kind of fiction" that Chin and his cohorts would have liked "Kingston to have written" would have been as well "dictated by the responses of white readers" (260).

Wong's essay also speaks of the dangers of "American-born autobiographers" capitalizing "on white curiosity by conducting the literary equivalent of a guided Chinatown tour" (262). By placing themselves as native informants "providing explanations on the manners and mores" of their community, "ethnic" authors submit to the demands of an audience that mistakes each first-person narrative for a confession and every narrator for a memoirist. This also resonates with the recent wave of 1.5 and second-generation Vietnamese American literary authors with which Nguyen is commonly associated. To give but one example, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), the stellar prose debut of one of his most talented peers, poet/novelist Ocean Vuong, is in turn structured as a confession. Textual connections between the novel and Vuong's poetry collections, as well with his personal life, would invite an autobiographical reading. However, *On Earth* is no memoir. As Vuong often stresses in interviews, he wanted to "start with truth and end with art" (2019b). His take on the canonized "ethnic" autobiography is thus a subversive endeavor. *On Earth* is no retrospective coming-of-age, but a series of vignettes, a journey with no haven, an erratic stream of images. As a confession addressed to an illiterate woman, the novel is a meditation on the (im)possibilities of language. Vuong's narrator, Little Dog, paints a picture in which war becomes a "mother

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tongue" (46) made up of stories and silences, one in which the most innocent expressions of everyday English ("We smashed the competition," "you're making a killing") are made receptacles of an invisible lexicon of death. The diasporic selfhood, in *On Earth*, thinks of himself as a product of war and a denizen of a nation that still lives in fear of its own history. In devising the novel, Vuong resisted the idea of conducting the literary equivalent of a Little Saigon tour. In an interview, adjusting Sau-ling Wong's concept to Vietnamese American legacies of war trauma, he redressed it as follows:

> What would happen if there is no story, traditionally. Then when you let go of plot, what you gain is people. And so this book can be seen not so much as a tour bus moving through a decimated landscape, which is what often writers of color are expected to perform. Be a tour guide of a smoldering world. What if it wasn't that? What of it's more of a gallery? A portrait gallery? Surrounded by the faces of these people. And that you move through the book on your own terms. (2020)

Vuong was but the last Asian American author to defy this and other market expectations. Throughout the decades, a solid anti-canon grounded on experimentation has inexorably taken shape (Fusco 2006, 110). Works like Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* resist exotification by employing more daring aesthetic solutions. Cha's book is a genre-bending oeuvre that, as Lisa Lowe maintains, "[r]ather than constructing a narrative of unities and symmetries, with consistencies of character, sequence, and plot, it emphasizes instead an aesthetic of fragmented recitation and episodic nonidentity—dramatizes, in effect, an aesthetic of infidelity" (130). This is not the place to retrace the history of this anti-canon. However, what I would like to highlight here is how Nguyen, like Vuong, to an extent *consciously* inserts himself in this tradition. He too did not want to conduct Little Saigon tours. As a leading scholar himself, author of an influential essay that helped change the landscape of Asian American studies, *Race and Resistance* (2002), Nguyen was familiar with such issues decades before devoting himself to

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fiction. Accordingly, one can surmise that Nguyen devised *The Sympathizer* as an accessible part of this anti-canon, a witty genre novel that collapses halfway through to show a hidden face. Namely, that of a challenging, aesthetically infidel, and politically charged genre novel steeped in avant-garde solutions.

His co-option of the "lý lịch" form must be seen in this light. With *The Sympathizer*, Nguyen reframes reeducation confessions as stand-ins for the presumptions of the American market regarding minority writers. These latter, in Nguyen's perspective, are always expected by "[t]he literary industry and [by] the entire social and cultural system of the United States" (Nguyen 2016b) to invariably deliver first-person narratives about themselves, their culture, and their upbringing, by writing, as he told journalist Angela Chen in the wake of winning the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, "for white people" (Nguyen 2016b). The narrative 'I,' in such an 'autoethnographic' work, is tacitly expected to be that of the author, as his/hers and the main character's experiences are required to match. Such is what H. R. Jauss defines as "the horizon of expectations" (12), that is to say, "the carrying out of certain directions in a process of directed perception which can be comprehended from the motivations which constitute it and the signals which set it off and which can be described linguistically." As Jauss would have it, "the new text evokes for the reader … rules familiar from earlier texts… [as part of a] transsubjective horizon of understanding" (13). When *The Sympathizer* came out, many labeled it as the long-overdue Vietnamese answer to American perspectives on the war in Vietnam. Nguyen was hailed as "a voice for the voiceless," the one Vietnamese American public intellectual with a refugee background everyone was apparently waiting for. The horizon of expectations was for him to become the one tour guide to lead the Western reader into a decimated landscape. He was the one supposed to tell the ever-elusive "Vietnamese side of the story." This, however, came at the price of discarding thirty or more years of pre-existing

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diasporic perspectives, as well as decades of Vietnamese war literature, translated or not. Furthermore, though Nguyen would indeed manage to leave an important mark, everyone seemed to forget that he was no spokesperson nor tour guide. In a way, he had foreseen part of the risks he was running. Because of his family background, he knew that he was incurring the danger of being mistaken for his narrator. Indeed, sometimes he has been proved right. To give but an example, in lieu of the original Christopher Moisan's rendition of 'the captain''s face, the cover art of the Italian edition of *The Sympathizer* features a stylized design of Viet Nguyen's, inadvertently blurring the lines between author and fictional persona.

And this kind of pressure is not limited to him. Marketable minority literature, Nguyen suggests, is entirely made up of *forced memoirs*. With the (huge!) necessary distinctions having been made, in this perspective there would be little difference between an "ethnic" autobiography and a "lý lịch" written by coercion in a reeducation camp. Nguyen's act of defiance is to introduce a patently false memoir into the discourse. His, in other words, is a *pre-emptive* critique of the market's horizon of expectations—a first-person minority narrative devoid of exotic recipes, trauma porn, and refugee gratitude, that spares nobody. In *The Sympathizer*, the minority 'I' is that of a character whose life experiences defy every possible suspension of disbelief. The story of a communist double agent tasked to follow abroad a South Vietnamese general, only to find himself in the Philippines, employed as a movie consultant by an egotistical Hollywood auteur that nearly blows him to smithereens during the filming of the movie, is a story that anyone would have a tough time believing it really happened. And even if their views (and voices) occasionally overlap, Nguyen's life experiences are nowhere near those of the narrator. The latter is something like a cardboard mask, an offshoot, a receptacle for political perspectives that, as retired CIA chief analyst Frank Snepp claimed when I interviewed him regarding Nguyen's novel (Snepp 2022), would probably appear alien to a real

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Vietnamese communist spy like the ones that Snepp interrogated in Saigon during the early 1970s. The character's excellent command of the English language did also raised doubts. Nguyen addressed the subjective of "believability" in an interview:

> Does such a person exist? Can such a person exist? I don't know. I certainly know that during the time of the Vietnam War, there were Vietnamese people who were really quite fluent in English, but whether they were so fluent that their intonations sounded American is a different issue. But I thought, well, why not? Do we have to automatically rule out the possibility simply on the grounds of believability, as some of my Vietnamese American critics have said—that this is clearly an Asian American novel, written by an Asian American, that no Vietnamese could have spoken like this? Maybe, maybe not. Why do we have to be bound by the constraints of our own realism? Why can we not imagine that there have been exceptional people able to do exceptional things? Or depart in some respects from full-blown realism? (Britto 2018)

Thus, one could very well speculate that implausibility was a *conscious* effort on Nguyen's part. In *The Sympathizer*, under the guise of the genre novel, lies something larger. To quote Timothy K. August, "one could say that Nguyen performs a work of espionage himself, gaining access to a wide audience by publicly presenting himself as just a prize-winning author while clandestinely still doing the work of an ethnic studies professor" (2021, 102). In a way, more than a character, his unnamed narrator could be seen as a character-device. As a literary persona, 'the captain' is in a class of his own. He is designed to engage in a spiral of uncomfortable conversations that range from the American involvement in Indochina to issues like Hollywood representation, diasporic revanchism, and the failure of the revolution. As the author himself revealed:

> I deliberately wrote a novel far removed from my own life or my family's life so that no one could think of mistaking me for my narrator. At the same time, even if the novel is not autobiographical, it seems like it could be

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nonfictional. It uses the genres of confession and memoir to create a nonfictional effect, which, for some readers, seems "truer" than fiction, and which for me as the author allowed the possibility of engaging in nonfictional narrative strategies that aren't often seen in contemporary American fiction: most notably the use of didacticism and "telling" rather than "showing." (Perlmutter 2018, 83)

Nguyen, in other words, was striving for a different kind of fiction. His was a deliberate rejection of the long-established standards promoted by the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programs. In his view, commandments like "show, don't tell" are Cold War precepts which foster "creative writing as a defense of the individual" (2017c). In a *New York Times* op-ed, he argued for the need to reevaluate the workshop as a "hostile place for women and people of color," a depoliticized environment in which there is no room for "politics, history, theory, philosophy, ideology" (2017c). To challenge this state of things, he shoehorned all of the above into a first-person narrative fictionally produced within an equally hostile environment. In *The Sympathizer*, the reeducation camp becomes a surrogate for a Creative Writing faculty rife with unimaginative writer-teachers raging against the "unacceptable, counterrevolutionary manner" (*TS* 309) in which students write. This idea is also reflected in Nguyen's essay-manifesto *Nothing Ever Dies* (2016), where Nguyen equates the workshop model as a "democratic appropriation of the communist self-criticism session" (207). His vendetta against the MFA precept to always "show and do not tell" drove him to devise *The Sympathizer* as a *fictionally-forced-memoir* loaded with didacticism. His was an effort deliberately metafictional, with the first installment of the saga that begins as a coerced self-criticism paper, and the second that ends as a confessional work written willingly. "You … won't tell me what I want to hear" (*TS* 299) says the Commandant to the "narrator-as-detainee" after having finished reading the 295-pages confession: "Does that make you very smart or very stupid?" Such a prison dialogue recalls more a spat between an opinionated student and a dogmatic teacher than a harrowing

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scene from a captivity tale. Here Nguyen blends the "educational" nature underlying the Vietnamese concentrationary universe with his critique of the MFA workshop as two systems as per which every self-narrative is made to look like the next one. Nguyen's choice of having a protagonist forced to write a memoir is both a chance for him to situate the plot into the heart of Vietnamese history, and to stage a grotesque allegory of market expectations regarding writers of color. In lieu of an editor, a commandant; in lieu of publishing industry standards, Party's guidelines; and in lieu of an MFA workshop, a reeducation camp.

Such a grotesque allegory is obviously no realistic account of Vietnamese history. When it comes to the "nonfictional creative strategies" evoked by Nguyen, that is, his drive to write brainy 'thrillers of ideas' in which French gangsters are shown discussing race and theory while torturing each other, these *strategies of implausibility* are the backbone of the whole endeavor. Nguyen's ideal aim, as Yu-yen Liu argues, is to write "criticism as fiction and fiction as criticism" (548). Oftentimes, the movement back and forth between story and ideas is marked by sudden ruptures, used for dramatic effect. As Amanda R. Gradisek notes, "[t]he novel's style is detached and distant, often focused on abstract and intellectual rumination, so that when there is a vivid description, the reader can hardly forget it" (4). Both *The Sympathizer* and its nonfiction companion, *Nothing Ever Dies*, Sandra Kumamoto Stanley notes, occupy "interstitial spaces, merging the language of fiction and critique" (286). Keeping this in mind, one will not fail to note how some sections of the two books are deliberately structured as odd Platonic dialogues in which the words matter more than the characters who say them. In both novels, the plot is peppered with disputes and debates that smuggle ideas under the detective trench coat of genre fiction. Take for instance these exchanges from *The Committed*:

You accuse me of racism yet again when all I have said is how much I love Asiatic women? What kind of—

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Racist love is still racist! (217)

You're a strange bastard, he muttered.

I have to be if I want to forgive the unforgivable. (234)

In the first passage, the narrator is clashing with French intellectual BFD about race and universalism. To prove his point, he directly quotes Frank Chin and J. P. Chan's concept of "racist love" (1972). Here, the reader's suspension of disbelief is tested up to a point, as is totally possible that the character could have heard about it while studying in California. *The Sympathizer*, Evin Lê Espiritu Gandhi contends, "writes Vietnamese subjects into the [Asian American Movement of the Long Sixties], remembering the forgotten history of the Vietnamese international students who played a key role during anti-Vietnam War protests" (60). But in the second case, the narrator is already wrestling with the concept of "forgiving the unforgivable" as posited by Jacques Derrida's *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (2001) twenty years before the French philosopher would write the essay. In fact, there is no shortage of instances in which, under the thin veneer of a pseudo-1970s color palette, the novels clearly concern political anxieties of our time. As Sylvia Shin Huey Chong says it, "[t]he narrator's litany strikes me as surprisingly modern, articulating a perspective more often heard today in Asian American studies classes and film festivals rather than from a community of Southeast Asians who had just arrived in the United States in the 1970s" (2018, 372). *The Committed*, Roy Scranton argues, is a "work of postcolonial theory in the guise of a crime novel" (179), and if we replace "crime" with "spy," quite the same can be said of the first book. The whole premise of the Nguyenian thriller of ideas as a genre relies on the reader's disbelief, as well on his/her willingness to engage with theory and notions as s/he is already doing with the story and the plot. It is hardly an arduous task, as the novels almost invariably wear their references

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on the sleeve, and Nguyen drops plenty breadcrumbs for the reader to follow. I concede to Sunny Xiang that the narrator-protagonist is a "carefully crafted persona [, and not a mere] autobiographical proxy" (423). Although this is true, there are parts of the novel in which the distinction seems to fade. 'The captain,' Nguyen confirmed me personally, is in many respects his "alter ego" (Nguyen 2022b→Appendix); not by chance, they share the same birthplace, Ban Mê Thuột. Thus, breaking free from the constraints of the literary marketplace's horizon of expectations regarding ethnic literature, the California writer/scholar sewn himself a tailor-made 'minority I,' as well as a gallery of worthy counterparts for him to engage with, in order to hide criticism inside of fiction. In this regard, the author stays true to Lisa Lowe's definition of Asian American literary aesthetics as one defined by "contradiction, not sublimation," that, "if subjected to a canonical function, dialectically returns a critique of that function" (44).

It is, in other words, as if Nguyen turns concepts *into characters*. Plodding as it may sound, this was done on purpose. The goal behind *The Sympathizer*, as Subarno Chattarji says, was a "transformative wresting of control" of the means of memory-making, a "rewiring of the circuits of memory" (208). Or, to say it as Debra Shostak does, to shred "the master narrative of Western cultural appropriation by speaking in its language and redeploying its tropes" (228). The conversation continues in *The Committed*, where Nguyen deals with the legacies of French colonialism, and with current-era political debates about identity and race. To carry his point on, he puts his narrator in the very hotbed from which such debates started—the turn-of-the-1980s parlors of Paris overflowing with hashish and French theory. So, using postwar Vietnam, refugee nationalism, and Hollywood's depictions of the conflict as a model case for understanding what America chooses to remember and what to forget about her imperialist ventures—and Parisian *banlieues* and literary salons to do the same with France and hers—

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Viet Nguyen, in open defiance to the precepts of the MFA workshops, effectively 'shows' by 'telling.'

2.5 Strategies of implausibility

It goes without saying that devising a reeducation camp as "the worst writing workshop ever" (Nguyen 2022b→Appendix) is to play with fire. It will not come as a surprise that, in Vietnam, the novel's translation has never been green-lit; nor that some, in the American diaspora, do not take kindly some of Nguyen's political views. In the homeland, the whole reeducation section would probably raise too many questions about a long-buried and dangerous past.[43] In Orange County, I personally happened to engage in a fascinating debate with a young second-generation Vietnamese American not keen on Nguyen's sentiments regarding the presence of both Confederate and South Vietnamese flags at the failed Capitol Hill insurrection of January 6, 2021, as expressed by the author in a *Washington Post* op-ed (Nguyen 2021b). However, one cannot help but notice how the MFA/reeducation joke can be legitimately seen as another kind of diasporic co-option—in this case, a "parodic reappropriation" (Shostak 222)—akin to the ones we have already touched on. In a scholarly essay from 2012, Nguyen stated that he personally finds South Vietnamese veterans' politics "repugnant" (927), but that he is still able—like the protagonist of his novels—to 'sympathize' with their claims to justice and rememberment. As Subarno Chattarji notes, "[t]he narrator's incarceration… directly counterpoints communist propaganda, shameful histories that must not be erased, just as his

[43] Interestingly enough, the layout of Lê Tùng Châu's bootlegged Vietnamese translation of *The Sympathizer* is remodeled to look like an anti-communist pamphlet directed at Hanoi's government—completely missing, perhaps, the main point of the novel.

87:1407282597

satire on the Vietnamese refugee community refuses to sentimentalise them" (237). With the MFA/reeducation joke, Nguyen points his finger at both sides of the spectrum, adopting the novel as "a safe aesthetic space" (Đinh 2021) devised to grapple with such kinds of diasporic transgenerational rifts.

And indeed, *The Sympathizer* is the one Vietnamese American novel that tackles the histories of Vietnam and America from the one (fictionalized) point of view that (many) Vietnamese Americans hate the most—that of a Vietnamese communist. As Timothy K. August summarizes, "[n]early everyone in this story is flawed" (2021, 114). In this respect, the sympathizer—the first "biracial Vietnamese antihero" (114) of American literature—is a true original. His literary dubbed voice, embedded in the confession-as-frame, is a means to recontextualize the collective trauma of the reeducation camps into an avant-garde, pseudo-Modernist domain, in which indignation gives way to the feeling of absurd. Twisted irony, Nguyen implies, is a much more effective way to expose the horror(s) of history. Following the footsteps of war writers like Joseph Heller, Nguyen made the tragedy a farce, and the farce a tragedy. But then again, to put it like Hayden White does,

> one narrative account may represent a set of events as having the form and meaning of an epic or tragic story, and another may represent the same set of events … as describing a farce. … Can it be said that sets of real events are intrinsically tragic, comic, or epic, such that the representation of those events as a tragic, comic, or epic story can be assessed as to its factual accuracy? (1992, 38; 39)

Had one been able to have a camera crew documenting the Late Bronze wars that inspired the *Iliad*, one would have to review hours of footage showing uneventful skirmishes between shepherds wielding leather shields instead of armored warriors battling river gods. In this respect, *The Sympathizer* is the first body of work to have changed the angle from which

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reeducation camps are usually fictionalized. If we remain within the boundaries of Vietnamese American literature, quite the same may be said regarding the history of American military involvement in Southeast Asia. It goes without saying, however, that Viet Nguyen is not the first writer coming from the war in Vietnam that ever attempted doing something similar. The difference between him and other authors essentially lies in the political perspective.[44] Where, say, most of Tim O'Brien's works expose war's absurdity while also demonstrating a clear "reluctance to play the historian's role … focus[ing] on the direct responsibilities of his characters rather than [on] the larger ones of more distant forces" (Mariani 2015, 185), Nguyen's farcical thrillers of ideas reject the binds of historical accuracy, but not history per se. On the contrary, they embrace it, while twisting it and deforming it beyond all recognition. As a ray of light changing speed because of Snell's law of refraction (Born 37), crossing from one transparent element to another, and giving the viewer the illusion of seeing a bent pencil under the surface of a glass of water, Nguyen's novels turn the late 1970s' Vietnamese California, postwar Vietnam, and Paris' criminal underbelly into a test bench for modern reckonings about power, memory, empire, and race. In these novels, a dispute on the way back from a Parisian brothel in the early 1980s can easily turn into a modern-day confrontation between French universalism and American identity politics, with a former Vietnamese spy (!) coming to the defense of the latter.

This *refracted history*, in which past and present (imperfectly) mirror one another, is what these novels are about. To look for realism while reading them is as pointless as trying to reconstruct Guernica's bombing using Picasso's painting as an historical source. And significantly, the last mention of the verb "to confess" to appear in the novel can be found in the "Acknowledgments," just while discussing the matter of historical plausibility. "Many of

[44] On antirealism strategies in Vietnam War narratives, see Rosso 1994.

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the events of this novel did happen," writes Nguyen, "although *I confess* to taking some liberties with details and chronologies" (*TS* 369, my italics). Given the relevance of the morpheme "confess" throughout the novel, the ambiguities it conveys in the plot, and the recurrent overlapping between the voice of the narrator and the opinions of the author as expressed in his works of non-fiction, this occurrence—the only paratextual (Genette 1997, 3) incidence of the morpheme in the whole body of work—can be seen as a sort of warning light and is definitely worth mentioning.

In the context of *The Sympathizer*, thus, confession and history are both frames. Through them, Nguyen could address the "larger" and "distant forces" often absent in combat narratives. In fact, many of his characters—as if they were personified concepts in a Medieval morality play—can be said to actively *embody* those forces in the flesh. It is no coincidence that most of the characters in *The Sympathizer* bear generic names-function such as "the General," "the Commandant," "the Chair," "the Auteur." They are not personas as much as mouthpieces giving voice to the conflicting perspectives addressed in the novel. They are allegories—stock characters, sometimes border line cartoonish, imbued with symbolic traits by a self-conscious author.[45] In fact, one could even make the case that, in his quest against Hollywood stereotypes, Nguyen deliberately resorted to *other* stereotypes to prove his point.[46] Be that as it might, it should be said that many tirades and back-and-forths in the novel are not meant to be realistic any more than the long combat dialogues one would see in the Silver Age comic books from whence the "misunderstood mutant[s]" (*TS* 1) whom the narrator compared himself to come

[45] Sometimes, as Debra Shostak argues, "when the narrator is referring to the titles of his 'superiors'…their personal anonymity betokens the[ir] ideological force … their namelessness registers their power over him, as if they are like gods whose names are too powerful to be spoken" (225). Indeed, one could even go as far as to say that they can be seen as allegorical characters representing the "larger and distant forces" at play on the battlefield(s) of memory.

[46] This was also the opinion of Frank Snepp when I interviewed him in West Hollywood in February 2022, especially with regard to Claude—a character partially based on him.

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from. To verify the above, suffice it to compare *The Sympathizer*'s personified entities with the full-fledged characters and real-life exchanges at the center of Nguyen's short story collection *The Refugees* (2017), whose style tends more towards realism.[47] Nguyen, in other words, can write round characters well enough when he wants to.

However, accuracy and realism, as I personally realized when looking at the installation in San Jose, are not always the best ways to convey horror. Sometimes it takes something more.[48] Nguyen's use of modernist solutions in *The Sympathizer*'s 'Coda' foregrounds this necessity. "[M]odernism," Hayden White argues, "appears … as an anticipation of a new form of historical reality … that included, among its supposedly unimaginable, unthinkable, and unspeakable aspects … a growing awareness of the incapacity of our traditional modes of representation even to describe them adequately" (1992, 51-52). As with Holocaust narratives, then, "modernist modes of representation may offer possibilities of representing the reality … that no other version of realism could do" (52). In fact, White maintains, modernist techniques and styles *de-fetishize* both the facts and their representations, clearing the way "for that process of mourning which alone can relieve 'the burden of history' and make a more, if not totally realistic perception of current problems possible" (1996, 32). When I asked Nguyen whether he based *The Sympathizer*'s camp on a real-life place or not, he pointed me out to Eliot. His intent, he revealed to me, was not to refer to specific "geography", but to keep the place "very mythical and not get bogged down in reality" (Nguyen 2022b→Appendix). The reeducation

[47] A notable exception would be the magic realism of the opening story, "Black-Eyed Women," that features a returning ghost.

[48] On this matter, I disagree with Timothy August when he contends that *The Sympathizer*'s world is "fictional yet plausible" (2021, 115). Whilst I recognize that Nguyen, as August argues, effectively "modeled many of the characters and moments in the book after actual people and events" (115), like—just to give a couple of examples—Nguyễn Cao Kỳ Duyên (Lana) and *Fantasia* (*Paris By Night*), or Hoàng Cơ Minh (the Admiral) and the Mặt Trận (the Front), the way in which he reshuffled and rearranged the plot is *deliberately* put at the service of an ahistorical, counterfactual version of things that puts modern-day issues and politics above concerns for accuracy and realism. Put simply, in *The Sympathizer*—I argue—implausibility is not accidental but intentional.

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chronotope is an unreal place—a bamboo gulag concealing white bright rooms replete of thousands of lightbulbs, surrounded by "a forest of toothpicks over which gusts of crows and torrent of bats soared in ominous black formations" (299). Nguyen designed it as a meld of a CIA 'black site,' the barren landscapes of *The Waste Land*, and the underground cellar where the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* lives. Perhaps, the reaction he wanted to elicit in readers was not so unlike the "shadowy sublime" (Nguyen 2016, 260) provoked by the "wretched aesthetics" (260) of the Southeast Asian sites of memory he describes in *Nothing Ever Dies*. By means of it, he tried in turn to give his readers a taste of that "kind of memory that confronts and exhausts… [, a memory that is] a slap in the face rather than a sermon from the mount" (261).

Thus, Nguyen's refracted history is made of deliberate distortions. "[T]he book's focus on storytelling," Amanda R. Gradisek argues, "suggests that *The Sympathizer* is a novel about the intersections of story and truth and how the desires of those who consume the stories shape the way they are told and packaged" (4). Nguyen's strategies of implausibility, in other words, are the result of a political discourse. "Through his consistent foregrounding of the refugee position," Timothy K. August argues, Nguyen brought forth a new key to understand the present through the blood-stained lenses of the past, "as [Southeast Asian] refugees and their descendants can provide necessary and trenchant critiques of empire, neoliberal governance, and militarism" (2021, 98). In fact, one could argue that Nguyen's ghostcolonial novels go even further, embracing the idea that, as scholar Yến Lê Espiritu once put it in a public lecture, "refugee stories [themselves can constitute] a site of theory-making" (2021), all the while moving *past* what Espiritu's Critical Refugee Studies Collective define as "refugee re-storying" (2022, 89). That is, the impetus behind those refugee narratives that "revel in beauty and survival, even when refugee lives are edged with precarity, [dismantling the tropes that] reify

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condescending and depleted images of refugees" (89). The point at issue is that beauty and survival, while important, are just half of the Vietnamese refugee story and experience. Ugliness and irony, when dealing with a war that has been 'lost on the battlefield but won in memory' by the receiving country—the country of refuge—are just as crucial. Especially considering that, since its end, "[t]he Vietnam War," as Yu-yen Liu maintains, has become the point of reference in public discourse "through which the following America-related events, the American collective power, foreign policy in Asia, … American identity and values are judged" (549).

In a way, Nguyen consciously plays with this assumption by creating a nesting doll-like narrative that, while discussing the war in Vietnam, "gestures [effectively] toward an otherwise" (Liu 543). Americans still see the shadows of Vietnam lingering over new wars, new quagmires, and the demise of yet another ally-turned-client state. But what they fail to see, Nguyen implies, is *how* all these elements are connected. They fail to see how the so-called "Vietnam syndrome," in a sense, has always been a misdiagnosis. The point, he "gestures" through his fiction and non-fiction, is not the reality of American decline, as much as the myth of American innocence. As the Watchman muses,

> [Americans] believe in a universe of divine justice where the human race is guilty of sin, but they also believe in a secular justice where human beings are presumed innocent. … They pretend they are eternally innocent no matter how many times they lose their innocence. The problem is that those who insist on their innocence believe anything they do is just. (*TS*, 182-183)

Through the various subplots of the novel, Nguyen proves how this myth still (dangerously) reverberates in the industries of memory. American innocence, he seems to imply, is akin to

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that of a pit-bull puppy: young America, like all young creatures, does not know how hard is biting. Now, he suggests, try explaining that to the bitten hand.

And indeed, by pointing out how more recent wars mirror the one war that shaped his own life and destiny, Nguyen shows how America heard only the first part of the Vietnam lesson. In this respect, one might even add *The Sympathizer* to the canon of the "neo-historical novel" (Rousselot 4; see also Shostak 218), as a fiction marked by a "simultaneous attempt *and* refusal to render the past accurately… aimed at answering the needs and preoccupations of the present" (Rousselot 5)—thus piling it up with genres such as the neo-Victorian novel, the neo-Forties novel, and so on. This, however, comes with the caveat that Nguyen's purported 'neo-Vietnam War novel' would emphatically reject both the "verisimilar mode," and the "aesthetics of nostalgia" (Rousselot 5) entailed by such a definition, as well as the idea, theorized by Elodie Rousselot, that neo-historical fiction perceives historical distance as *exotic*. Quite the opposite, as the past—in *The Sympathizer*—is as ugly as the present, and it is not 'other' to it as much as *far too similar to it*. Nguyen's novel is not an "escapist fantasy" (Rousselot 6) as much as a warning for modern-day readers to pay attention to the continuity of power mechanisms through history. Also, as Debra Shostak argues, neo-historical fiction "presumes a gap between writer … and the subject matter," whereas Nguyen, partly because of his personal ties with the story he is telling, "'writes back' to orientalizing American representations of the Vietnamese and the war," seeking "his *own* traumatic past, not that of a hypothetical other" (219).

However, unlike Shostak, I would hesitate to fully label the novel as an example of what Linda Hutcheon defines as "historiographic metafictions," that is, those "popular novels which are both …. self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (5). Even though *The Sympathizer* is clearly a metafiction, it is "historiographic" only to a degree. I concede that the novel "both install[s] and then blur[s] the line between

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fiction and history" (Hutcheon 1988, 113), and that is written in a "reflexive form … [which implies] self-aware[ness] regarding its textualized acts of representation" (Shostak 219). As Shostak (221) dutifully notes, intertextual ironies can be found all over *The Sympathizer*. "[T]he prominence of intertextual reference," Karl Ashoka Britto argues in turn, "draws our attention—at times with humor, at times with anguish—to the mediated nature of any historical narrative" (2019b, 373). The novel, Sunny Xiang maintains, holds up a "special mirror of [Nabokovian] 'modernist reflexivity'" (420). Indeed, *The Sympathizer* is without a doubt a fiction "that does not 'aspire to tell the truth' … as much as to question *whose* truth gets told" (Hutcheon 123). The novel, as Sunny Xiang puts it, is certainly not devoid of "metafictional turns" (423). And in at least one respect, Nguyen's novel can also be made to fall in the Umberto Eco's postmodern take on the historical novel as reported by Hutcheon:

> Historical novels, [Eco] feels, "not only identify in the past the causes of what came later, but also trace the process through which those causes began slowly to produce their effects" (76). This is why medieval characters, like John Banville's characters in his *Doctor Copernicus*, are made to talk like Wittgenstein, for instance. (113)

Quite the same could be said of all the ruminations of Nguyen's narrator, whose political concerns, as Frank Snepp pointed out to me, are more akin to those of a present-day "Berkeley radical" (2022) than to those of the 1970s Vietnamese revolutionaries whom the character is supposed to be based on. Indeed, from the very start the narrator seems more worried about issues like Orientalism and "the problem of representation" (*TS* 187) than about five-year plans, collectivization, and land reforms. When working as a consultant in the Philippines, he seemingly dismisses the New People's Army communist insurrection as an insurgency led by "local rebels" (*TS* 134) without worrying too much about their cause. And if we are to believe Snepp, one of the real-life inspirations for the novel, North Vietnamese spy Nguyễn Văn Tài—

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"one of the most magnificent and dangerous men I've ever met in my life" (2022)—would have probably "killed Viet Thanh Nguyen" if he had the chance to meet him in person (!).

Having said that, however, I would not go as far as to define *The Sympathizer* an outright historiographic metafiction. In reading Nguyen's book, with the—though significant—exception of the "Postface," "there is no sight of the "paratextual conventions of historiography … to both inscribe and undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations" (123) that Hutcheon refers to as common traits of the category.[49] On the contrary, in many interviews Nguyen repeatedly stresses how he conceived *The Sympathizer* more like a "work of scholarship without footnotes, [in order to] say all kinds of outrageous things … which I would have to do all kinds of research to prove in a university press book" (Lentz-Smith 245). "Fiction," in his view, "can be just as truthful as scholarship, but it's free to forego the apparatus of footnotes and the like" (245). And as for history—for what the *intentio auctoris* is worth—he often states that "I never was interested in writing an historical novel; I was interested in writing a war novel." (242).

If we see it in this sense, *The Sympathizer* is indeed more a novel about war than a novel about *a* war, insofar as the author approaches 20th Century's Vietnam like a case study for understanding American imperialism at large, one branch at a time. In the novel, as Yu-yen Liu puts it, the war in Vietnam is seen as "a node among a cluster of state violence" (2019, 542). "Constituted as existing on the other side of freedom," Yến Lê Espiritu says, "Vietnamese could only be incorporated into modern subjecthood as the *good refugee* [by rejecting] the purported anti-democratic, anti-capitalist … communist Vietnam and embrac[ing] the 'free world'" (2014, 101). In this sense, the novel's protagonist is the ultimate "bad refugee" (August 2021,

[49] Intriguingly, though, paratexts and footnotes are heavily featured in Lê Tùng Châu's bootlegged Vietnamese translation of the novel that one can find on the Internet, making it (involuntarily) fall into Hutcheon's category (!).

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98). As a nameless man, he is a (distorted) mirror of the "nameless masses conventionally found in portrayal of refugees" (August 2021, 98). Instead of bowing in gratitude in front of America, he retorts by reminding her that U.S. foreign policy is the reason why he is a refugee in the first place. As a character, 'the captain' complicates things and disrupts frameworks. He spits in the face of what Mimi Thi Nguyen defines as "the gift of freedom," that is, "the name for liberalism's difference from coloniality, but also its linkage to it—through which freedom as a 'thing, force, and gaze' re-creates modern racial governmentality for a new age" (22). In one instance, as suggestively observed by Karl Ashoka Britto (2019b, 376), the narrator visually recalls Walter Benjamin's angel of history propelled towards the future by the storm of progress. Through him, Nguyen could make the additional step that many great literary works about the war in Vietnam never dared (or cared) to take: to pan all over the question like a camera dolly, from the blazing huts of the American war to the rubber plantations of French colonialism, to arrive at the War on Terror and at the other battlefields of America's forever war. In the next pages, we shall see the extent to which the narrator's voice carries all of this and more, and how Nguyen's refracted history can imply that yesterday's wars and today's are one the mirror of the other.

2.6 Refracted history

> "'Many Americans thought that our history did not matter because they had a better future planned for us'," Phạm Xuân Ẩn, as quoted by Larry Berman (28).

As always, it is not hard to see how the intent behind Nguyen's idea of refracted history is political. To properly understand the extent of his game of historical refractions, it will be sufficient to bring up the type of torture to which his narrator is subjected to in the reeducation

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camp. In Chapter 21, the interrogation techniques used by Man, the Commandant, and the Doctor are (oddly) based on those historically used by the Special Branch of South Vietnam's National Police (Valentine 100-112). In the novel, these same techniques had made an earlier appearance during the flashbacks set in 1972, in which the narrator remembers how he witnessed and contributed to the ordeal of a communist operative nicknamed the Watchman. The episode, admittedly derived from Frank Snepp's memoir *Decent Interval* (2002), shows *The Sympathizer*'s nature of a "Janus-faced" narrative "turned toward the past … [but] refracting current US practice and rhetoric of interrogating Arab detainees during the War on Terror" (Stefan 210). These refractions, as it is clear from the novel's exergue—a Nietzschean quote on laugh and torture—are indeed one of the focal points of the book.

In the novel, the Watchman's interrogation involves music torture and sexual humiliation. The narrator, under his cover as a Special Branch operative, reports to having written a false confession on the prisoner's behalf, in which the latter would have disclosed his pretended homosexuality. Thus—and it will not be the last time—we see the narrator producing a confession inside of a confession. Both, it should be noted, are equally dangerous texts: the one intended for the Watchman is presented as dangerously false, as the one that it contains it, the 295-pages I-Confession, is implied to be dangerously *true*. And here, as Hayley C. Stefan points out, the peculiar style in which the novel's dialogues are written, with no quotation marks to distinguish one speaker from the other, can give birth to further ambiguities regarding who is speaking to whom, signaling "the dual nature of the text and … the fraught optics of torture" (219).

The blur extends to history, as in reading about blindfolded prisoners and sleep deprivation no contemporary reader would fail to think about Guantánamo or Abu Ghraib. In fact, sleep denial and other kinds of methods designed to obtain intel without leaving marks on

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the body of the prisoner all stem from the *KUBARK* handbook, a 1963 CIA manual that promoted a type of torture "that relied on … self-inflicted pain for an effect that, for the first time in the two millennia of this cruel science, was more psychological than physical" (McCoy 50). This kind of interrogation formula proved to be more effective in gathering information when compared to traditional torture; as Claude says in the novel, "Brute force will get you bad answers" (*TS* 163).

As Alfred McCoy (51) points out in his *A Question of Torture*, another source for the novel, the *KUBARK* techniques are based on sensory deprivation. They rely on white bright, shadowless, and soundproof rooms to induce derealization and delirium (white torture). When inflicting "white torture," the interrogators attack "the victim's sense of time, by scrambling the biorhythms fundamental to every human's daily life" (McCoy 51) and thus jumbling his/her perceptions of reality and identity. Often, as in the early 1980s Philippines under Ferdinand Marcos, the CIA methods involved a sort of "perverse theater" in which the subject was "compelled to play the lead in a drama of his own humiliation" (80). In such a scenario, McCoy explains, "the cell becomes a studio, the inquisitors actors, and the detainees their audience" (79). The *KUBARK* procedures were tested in South Vietnam during the war, to then return under different names in Central America in the 1980s and—more recently—in Afghanistan and Iraq. In December 2012—while Nguyen was writing *The Sympathizer*—Kathryn Bigelow's Oscar-nominated *Zero Dark Thirty* was released in theaters, showing the hunt for Osama Bin Laden from the point of view of CIA agents. Bigelow's movie rounded off a decade of Hollywood reckonings with the still ongoing War on Terror. In those years, even superhero flicks like Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) showed America's inner strife with its own conscience, as they staged the tragedy of men/women who get their hands dirty to keep those of the people clean. The question raised by these movies in the wake of the Patriot Act

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and mass surveillance was what the nation was ready to become in order to stop its enemies. Bigelow's movie, in Nguyen's view, is propaganda (2016, 12), as it makes the audience empathize with such a kind of character and such a kind of philosophy.[50] Nguyen's novel, on the other hand, reverses this perspective. It presents four (chiasmatic) scenes of abuse, each of which is designed to recall the others: 1) the Watchman's interrogation in the "white room" (carried on by the narrator in his double capacity of undercover spy and Special Branch operative), set in 1972; 2) the fictional torture of Binh and the fictional rape of Mai in the movie *The Hamlet* ('perpetrated' by South Vietnamese refugees extras dressed as Vietnamese communists), set in 1976; 3) the actual rape of the communist agent (committed by South Vietnamese policemen with the complicity of the narrator, set in 1972; 4) the 'absurdist' torture of the narrator in the camp (committed by Vietnamese communists using American techniques tested in South Vietnam), set in 1977. The narrator's "multiple roles," Hayley C. Stefan points out, "offer prismatic views on torture which inform the novel's multivalent critique" (215).

Thus, all kinds of victims and perpetrators take turns on *and* around the torture table.[51] The Americans, the South Vietnamese, the Vietnamese communists, and even Hollywood, Nguyen seems to suggest, are all part of one same circus of atrocities. The text highlights these connections by showing the narrator zoning in and out from past to present. One significant example is the slippage that occurs in Chapter 10, where the narrator, while witnessing the filming of torture scenes in the Philippines, finds himself reminiscing about Claude's interrogation lessons during his training days in Saigon. In fact, the narrator himself is at once a victim and an accomplice in *all* the four tortures. He (reluctantly) contributes to the Watchman's ordeal, to the Movie's filming, and to the abuse of the agent, to then ending up

[50] See Stahl 2022 for the CIA's Entertainment Office involvement in the making of *Zero Dark Thirty*.
[51] One will find a similar dynamic at play even in the last section of *The Committed*, with Vo Danh and French Algerian gangster Mona Lisa swapping places on the chair of torture.

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himself as a victim. And in fact, when he himself—hoisted by his own petard—is subjected to the same treatment he saw inflicted on others, the narrator feels like "a doctor studying a fatal disease that suddenly afflicts him" (*TS* 332). In the fourth scene, the "dialectics of victim and victimizer" (Liu 545) comes full circle. Here, the "perverse theater" of the *KUBARK* method is made literal: Chapter 22 is structured as a sort of merge of the Grand Inquisitor's chapters from Dostoevsky's *Karamazov Brothers* with Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*, as penned by a writing team led by Beckett and Ionesco, complete with stage names and stage directions.[52]

However, Nguyen's choice of offering a "pathogenic reading of torture as transnational and crossing temporal periods" (Stefan 226) should not distract us from the fact that such kind of "perverse theater" is unlikely to ever have taken place as depicted in the novel. The whole "experiment" section of the narrator's ordeal oozes symbolism. We see American lightbulbs, powered by a Soviet generator, used by the Vietnamese communists, whereas, as we have seen,

[52] Yet, the most revealing literary reference one would find in the Coda is probably the nod to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952)—the one work that, amongst many things, also inspired the opening lines of Nguyen's novel. Both novels, as Timothy August summarizes it, address how "racialized minorities remain invisible until they are acknowledged as threatening," and, in fact, "both books are alike insofar as they embrace the 'threat' that these invisible actors can pose to others, and to themselves" (2018, 76). *The Sympathizer*, as Sandra Kumamoto Stanley demonstrates, is rife with callbacks to Ellison's book (282; 292). The invisible man, as Caroline Rody notes, is the sympathizer's "Calibanesque … literary ancestor" (399; 398). And indeed, the influence of Ellison (and of African American literature at large) looms over the novel especially with regard to racial visibility and W.E. B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness (see Goyal 381). "Viet Nguyen's narrative," Subarno Chattarji argues, "is animated by a Baldwinesque anger, an anger that links innocence with the project of rendering the Vietnamese invisible" (2019, 203). In *The Sympathizer*, the cell of the reeducation camp, reminiscent of that of Saigon's National Interrogation Center in which the Watchman is tortured (shaped in turn on the historical "snow-white room" in which Frank Snepp interrogated Nguyễn Văn Tài; see Snepp 2002, 38), is said to be "plastered in white" (*TS* 327) and covered with hundreds of lightbulbs. In Ellison's novel, the unnamed narrator lives in a similar space. His basement is wired with 1,369 lights, to make him "feel [his] vital aliveness," as "[t]he truth is the light and light is the truth" (7). Where Ellison's narrator craves light, claiming that he can see "the darkness of lightness" (6), as Broadway and the Empire State Building, in his perspective, are "among the darkest [spots] of our whole civilization," Nguyen's narrator is forced to "see," to bathe in the light, by initiative of his wardens. As a 'mole,' he has "been underground too long" (*TS* 329). The blinding, in the eyes of the Commandant, is akin to that of the radiant revolutionary suns one can observe in the propaganda art that still graces Vietnam's public spaces. And not incidentally, the other half of the "experiment" involves a Russian truth serum that compels the narrator to confront the repressed memories of the third torture, exposing his guilty conscience regarding the rape of the communist agent. As he muses in Chapter 22, "I was no longer certain whether I could see everything or nothing" (TS 350). In other words, as with Ellison's hero, for the sympathizer "the truth is the light," even if this particular truth, his 'doing nothing' in the face of abuse and injustice is—and the pun is intended—actually anything but *light*.

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sensory deprivation methods were historically used by the South Vietnamese during wartime as a CIA-sponsored alternative to old French techniques (Valentine 84). The mad-scientist attires of the three examiners, complete with masks and goggles, and the general eeriness of 'the Coda' section kind of give away that we are now moving our first steps into a different literary territory.[53] On a formal level, such detachment is made evident by the avant-garde styles employed by Nguyen to render the narrator's ordeal (Beckett-like stage directions, the abrupt switch to the third person, etc.). It is, in other words, as if the diegetic experiment we see depicted was a mirror of the author's experiments with form and style while writing this very section of the novel.

Now make no mistake: horrible punishments were regularly meted out in communist camps. All the sources report beatings, abuse, starvation, isolation, and every kind of conceivable ill-treatment, with prisoners left to languish in small-size CONEX boxes under the scorching sun (Vo 81; Bass 2009, 219). However, one would not find any mention of "white torture" in any reeducation memoir, as the regular camps and impoverished postwar Vietnam were no place for wasting resources in such a reckless fashion.[54] According to reeducation camps researcher Nghia M. Vo, however, in actual fact the Vietnamese communists, to an extent, used CIA-inspired sleep deprivation techniques in "special centers where these pieces of equipment [were] utilized on a special number of people" (2022). A high-ranking PAVN[55]

[53] As per Timothy K. August (2021, 119), the Coda is "deliberately written in a difficult and disorienting manner—undoing the intimacy, comfort, and trust built throughout the previous three hundred pages while deviating from the genre's conventions." In other words, it is as if Nguyen would pull the rug off the audience's feet, to land his final punch on the market's expectation regarding the minority "I." And not incidentally, here is where the "I" shatters into the third person of Chapter 21, the stage directions of Chapter 22, or the 'we' of Chapter 23, as if Nguyen would strategically put some additional distance between himself and the character.

[54] In the novel we see a similar distortion put into place on the initiative of the Auteur when shooting his film in the Philippines. In the Hollywood subplot, we will see fictional NLF fighters absurdly wasting their precious water supply to waterboard the character of Binh in the movie *The Hamlet*—that is, utilizing another Guantánamo-style method of torture.

[55] The People's Army of Vietnam (*Quân đội nhân dân Việt Nam*), formerly known as the NVA (North Vietnamese Army).

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defector, Colonel Bui Tin, did confirm in his memoir that CIA techniques were employed by the communists during the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia on suspected double agents:

> The 'professional methods' they had used were torture and sophisticated physical abuse: not allowing the prisoners to sleep, questioning the prisoners around the clock to put them under extreme psychological tension; forcing them to go without food and water and then telling them that they would not be given anything to eat or drink until they confessed, etc. (qtd. in Stein)

However, no source I am aware of makes mention of an *Invisible Man*-like ceiling covered by lightbulbs such as the one seen in *The Sympathizer*. Nguyen himself has admitted how his was in fact a "poetic license" (2016d):

> Now [CIA techniques], they used to some extent. Now this part is I think fictional, the techniques that I have read about … tend to be much more physical, but they did use also sensory deprivation as well. Not in quite as refined a way as it's depicted in this novel. So I took poetic license, I took the idea that at the end of the war, the Vietnamese captured the documents that the CIA used. The report that I cite in the novel is a real CIA report that you can find online that details all of these techniques or at least gives you hints of them. So the fictional devices, they found this and they used it.

For Nguyen's refracted history to better expose Vietnam's circus of atrocities, he devised the narrative ploy of having Man, the narrator's best friend/handler, and also the person who will torture him in the camp, finding the *KUBARK* manual in the narrator's old room at the General's villa (*TS* 330). The symbolism is spot-on: 'the captain,' as a "17th parallel in the flesh," is the architect of his own suffering, as Vietnam was during wartime. "When it came to learn the worst habits of our French masters and their American replacements," he realizes, "we quickly proved ourselves the best … Having liberated ourselves in the name of independence and

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freedom… we then deprived our defeated brethren of the same" (360). One cannot think of a clearer way to demonstrate this than staging a scene in which a double agent is tortured by his friend and handler (and confessor) with the same techniques he had used on his fellow comrades in order to protect his cover.

On the surface, Nguyen's license—showing Vietnamese communists using American/South Vietnamese interrogation methods—would not be different from the distortion put into place by Michael Cimino in *The Deer Hunter* (1978). As Sylvia Shin Huey Chong (2005) argues, the iconic scene in the movie in which NLF militants are shown torturing American soldiers by forcing them to play Russian roulette is a visual reversal of the infamous "Saigon Execution" photo depicting General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan shooting NLF Captain Nguyễn Văn Lém. The picture, taken in the South Vietnamese capital by photographer Eddie Adams during the 1968 Tết Offensive, is one of the war's most iconic images.[56] Cimino, Chong argues, *reracialized* the violence of the episode at an iconographic level by putting the gun in the hands of the Americans and recentering them as victims. "*The Deer Hunter*," she claims, "nationalizes the fantasy of 'Saigon Execution,' turning an image of Vietnamese-on-Vietnamese violence into the scene of the nation's trauma" (2012, 139). Similarly—I might add—the movie put American soldiers into underwater bamboo enclosures that look like the "tiger cages" of Côn Sơn Island, in which communist soldiers and supporters were detained and brutally abused by the American-backed Saigon government.[57]

[56] Because of its iconic status and its hidden and controversial backstory, Eddie Adams' shot is also a recurrent theme in diasporic Vietnamese arts and literatures. Since we are dealing with an image, it is no coincidence that Adams' picture is mostly featured in key passages from graphic memoirs. See for instance Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* (2017), or Marcelino Truong's *Une si petite jolie guerre: Saigon 1961-63* (2012). "Saigon Execution" is also the subject of many of the works that comprise the series "From Vietnam to Hollywood" of international artist Dinh Q. Lê, in which the Vietnam-born creative interweaves stills from Vietnamese movies, Hollywood depictions of the war, and archival photos on linen tape, while using a traditional Vietnamese technique for crafting grass mats (Barthe).

[57] Of course, this kind of 'Hollywood recentering,' this "internalization of Vietnamese violence into the American body" (Chong 2012, 139), is not a trend confined to critically acclaimed classics like *The Deer Hunter*. To take an extreme example, we could observe that even a low-quality action flick like *Braddock: Missing in Action III* (1988)

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In fact, Nguyen himself acknowledges all of this in *Nothing Ever Dies*. In his essay-manifesto, he points out how *The Deer Hunter* "evokes and yet erases" the historical shooting from the collective memory, all the while turning "Vietnamese pain" into "American pain," by re-enacting a "solipsistic revision" of the Lém execution that allows Cimino to paint the war as a conflict "between Americans fighting a war for their nation's soul" (2016, 110).[58] Thus, Nguyen's *own* recentering of violence—that is, his idea of having communist Vietnamese torturing one of them adopting an American technique historically used by anti-communist Vietnamese—is not to be seen as accidental. Here and elsewhere, Nguyen's refracted history implies that *everyone is guilty*. By staging the mirror game of the four chiasmatic tortures, he turns the (torture) tables on what Subarno Chattarji calls the "memorial noise" (238) surrounding the war in Vietnam. Which is to say, the way in which every side—while "fighting the war again in memory," that is, while retelling it through the arts—seems often to forget about the pain of the others, about one's own misdeeds, and about the larger picture. Where *The Deer Hunter* switched up the narrative, turning war iconographies into celluloid icons and laying American guilt on the "Oriental other" (Chong 2005, 89), Nguyen did exactly the same, but in *both* directions at once. The point of his art, as he often repeats in interviews and op-eds, is not to represent our shared humanity as much as our shared *inhumanity*, as for him "we are

features a similar reversal of roles, showing *KUBARK*-like electrical torture perpetrated by Vietnamese communists against a (white) American body. In this case, however, it is highly likely that the recentering owes more to the filmmakers' negligence than to anything else. As with his more famous 'cousin,' John Rambo, the character of James Braddock is often depicted as covered in sweat and blood in a Christ-like sacrificial pose, while being tormented by sadistic, nondimensional, and stereotypical captors. Both Norris' and Stallone's characters stem from a long line of New Right-inspired muscular heroes bent on single-handedly fulfilling America's revenge fantasies with a bandolier on their chest and a machine gun in their hands (Rosso 2003, 189; Rosso 2019). As Nguyen often says in interviews, he had watched most of Hollywood renditions of the war brought to the silver screen, "an exercise" that he would "recommend to nobody" (Birkenbeuel). Thus, it is not too much of a leap to surmise that he could also have in mind *Braddock*'s reversal of roles—an American tortured with American-inspired techniques—while crafting *The Sympathizer*'s Vietnamese-on-Vietnamese torture scenes.

[58] One may also contend that the juxtaposition between historic footage and film images depicting the Fall of Saigon in *The Deer Hunter* further strengthens this dynamic, as fictional pain (Mike's frenzied search for Nick; Nick's death) is superimposed on scenes of real-life desperation (the Vietnamese huddled in front of the Embassy; their evacuation), with the viewer's attention focused on the first to the detriment of the latter.

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[human but] also fully inhuman at the same time, either through what has been done to us or what it is that we ourselves do" (Vadde). To recognize that is to hold *everyone* accountable, bringing to the (torture) table both the "direct responsibilities" tackled by war authors like Tim O'Brien, and the "larger forces" that they refuse to engage. In other words, as Giorgio Mariani (1996, 154) would put it, instead of obsessing over the question "what is war?", Nguyen raises a simpler, but stronger question: "*why* the war?"

And indeed, a 'true war story,' in Nguyen's view, ought to be focused on war's root causes and legacies.[59] The 'canonical' 1955-1975 Vietnam War/American War, in both *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*, is more evoked than showed. The story *begins* with the Fall of Saigon, that is, with the event that, in American collective memory, usually *seals* the unceremonious end of the American involvement in Indochina. Instead, Nguyen places the emphasis on what happened *after* the end, on the past that is not past: erased perspectives, repressed legacies, and unheard voices. That is, on how the war has been fought again in memory (the Hollywood subplot) and on other, forgotten battlefields (the Front subplot). But he also draws attention to what happened before the beginning, that is, to the chain of causes that led to the conflict, a chain of causes that long predates American involvement. And while Tim O'Brien tends to focus more on ground-level responsibilities, Viet Nguyen routinely brings those responsible on the ground.[60] To see the extent of this paradigm shift in Vietnam War

[59] See Chapter 8 of *Nothing Ever Dies*, "On True War Stories," another Nguyenian manifesto, in which, amongst other things, he tackles the depiction of war in O'Brien's works, and the latter's 'reluctance' to delve further into war's causes and reasons. In O'Brien's first work, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1969), the narrator "O'Brien" asks himself whether "[c]an the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there" (O'Brien 2015, 32), coming to the conclusion that he can only "tell war stories." But for Nguyen, to tell a "true war story" is to embrace a "panoramic optics" (227), a "satellite vision that can show the operation of massive war machines, not just the limited vision of a grunt" (226).

[60] This, however, does not imply that O'Brien lacks interest in the matter, nor that his 'peace-mongering' perspective is only triggered by the memory of the 58,000 American soldiers that fell in Vietnam. The plight of the more than three million Vietnamese dead does not certainly leave him indifferent, as he recently reiterated both in a *Literary Hub* op-ed (O'Brien 2019), and in Aaron Matthews' documentary *The War and Peace of Tim O'Brien* (2020). In his words, "One man's service to country is another man's dead son" (O'Brien 2019).

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narratives, we will now spend a few pages comparing a passage from O'Brien's short story "In the Field," from *The Things They Carried* (2015, 175-188), that of Lt. Jimmy Cross' inner monologue after the death of private Kiowa, to the frenzied sequence that closes *The Sympathizer*'s Chapter 21 (339-340), in which 'the captain' hallucinates as a result of the torture inflicted on him in the reeducation camp. Both sequences feature anaphora (the word "blame" in "In the Field," the word "if" in *The Sympathizer*), both are full of irony, and both deal with the issue of wartime responsibilities. However, O'Brien's and Nguyen's resulting messages, as we shall see, could not be more different. Let us place these two conflicting paradigms face to face and see what happens.

O'Brien's "In the Field" sees an eighteen-men platoon looking for the corpse of a dead soldier, Kiowa, in a muddy field along the banks of the Trà Bồng River, in Central Vietnam (I Corps). In a way, the search for Kiowa's body could be seen as a dark, filthy, and postmodern reenactment of the Homeric episodes involving struggles over the remains of fallen warriors. Only this time we see tired kids fighting against rain and muck in lieu of armored heroes battling each other for glory. And accordingly, the story revolves not around honor and comradery as much as around guilt and blame. Kiowa has been killed by enemy fire, but his death was also due to a decision made by an officer, and to an act of stupidity made by a fellow soldier. At the end of O'Brien's story, lieutenant Jimmy Cross' erratic train of thought is ironically (Mariani 2015, 185) reported by narrator "Tim" as the guilt trip of an irresponsible CO,[61] passing the buck to a great deal of outside forces to keep the mind off his own culpability:

[61] "Commanding officer."

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When a man died, there had to be blame. Jimmy Cross understood this. You could blame the war. You could blame the idiots who made the war. You could blame Kiowa for going to it. You could blame the rain. You could blame the river. You could blame the field, the mud, the climate. You could blame the enemy. You could blame the mortar rounds. You could blame people who were too lazy to read a newspaper, who were bored by the daily body counts, who switched channels at the mention of politics. You could blame whole nations. You could blame God. You could blame the munitions makers or Karl Marx or a trick of fate or an old man in Omaha who forgot to vote. (187-188).

Conversely, in *The Sympathizer*'s "if-clauses" passage there is no filter between the reader and the delusional reveries of Nguyen's narrator. Here, at the end of Chapter 21, the fine line between irony and seriousness is particularly tough to see.[62] After the "reeducation" by the means of *KUBARK*-inspired sleep deprivation imposed on him by both the orthodox Commandant and the (secretly) disenchanted Commissar Man, the narrator has finally remembered the repressed memories of his complicity in the 1972 rape of the communist agent in the Special Branch headquarters. What follows is a feverish series of rambling thoughts, held together by the anaphoric repetition of the word "if," that, not unlike Jimmy Cross' words, are, as one can surmise, in turn triggered by guilt. In the "ifs" passage, the narrator—now a free, if traumatized man that kills time by writing the Coda chapters while waiting to escape the country—recreates *literarily* one of the epiphanies he had in the camp some months before.[63]

In a swirling vortex of nightmarish images secondary to sleep deprivation, Nguyen's character, like O'Brien's, tries to cast out the guilt. In his delirium, he sees his life unfolding in

[62] On this point I do not agree with Yu-yen Liu in her assessment of the narrator's "if-clauses" list as purely "yearning" and "heartbreaking" (547).

[63] However, it should be mentioned how even in the I-Confession there is no shortage of similar anaphoric passages. One need only to think about the "we could not forget" passage of Chapter 14 (*TS* 229-230), another instance of "refracted history" in which Nguyen, behind the guise of the narrator, gives voice to the decades-long exilic nostalgia of the South Vietnamese refugees, even if the action is set as late as 1976. This passage is also a precursor of the final "refugee paean" of Chapter 23, with the narrator, ever the 'sympathizer,' that actively embraces the displaced perspective of his purported enemies, partaking to their sorrow and longing.

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a panoply of missed opportunities that quickly go beyond his (divided) self, to precisely involve those "distant and larger forces" shunned by O'Brien's narrators. Here, the train of thought covers all the bloody past of Vietnam, intersecting ancient legends and modern history "not as a series of chronologically unfolding events, but as a single utterance cast somewhere between supplication and yearning" (Britto 2019b, 378). Here follows the complete passage:

… [S]o if you would please just turn off the lights, if you would please just turn off the telephone, if you would just stop calling me, if you would remember that the two of us were once and perhaps still are the best of friends, if you could see that I have nothing left to confess, if history's ship had taken a different tack, if I had become an accountant, if I had fallen in love with the right woman, if I had been a more virtuous lover, if my mother had been less of a mother, if my father had gone to save souls in Algeria instead of here, if the commandant did not need to make me over, if my own people did not suspect me, if they saw me as one of them, if we forgot our resentment, if we forgot revenge, if we acknowledged that we are all puppets in someone else's play, if we had not fought a war against each other, if some of us had not called ourselves nationalists or communists or capitalists or realists, if our bonzes had not incinerated themselves, if the Americans hadn't come to save us from ourselves, if we had not bought what they sold, if the Soviets had never called us comrades, if Mao had not sought to do the same, if the Japanese hadn't taught us the superiority of the yellow race, if the French had never sought to civilize us, if Ho Chi Minh had not been dialectical and Karl Marx not analytical, if the invisible hand of the market did not hold us by the scruffs of our necks, if the British had defeated the rebels of the new world, if the natives had simply said, Hell no, on first seeing the white man, if our emperors and mandarins had not clashed among themselves, if the Chinese had never ruled us for a thousand years, if they had used gunpowder for more than fireworks, if the Buddha had never lived, if the Bible had never been written and Jesus Christ never sacrificed, if Adam and Eve still frolicked in the Garden of Eden, if the dragon lord and the fairy queen had not given birth to us, if the two of them had not parted ways, if fifty of their children had not followed their fairy mother to the mountains, if fifty more had not followed their dragon father to the sea, if legend's phoenix had truly soared from its own ashes rather than simply crashed and burned in our countryside, if there were no Light and no Word, if Heaven and earth had never parted, if history had never happened, neither as farce nor as tragedy, if the serpent of language had not

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bitten me, if I had never been born, if my mother was never cleft, if you needed no more revisions, and if I saw no more of these visions, please, could you please just let me sleep? (*TS*, 339-340)

As anybody can see, the passage is rife with references. When the narrator ask what would have happened "if legend's phoenix had truly soared from its own ashes rather than simply crashed and burned in our countryside," he is making an allusion both to the mythical birds of the Western and Sino-Vietnamese traditions (the *Phượng Hoàng*), and to the CIA-sponsored counterinsurgency program for which, in the fiction, he and his 'blood brother' Bon had worked for—the Phoenix Program.[64]

And when he, the sleeper agent, is paradoxically prevented from sleeping, his definitive (symbolic) detachment from the Lao Động's[65] orthodoxy finally takes place. As the narrator (semi-ironically) wraps up his tirade pleading Man for letting him sleep (*TS* 340), one could not fail to note how his need for rest is yet another subversion of the mythos of the Vietnamese revolution, akin to the novel's final epiphany centered around the reversal of Hồ Chí Minh's motto. In fact, President Hồ, the father of the revolution, one of the staunchest advocates for Vietnam's decolonization, and then head of North Vietnam until his death in 1969, was famously remembered by one of his first Western biographers, French journalist Jean Lacouture, as "the one who stays up while others sleep" (502). Nguyen's narrator, on the other hand, is *forced* to stay awake. As the Commandant argues, (unconsciously) echoing James Joyce: "[r]evolutionaries are insomniacs, too afraid of history's nightmare to sleep" (*TS* 341). Nguyen's subversion, then, is to stage a scene involving an embittered revolutionary experiencing history as a waking nightmare. Such must have been the perspective of

[64] Not accidentally, a chapter from one of the declared sources of the novel—Douglas Valentine's essay *The Phoenix Program* (1990)—is titled "Phoenix in Flames."
[65] The Communist Party of Vietnam (Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam), founded by Hồ Chí Minh in Hong Kong in the year 1930, and renamed Worker's Party of Vietnam (Đảng lao động Việt Nam) in 1951.

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disenchanted militants like memoirist Trương Như Tảng, another real-life source of inspiration for the novel. As the latter, a former NLF head honcho forced to leave the country as a part of the boat exodus, muses in his *A Vietcong Memoir* (1986), at the end of *The Sympathizer* for the narrator is apparent that "the lives that so many gave to create a new nation are now no more than ashes cast aside" (310). The difference, however, is that Nguyen's protagonist, ever the Absurdist drama character, finds the thing *oddly amusing* rather than dismaying.

Indeed, in the final climax the narrator is on the verge of what one could interpret as a psychotic break, if one reads the scene in realistic terms—or as break with ideology, if one reads it symbolically. In the final lines, the if-clauses list comes full circle. The narrator asks what would have happened "if history had never happened" (*TS* 340), making the principle behind Nguyen's refracted history finally manifest. Individual choices, he realizes, *cannot* break the chains of larger causalities. His is what Paul Ricoeur would define "an inflation to an infinite responsibility" (2000, 34); that is, the inability to "pass through the clash of causalities and attempt a phenomenology of their interweaving" (2000, 23). The narrator has been bitten by the "serpent of language" (*TS* 340), and language, as Nguyen told me with regards to this particular line, is "dualistic." "Dangerous" but "necessary," language "has led [the sympathizer] down to this path of writing these confessions" (2022→Appendix). Thus, as oddly as it may sounds, here language becomes a *temptation*. By giving voice to his condition of being able to see every issue from both sides, language 'frees' him from Eden to throw him in the world. Language is a snake, alluring yet treacherous—both a gift and a curse. And language, as translator Lê Tùng Châu duly observes in a footnote of his bootlegged translation, could be indeed compared to a creeping reptile that continuously sheds its skin. Being *The Sympathizer* a "literary dubbed" narrative, such language is Nguyen's literary American English, concealing the diegetic Vietnamese voice of 'the captain' under its shining scales. In the final lines of the

111:1094230268

'ifs' sequence, Nguyen's American English twists on itself. Here the narrator, as in other similar passages, resorts to rhyming to render the absurdity: "if you needed no more revisions, and if I saw no more of these visions" (*TS* 340).[66]

Perhaps it is no coincidence that this couplet is placed right before Chapter 22. This is indeed the "perverse theater" chapter in which Nguyen, to finally strip the war of its Hollywood-induced aura of a self-centered American drama, turns the tragedy of Vietnam into a *literal* one. Here the "reeducation" session, from the Q&A format of Chapter 21, switches up to something more similar to an 18th Century-style *opera seria* recitative. Here, the first-person narration gives way to dramatis personae and stage directions, with the ever-present ghosts of Sonny and of the crapulent major—the two friends that the narrator had to kill in the U.S. before getting back to Vietnam with the Front recon team—that, after having been introduced as Banquo-ish haunting figures, ultimately take on the role of Shakespearean fools addressing an invisible audience with their *asides*. Not incidentally, "and if I saw no more of these visions" is a decasyllable, as in iambic pentameters and blank verses—the rhyme forms of Elizabethan theater. The metrically imperfect couplet is thus to be seen as a half-baked attempt at versifying, adding on yet another oddity to the absurdist atmosphere of the Coda.

But to get back to the comparisons with "In the Field," one would not fail to note how both Jimmy Cross and 'the captain' drag nations, God, and Karl Marx into their frantic streams of thoughts. While Jimmy's ruminations go back-and-forth between fate and chance, rain and politics, *circling* around Jimmy's own share of accountability, Nguyen's narrator traces the causes of his suffering further and further back in history, steady following a *straight* line that

[66] Considering that *The Sympathizer* opens with a reference to T.S. Eliot, perhaps this could also be seen as a nod to a line from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": "And time yet for a hundred indecisions/and for a hundred visions and revisions." I hereby thank Prof. Fulvia Sarnelli for her suggestion.

112:4416089944

pierces through his life to get lost in the mists of time. With ever-increasing speed, he climbs down an infinite ladder of causes and effects: the war, the Americans, the Soviets, the Japanese, French colonialism, the Chinese, the mythical origins of the nation, the beginning of time, Adam and Eve… As Giorgio Mariani concedes to O'Brien, "it would be a lot easier to blame some more or less abstract entity … than to highlight the guilt of single …. individuals" (2015, 185). But *The Sympathizer*'s world is made of character-devices, and is centered around a semi-allegorical, all-encompassing character-voice whose storytelling techniques are gearing more towards 'telling' than 'showing.' In such a world, characters can often be seen as abstract entities themselves. The Auteur is at once a stand-in for Francis Ford Coppola *and* for Hollywood; Claude is based on Edward Lansdale and Frank Snepp but embodies all the actions of CIA in Vietnam;[67] the Commandant is the orthodoxy of the Communist Party in the flesh… and the list could go on.

Instead, all that seemingly matters in O'Brien short story are *individual* responsibilities. Kiowa could have died because of Jimmy's ill-fated choice of setting up the camp in the untenable "shit field," or because his friend, the "young soldier," lit a flashlight to show him his girlfriend's picture, drawing the enemy's mortars on the whole squad. As a third character, soldier Norman Bowker, concludes: "Nobody's fault. … Everybody's" (186). Here, we can see where O'Brien's and Nguyen's war fictions really differ. For Nguyen and his narrator, it is not everybody's fault because it is nobody's, but because *it is everybody*'s. In *The Sympathizer*'s world, the apportioning of blame is not erratic, but *systematic*: in such a world, abstract responsibilities and individual responsibilities may even be the same thing.

[67] Claude's French-sounding name could also point out to Lucien Conein, the CIA operative who orchestrated the 1963 American-backed coup that led to the assassination of South Vietnamese president Ngô Dình Diệm.

113:3221392091

To put it in purely theoretical terms, the issue at hand here is the Arendtian distinction between guilt and responsibility vis-à-vis Paul Ricoeur's take on the same subject. Indeed, Bowker's conclusions perfectly match Hannah Arendt's famous realization that "[w]here all are guilty, nobody is" (43). That is, that guilt is always "strictly personal," that "[i]t refers to an act, not to intentions or potentialities," and that, as Arendt puts it, "only in a metaphorical sense that we can say we *feel* guilty … for deeds we have not done" (43, italics in the text), and thus "the cry 'We are all guilty' is actually a declaration of solidarity with the wrongdoers" (44). Or, to say it like Ricoeur does: "When so disconnected from a problematic of decision, action finds itself placed under the sign of a fatalism that is the exact opposite of responsibility. Fate implicates no one, responsibility someone" (2000, 26). Since Nguyen never made any secret of the influence that Ricoeur had on his work, one can surmise that the California author/scholar is familiar with these passages. Consider for example this question posed by Ricoeur in his "The Concept of Responsibility": "how far in space and time does the responsibility for our acts extend? … Stated in terms of its scope, responsibility extends as far as our powers do in space and time" (2000, 29). Any reader of *The Sympathizer* would not fail to recognize clear echoes of the "if-clauses" passage. Still, Nguyen's narrator challenges the French philosopher's assumption that "our responsibility for harm done extends as far as does our capacity to do harm" (2000, 30) insofar as this individual capacity, in *The Sympathizer*, is always to be seen as part of a general condition. For Nguyen's narrator, pointing simultaneously to collective guilt *and* to collective responsibility is not to be seen as a kind of cop-out. As per Ricoeur,

> to take charge of the totality of effects is to turn responsibility into a kind of fatalism in the tragic sense of the word, even into a terrorist denunciation: 'You are responsible for everything and guilty of it all!' … [T]he extension and … the prolonging in time of the scope of responsibility may have an opposite effect insofar as the subject of responsibility becomes ungraspable due to its being multiplied and diluted. (2000, 32; 34)

114:1662484944

Nguyen's narrator's indiscriminate condemnation does the very opposite. Instead of exonerating, it implicates; instead of turning collective responsibility into "a kind of tragic fatalism," it turns it into a *principle*. "For how far," Ricoeur asks, "does the 'my' character of 'consequences' extend, and where does the 'alien' begin?" (2000, 33). As far away as the beginning of "Light," "Word," and "history," Nguyen's narrator would reply. Now, it goes without saying that such a perspective does not make things easy—especially when expressed in literary terms by a war refugee, in a country built on slavery and genocide, where many family fortunes have dark origins, the question of reparations often arises, and even street and city names occasionally reek blood. (Nor, for that matter, it does in the reimagined 1980s Paris seen in *The Committed*, in which the legacies of nearly a century of French colonial rule in Indochina are similarly put to the task). In such a scenario, a question like "how far in space and time does the responsibility for our acts extend?"—like all questions worth asking—would have no easy answer.

Regarding the subject of responsibility, we should not forget that—as stressed above—the "blames" passage in "In the Field" is heavily implied to be read as ironic. Narrator "Tim" guides us through Jimmy Cross' thought process, helping us realize how the CO's back-and-forth is but a way of coping with his guilt, his "'my' character of 'consequences'," as Ricoeur would put it. Thus, where Jimmy strives to see history as a tangle of fortuities, Nguyen's narrator embraces it as a chain of causalities (and casualties). Simplifying a bit, one could go so far as to say that the mindset presented in the "blames" passage, that is, the list of excuses that Jimmy Cross invokes for himself, is patterned on a Greek tragedy, with the characters' lives in the hand of the fates, while the state of things as per the "if-clauses" sequence, that is, Nguyen's narrator delirious epiphany, is more along the lines of a Shakespearean history play

115:3820780950

full of bad decisions, wrong turns, and forks in the road. According to Nguyen's narrator, everything can be seen as the product of someone *else*'s choices. History, as subtly implied by the two Genesis references one can found in the "ifs" passage, is a Droste effect—an infinity mirror of original sins. The "ifs" sequence is a never-ending path of injustices and betrayed revolutions, one mirroring the other, that goes back to the dawn of time. Perhaps, such a perspective is harder to fathom for a soldier that serves "in Pharaoh's Army," like Jimmy Cross.[68] But for a wretched of the earth, for a subaltern who has figured out how to speak, for a neocolonial subject like *The Sympathizer*'s narrator, all it takes to see oneself as the last link of a chain of oppressed-turned-oppressors is the lucid madness provided by a handful of days spent without sleeping.

In conclusion, Nguyen's game of refracted history implies that *no one* can be saved. Even running a refrigerator in suburban America, he argues with reference to his teacher Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1977), is to look "into the obscene guts" of war, as it might use a refrigerant made by the same chemical company that patented the Agent Orange defoliant (Nguyen 2016, 230). As Sarah Chihaya puts it, quoting an excerpt from *Nothing Ever Dies*, "this kind of recognition—one that acknowledges the multiplicity of both perpetrator and victim—requires vulnerability to a certain slippage between these imagined positions that 'confronts the totality around us and within us' and in so doing 'reveals the stereoscopic simultaneity of human and inhuman'" (369). Instead, some of O'Brien's characters seem to speak about war as an accident of things. "The rain was the war," says Jimmy, "and you had to fight it" (176). War, in such a perspective, falls literally from the sky—there is no way to avoid it, as if young Americans like Azar, Bowker, or Kiowa had no choice in the matter but to go

[68] Here the reference is to another early 1990s literary work written by a Vietnam veteran, Tobias Wolff's "In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War" (1995).

116:4826896153

and obey the orders. On the other hand, Nguyen's narrator knows that sometimes war is indeed a hard rain that falls down from the sky. Sometimes, as for the Hanoian civilians during the Christmas bombing of 1972, there is no choice in the matter but to stay put and seek shelter. In Nguyen's view, tales of displaced people, raped women, orphaned children, and even of the old refugees with dementia and the returning second-generation diasporic subjects featured in *The Refugees* (2017), are 'true war stories,' because war, imperialism, and colonialism *actively* caused them. In the words of Subarno Chattarji: "[t]he refugee story as war story complicates the 'American Dream' story in that it will not obliterate events and contexts that produced the refugee influx and neither will it construct the U.S. as an ideal end" (202). Or, to put it as Timothy K. August does, "[f]or Nguyen, the refugee story is an opportunity to tell the war story in a way that an American audience may neither want nor expect" (2021, 108).

The chain of injustices detailed in the "if-clauses" sequence is the principle that lies behind Nguyen's game of refracted history. In his view, a straight line connects a fridge in American suburbia with American racism, American military ventures, and European colonialism. Had Kiowa been a character of *The Sympathizer*, there is no doubt that Nguyen's narrator would have not failed to repeatedly point out the ironies behind his condition of being an American soldier with a Native American background killed in action during a war in which "[m]ilitary operations were named … 'Cochise,' and 'Crazy Horse' … Viet Cong … defectors … were called Kit Carson scouts… [t]erritory controlled by the enemy was called 'Indian country'… [and] [g]oing on patrol was 'playing cowboys and Indians'" (Bates 1996, 10). To paraphrase Ricoeur: Fate implicates no one, responsibility someone, and Nguyen's refracted history everyone.

117:2531595078

2.7 A thought experiment

While continuing to explore the use that Nguyen makes of history to build his narrative, there is one additional if-clause we shall add to the hallucinations of his narrator. That is to say, what if the latter's superiors would have doubled back on their decision to send him abroad to follow the General and his exiled cohorts? This if-clause is intriguingly absent from Chapter 21's concluding passage. But in actuality such a fork in the road, as we will see in the next pages, was faced by one of the historical figures that helped inspire the novel. In this section, we will see how Nguyen founded his 'thriller of ideas' not just on historical distortions but also on historical *diversions*.

As is clear from the beginning, as a character 'the captain' is defined by his divided loyalties and moral ambiguities.[69] In fact, story-wise, the central tragedy of the novel(s) is the John Woo-esque (Robinson) rift between him and his two 'blood brothers'—the vengeful Bon, a former Phoenix Program operative turned assassin for the Front, and Man, the narrator's communist handler later revealed to be the reeducation camp Commissar. As I will demonstrate, Nguyen has drawn part of the inspiration for this plot point from the life of another real-world character, communist double agent Phạm Xuân Ẩn, the ultimate prototype for Nguyen's protagonist—a "sympathizer" in the flesh. What really sets this connection apart from being but the latest addition to a trivial list of sources—I argue—is the fact that Ẩn's story, among other things, follows a whole different path to the "strategically implausible" life trajectory of

[69] *The Sympathizer* would not be the first Vietnamese American narrative to include such a character. To name but two examples, both Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997) and *The Lotus and the Storm* (2014) feature relatives or family friends that are eventually discovered to have secretly sided with the communists since wartime. Nguyen's novel, however, is the first—and the most prominent—Vietnamese American narrative to feature such a character as the main protagonist/narrator.

118:2509935706

Nguyen's fictional spy. In this section, I will compare novel and source material by making use of Catherine Gallagher's (2018) take on counterfactuality. Once again, my point is that Nguyen did more than simply pattern his narrative on real events. He distorted and reshaped the facts—laying ruin on them only to build upon the detritus. In the process, he created a true original: an undutiful Politburo agent who talks like an ethnic studies professor, behaves like a character by John Le Carré, and has the moral code of a John Woo protagonist that would happily catch a bullet for his "blood brothers" if push comes to shove.

This last aspect, although it often strays into genre fiction's territory—with all the platitudes that come with it—is in effect one of the crucial points of the whole endeavor. Indeed, much of the novel's tension arises from the fact that Man, Bon, and the narrator are "situated at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum" (Britto 2019b, 373). Their group dynamic is a Vietnamese twist on the archetypal male-bonding tale of honor, friendship, and betrayal that one can see depicted in Hong Kong gangster flicks like *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), or *Bullet in the Head* (1990), which is also set in wartime Vietnam.[70] John Woo's movies, as Jillian Sandell summarizes, are often centered around "intense male friendships depicted through … breathtakingly choreographed action sequences featuring balletic shoot-outs and spurting exit wounds combined with tragic and sentimental plots about the place of loyalty and honor in a corrupt and violent world" (23). Such movies transpose the rules and themes of traditional Chinese *wuxia* (honor, loyalty, chivalry) into a hard-boiled and contemporary setting (Goneau, Amara 2006, 174), all the while challenging old action models of masculinity and celebrating

[70] On balance, however, the influence of John Woo is more manifest in *The Committed* than in *The Sympathizer*—which is not surprising, if we consider the gangster/crime undertones of the sequel novel. Most notably, *The Committed*'s own 'Beckettian' chapter, Chapter 20, features a Woo-esque showdown between the three blood brothers in Paris.

119:9280309058

"the spectacle of male intimacy" (Sandell 30). Add in war politics, and you will have a recipe for many action-packed sequences featured in Nguyen's novels.

Partly because of the common Vietnam War setting, Nguyen's novel especially resonates with Woo's *Bullet in the Head*. The two plots revolve around three "blood brothers" caught up in war's turmoil. Indeed, both *Bullet* and *The Sympathizer* feature childhood friends that made a deal to stick together in good and bad luck, who end up in a Vietnamese reeducation camp. In both cases, there is a reference to *Hamlet* (the title of the Movie in *The Sympathizer*, the scene with Tommy talking with Frankie's skull in *Bullet*). In both cases, we see a half-French, half-Vietnamese character, and a face-scarred individual (even if, in Woo's movie, they are one and the same). In both cases, the cleverest of the three "blood brothers" eventually rises trough society ranks (Tommy as a business executive in capitalist Hong Kong, Man as a political commissar in communist Vietnam). In both cases there is a child that the protagonist does not know about waiting for him 'back home' (the kid in *Bullet*, Ada in *The Committed*). And finally, in both cases the story ends with one of the friends begging another to put the titular "bullet" in his head. For what concerns the "blood brothers" plot, it is as if Nguyen had torn Woo's script into little pieces and rearranged it as he pleased to form a new whole. *Bullet* does not fail to check all the boxes when it comes to Hollywood stereotypes about the war in Vietnam (the references to *The Deer Hunter*, for one, are apparent). Nonetheless, it provided Nguyen with an example of the same "intense romantic masculinist fantasy" (Robinson) of homosocial "intense loyalty" that he witnessed in young Vietnamese gang members while growing up in San Jose during the 1980s. To trigger his thriller of ideas, he needed the plot tension that only a trio of politically divided characters willing to die for each other could successfully provide.

120:8493156832

And indeed, despite working for Man, the narrator loves him and Bon all the same and shows loyalty to both.[71] In fact, the whole point of the 'John Woo triangle' is to show how, during a civil war, it is not unusual for people to put personal ties over politics—and vice versa. Case in point, the narrator's attempt to protect the two blood brothers from one another, with him going so far as to follow Bon back into Vietnam with the Front recon team, notwithstanding the suicidal nature of the operation. In a way, also in this respect Viet Nguyen did base the novel on true events. Even if *The Sympathizer*—as we have seen—is anything but realistic, part of its plot has a counterpart in the strange story of Phạm Xuân Ẩn, a charming *Time* magazine correspondent who was secretly working for Hanoi's Politburo during wartime (Berman; Bass 2009). As we shall see, one of the key moments of Ẩn's life revolves around a selfless act

[71] A note on names and etymology. In addition to the names-function we have already discussed, the two novels are also rife with a great deal of tongue-in-cheek 'talking names.' The most obvious are Richard Hedd ('Dick Head'), Avery Wright Hammer, *The Committed*'s caricature of Bernard-Henri Lévy, B.F.D. (a play on his initials, B.H.L., that is heavily implied to stand for 'Big Fucking Deal'), and Le Cao Boi (*le* Cowboy).

Perhaps the names of the two 'blood brothers' could bear hidden meanings as well. Man's, Debra Shostak argues, might derive from his being "'manly' in his nihilistic stoicism" (225), as the hardened and disfigured survivor of a napalm attack. Undoubtedly, the English language pun on Man's name is transparent. It could also point out to the communist idea of the "New Man." However, I cannot help but consider how the meaning of the original Vietnamese name, Mẫn—that roughly translates as 'industrious, diligent, hard-working'—is an ironic but fitting complement to his condition of having given everything for the revolution only to find himself alone, disenchanted, and scarred. Similarly, I concede to Shostak that Bon's name could indeed be a calque from the French word for "good"—in that the character, notwithstanding his gloomy temperament and his record of homicides, is described as a moral and naïve person. On the other hand, though, I reject Shostak's interpretation of Bon's name as that of a 'good' soldier of the right cause "from the Western perspective" (202; 225), since, in the West, as a result of events like the "Saigon Execution" fiasco, South Vietnamese servicemen were (and are) definitely not perceived as such by many. In this respect, we only need to think of General Loan—head of the same institution in which, in the fiction, both Bon and the narrator are enrolled, the National Police—that spent the entirety of his American exile living in shame and ignominy.

Similarly, I find it hard to believe that Nguyen would have attached Bon's name to that of Charles Bon from Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*, as Shostak (335) claims. While Shostak's connections between Nguyen's novel and Faulkner's are sound and intriguing, I cannot help but consider how they would fit the narrator way better than his "blood brother." Furthermore, whenever in the novel there is an intertextual connection on the order of the ones she proposes, Nguyen usually does not fail to signal it very clearly—unlike what happens here. More simply, Bon's name could point to his being a '*bone*head'; or, back to the semantics of Vietnamese language, "Nguyen's decision not to put diacritical marks on [the] names," Thúy Đinh observes, "allows it to gain multivalent … meaning across languages" (2021), as Bon's name can mean 'path,' 'mission,' 'group,' or the number four (*bốn*), that— Đinh argues—in East Asian cultures "means death."

I hereby propose another interpretation, as Bon-as-four could signal the fact that the character is the fourth member of a trio made by Man, himself, and by a "man of two minds," that, at the end of the novel, will speak of himself in the plural, as a "pronominal two-in-one." Interestingly, however, it should be noted how Lê Tùng Châu's bootlegged translation of *The Sympathizer* writes all the names *without* diacritical marks as the original English text, thus still leaving room for any such ambiguities.

121:4325271050

intended to save a friend—as it happens in the novel. Ẩn's story, "the idea of Phạm Xuân Ẩn in general," as he revealed to me (2022b→Appendix), was in Nguyen's mind during the writing of the book. And although Phạm Xuân Ẩn and Nguyen's narrator operate in very different circumstances, many crucial aspects of the personality and narrative arc of the latter are clearly drawn from the character and life experiences of the first. Indeed, the most striking match between history and fiction is the fact that both Nguyen's protagonist and Ẩn share the 'condition' of being, as war journalist David Halberstam puts it, two people "caught between two worlds" (Berman 249), and "split right down the middle" (Bass 2009, 4). Therefore, let us once again compare the novel with the source material in order to better understand the use that the first makes of the second.

There are many ways to learn about Phạm Xuân Ẩn. In addition to the state-endorsed, more hagiographic works one can find in Vietnam, with the prospect of several TV and movie adaptations to come out soon, two Anglophone biographies released in the late 2000s truly stand out from the rest: Larry Berman's *Perfect Spy* (2007), and Thomas A. Bass' *The Spy Who Loved Us* (2009). Both Berman and Bass were to become friends of Ẩn during his later years, both repeatedly interviewed him in his house in Hồ Chí Minh City's District 3 while he was ailing, and both landed on Viet Nguyen's reading list when the latter was crafting *The Sympathizer*. But while in Vietnam Berman's biography—a book that paints a decidedly benign picture of the revolutionary general—can be found in every airport bookstore from Nội Bài to Tân Sơn Nhất, Bass' "*unathorized*" (2009, 7, in italics in the text) work tends to convey a more nuanced perspective. Whereas Berman depicts the spy as a benevolent nationalist caught up in history's crossfire, Bass offers a chiaroscuro portrait "of a master tactician" (7), a 'committed

122:1051581090

sympathizer' that did not fail to ignite Viet Nguyen's imagination. Borrowing a passage from Hayden White, one could say that in the case of the two books,

> what has happened is that a set of events originally encoded in one way is simply being decoded by being recoded in another. The events themselves are not substantially changed from one account to another. That is to say, the data that are to be analyzed are not significantly different in the different accounts. What is different are the modalities of their relationships. (1978, 97)

Bass and Berman's biographies, simply put, tell the same exact story from two different angles. A vivid portrait emerges when comparing the texts, that of a man who truly contained multitudes. Based on the accounts, Ẩn comes off as a witty conversationalist, a compassionate friend, a morally conscious journalist, a treacherous spy and double, a dedicated patriot, a revolutionary hero, a victim of political persecution, a man who had blood on his hands, a man who loved America, a man who loved Vietnam—all at the same time. His profile is that of a man torn between multiple loyalties. Decades after the war, Thomas Bass remembers, Ẩn still kept slipping between his divided allegiances during their conversations:

> "When we lost the battle in southern Laos …" "What do you mean when you say *we* lost the battle?" I ask. "I am referring to the nationalist side. I am sorry. I am confused," An says, laughing. (2009, 217).

For his part, Larry Berman recalls that Ẩn once handed him a translated copy of Nguyễn Khải's *Past Continuous* (*Gặp gỡ cuối năm*), a 1982 Vietnamese literary ancestor of *The Sympathizer* partly centered around a fictionalized version of himself named Quan. In reading the excerpt quoted by Berman, it almost feels like reading Nguyen's novel:

123:4591070699

He had been a special kind of soldier on a special kind of battlefield, … knowing that the one who looked at him as a close friend today could become his torturer tomorrow… He had to live his cover as if it were his real life, in his thoughts as well as in his action; he had to become his mask, only his mask, always his mask, nothing else. Fake but real, real but fake… it felt as if he would live that way forever. (Berman 273)

Another passage from Bass' biography could have concurred to inspire Nguyen's (allegorical?) choice of having a mixed-race character as his protagonist.[72] In comparing Ân with his friend Philippe Franchini, the Eurasian owner of Saigon's renowned Continental Hotel, Bass notes:

Pham Xuan An is also a *métis*, a cross between Vietnam and America. He too is a spy in the houses of his mother and father, a fish swimming in all the waters of the world. If the history of Vietnam is one long story of treachery and ambivalence, the *métis* incarnates this history in his skin, with Franchini and An being exhibits A and B. (234)

Rather than Bass's (highly questionable!) assessment on Eurasian persons as a living embodiment of "treachery and ambivalence," what I would like to highlight here is the remark of him being "a spy in the houses of his mother and father." During his ongoing massive promotional tour, a tour that, as Timothy K. August points out, could legitimately be seen as a years-long "performative piece" (2018, 61), Nguyen often put the emphasis on how the choice of having a spy as his protagonist was paradoxically shaped by *his* personal experiences. As he told PBS's Jeffrey Brown in 2017,

[72] Ever the academic, Nguyen was obviously aware of the risks he was running while going down this particular road. During an event at Yale University, he discussed his reluctance to propose a new version of the "tragic mulatto" character, and "the terrible fates that befall people of mixed-race heritage who become symbolic of the irreconcilable realities of being mixed race and of two populations" (2016c). For a historic overview of the social conditions of Eurasians in French Indochina during the 1940s—that is, around the time *The Sympathizer*'s narrator is said to be born—see Goscha 164-166).

124:6280706114

[W]hen I was growing up, I felt myself to be a spy in my parents' household, because they were Vietnamese, and I was being Americanized. And then, when I went outside, I was a Vietnamese spying on Americans. And that sense of always being an observer, always being a spy has continued to stay with me.

The spy novel as a frame, thus, enables Nguyen to craft a narrative dominated by a minority 'I' that, as Phạm Xuân Ẩn, "belong[s] to everything" (Bass 224) all the while feeling out of place everywhere. It proves interesting to compare Nguyen's literary experiment not only with the stories of Southern and Northern double agents, but especially with those of their fictional offshoots. We have already seen an excerpt from Nguyễn Khải's novel. Similarly, also in the 1980s another communist spy, Phạm Ngọc Thảo, was at the center of a Vietnamese TV series. Both products, entangled as they were in the meshes of what Nguyen himself defines a "middling industry of memory whose products stay within its own borders" (2016, 167), are virtually unknown in the West. The same, for that matter, can be said of the fictional 'sympathizers' that captured the imagination of the reading public in the pre-1975 South. In an article, scholar Duy Lap Nguyen traces the literary fortune of Bùi Anh Tuấn, a South Vietnamese Ian Fleming whose hero, spy Z.28 a.k.a. Văn Bình, is a pure Cold War creature embedded in the "excessive enjoyment of unrefined amusement and pleasure associated with [the] consumer society … of the 'neocolonial culture' that emerged in South Vietnamese cities" (Nguyen 2018, 128; 131). While Viet Nguyen's narrator shares some traits with these fictional spies—he is as cunning as the first two and as a bon vivant as the third—*The Sympathizer* does not lionize such traits by any means. In the novel, doubleness is not incensed as in Tuấn's stories or in propaganda-like hagiographies of communist spies.[73] Rather, it is portrayed as a curse. In

[73] The contrast is even starker when it comes to real-life doubles like Nguyễn Văn Tài, on whom another character of Nguyen's novel, the Watchman, is based. As it happens to his fictional counterpart, Tài was in turn "placed in a completely sealed cell that was painted all in white, lit by bright lights 24 hours a day … for three years without learning where he was" (Pribbenow 59).

125:2802538133

the book, the double becomes the ultimate stand-in for the diasporic subject torn between two worlds. That being the case, it follows that Nguyen performed a unique trick in that he managed to defy *and* satisfy at once the market's "horizon of expectations." He discarded the spy novel's conventional tropes to put a new spin on the idea of "(not) belonging to everything." "[U]ndercover agents," Timothy K. August suggests, "are actively involved in the world of deception, marking their own actions as similar to those lurking in the realms they investigate. The figure of the insider/outsider spy gives Nguyen the flexibility to create a deceptive 'ethnic' character who does not belong to any social group" (2021, 115). Even in this case, Nguyen tapped into a preexistent literary lineage. As Crystal Parikh argues, works like Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, a novel centered around a Korean American operative who works for a private intelligence agency, foreground the idea of a "minority spy, a figure that allegorizes the crisis of the 'ethnic intellectual' as a self-representing agent within minority discourse" (251). As if prophesizing *The Sympathizer* eleven years before that Nguyen could write it, Parikh writes:

> The anxiety that the minority insider might come to serve as a traitorous informant on his or her community is one commonly found in the texts of writers of color … The figure of the ethnic spy, like the minority intellectual, challenges conventional models of knowledge-power relationships by calling into question the extent to which the material processes of race mediate the class and professional affiliations of intellectual and institutional power. (249; 251)

Nguyen's novel, Timothy August maintains, differs from Lee's insofar *The Sympathizer* is a "refugee spy novel" that retains *Native Speaker*'s idea of the "minority spy" while also illuminating "the contortions necessary for refugees to speak when read through a backdrop of American war" (2021, 118). However, to an extent even *The Sympathizer* conveys a similar "minority insider anxiety." Its protagonist is a man torn between loyalties and allegiances, one who understands both sides of every divide he finds himself across. A communist double

126:4066426611

capable of empathy with his enemies, 'the captain' can be seen as a stand-in not only for minority subjecthood but especially for minority intellectuals challenging "conventional models of knowledge-power relationships." In other words, as a spy novel written by an ethnic studies professor, in a weird sort of way *The Sympathizer* can indeed be read as a first-person minority narrative about one's upbringing.

In fact, what truly sets Phạm Xuân Ẩn apart from the nearly other fifteen thousand Communist spies operating during wartime, making him a fitting receptacle for Nguyen's "minority spy" parable, is his "John Woo-esque" penchant for trying to help his friends no matter their political allegiance. This, in addition to his love for America, is what really makes Ẩn's life story the perfect carrier for the perspectives addressed by the all-encompassing voice of Nguyen's narrator. To cite but one crucial example, one will only need to note how Ẩn, on the eve of Saigon's collapse, risked his revolutionary credentials by literally pushing his friend and patron Dr. Trần Kim Tuyến, the former South Vietnamese chief of intelligence, on the helicopter leaving the rooftop of USAID's apartment building at 22 Gia Long St. (Berman 221 ff; Bass 219; Snepp 2002, 516). Dr. Tuyến, Bass points out, is "the final person climbing the rickety ladder up to the waiting helicopter" (219) in Hubert Van Es's iconic photo of the evacuation. Ẩn, whose name aptly translates as "hidden/secret," stays out the frame—as he, metaphorically speaking, has always done throughout his life. Similarly—but abiding to Hong Kong cinema conventions—in Nguyen's novel the narrator, despite having no plan, decides to go against Man's order to stay in the U.S. to follow Bon in Thailand, ostensibly to "save his life" (*TS* 268). Then, after having spent more than one year in the reeducation camp, he refuses to leave it without him at his side: "If Bon can't leave… neither can I" (*TS* 348). Many factors lay behind his fateful decisions. What matters here is that the narrator is devised as a character not only capable of looking past his beliefs to save a friend, but especially as one able to

127:4812208114

understand said friend's beliefs while retaining his own—as Phạm Xuân Ẩn was. For both Ẩn and 'the captain,' in short, friendship comes prior to politics and affection trumps ideology.

In a sense, devising such a character arc can be seen as a way to challenge the Hollywood stereotype of the unrelenting VC driven by inscrutable motivations. To craft his subversion of the Vietnam War narrative, Nguyen needed one who, as he puts it, "doesn't see things as right versus wrong [but] as right versus right" (Bell). The narrator's "capacity to sympathize," Karl Ashoka Britto maintains, "makes him both a compelling narrator and a vulnerable yet thoroughly complicit player in the theater of cruelty that shapes his life" (2019b, 374). And even if it is centered around the memories of a disenchanted Vietnamese communist narrative 'I,' *The Sympathizer* is no gritty tale of disillusionment like Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* (1990) or Dương Thu Hương's *Novel Without a Name* (1995), both war novels penned by North Vietnamese veteran writers put under house arrest by the state, which secret motto might as well be "So much blood, so many lives were sacrificed for what?" (Ninh, 39). Nor is *The Sympathizer* a bleak parable of fading heroes and bygone eras like the 1987 short story "The General Retires" by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, in which the dissident author resists the national myth of self-sacrifice and endurance by exposing war's futility from an old-timer's perspective. Nguyen's is another kind of story—a story about ironies, rather than (spilled) guts and (vain) glory. To write it, he needed a better class of a protagonist: rather than a jaded soldier failed by his revolution, a sassy spy who fails his.

And what a spy Phạm Xuân Ẩn was. Inducted in the ranks of the Party in 1953, he was sent to the U.S. on Politburo's orders to study the American way of thinking. What they were looking for, Bass surmises, was a "poetic spy, a spy who loved Americans and was loved by them in return" (8). Ẩn's stay abroad as a journalism student was approved by the higher levels

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of the DRV[74]'s chain of command, as posing as one would allow him to get access to "obscure places and elevated people" (Bass 104). While in the novel Nguyen's character studies in Southern California for six years during the 1960s at the fictional—and aptly named! — Occidental College, Ẩn's real abroad experience took place the decade earlier, in the similarly named Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa, CA.

Ẩn's CIA mentor, the renowned spymaster Colonel Edward Lansdale—the 'kingmaker' of Ngô Đình Diệm—was instrumental in getting him the scholarship, as is Claude, his fictional counterpart, in the case of *The Sympathizer*'s protagonist. Both, among other things, gift their protégées with a copy of a warfare manual (Berman 136; Bass 66)—which, in the case of Nguyen's character, will become a codebook for communicating with his case officer and 'blood brother,' Man, during the second stint as a spy in the U.S..[75] And even if both Nguyen's sympathizer and Ẩn seem to have had the time of their lives in California, their attitude is where fiction and source material truly differ, and where Nguyen's game of refracted history really comes into play. Indeed, it is hard to imagine Nguyen's spy taking kindly to being called "Confucius" (Berman 86; Bass 107) by his classmates or being laughed at in the toilet because of his cultural customs (Bass 109), as happened to Ẩn. Nor does it seem possible to picture him feeling homesick while stepping into a friend's dorm room refashioned as a Southeast Asian jungle, like Ẩn wrote he once felt in a (tongue-in-cheek) article on the college newspaper (Berman 96).

In addition, one would rest assured that Nguyen's narrator would have found a way to pinpoint how Ẩn's alma mater stands on a site where an American army base once was (Berman

[74] The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam).
[75] Lansdale's gift to Ẩn, Paul Linebarger's *Psychological Warfare* (1948), a guide on the titular subject that has been used as a textbook by the U.S. Army for years, in the novel becomes the fictive Richard (Dick) Hedd's *Asian Communism and the Oriental Mode of Destruction*—a cliché-ridden text that convey a great many hideous perspectives about Asia and the war.

129:6340368778

85; Bass 108). Especially considering that that very base, at the end of WWII, served briefly as a prison camp for Rommel's Afrikakorps veterans—the same German soldiers that were employed in the French Foreign Legion against the communist Việt Minh during the First Indochina War (Lanneau 2011, 80)—and was then used by the government as an internment camp for deported Japanese Americans until the war's end. Also, it is intriguing to note—as Bass does—that Phạm Xuân Ẩn "was possibly the first Vietnamese to live in Orange County" (107), a territory that is now home of hundreds of thousands of first-wave refugees and second-generation Vietnamese Americans (Dang, Vo, Le). And ironically, the Orange Coast College is located just across the street from the OC Fairgrounds, the location of the annual UVSA (Union of Vietnamese Student Association) Tết Festival, whose stalls prominently showcase the flag of the very country Ẩn helped to erase from history books. Furthermore, it is also worth noting that that very military base, Santa Ana Army Air Force Base, was the very place in which Joseph Heller first trained as a bombardier (Tortolano), collecting his first impressions for *Catch-22* (1994), another proclaimed source of inspiration for Nguyen's novel. And even if *The Sympathizer*, when dealing with the narrator's period abroad, focuses on other ironies—such as the Emersonian quote on inconsistency that he underlines three times (*TS* 12), as to mimic the stripes of that very flag, meant to represent the North, the Center, and the South of a "motherland" he finds "nothing if not inconsistent"—one may wonder whether or not, behind the characters of the orientalist Chair and his frustrated secretary, Japanese American Sofia Mori, lies some subliminal reference to the story of the real Orange Coast College, with its symbolic connections to German Nazism, French colonialism, and American racism. Similarly, one will not fail to pinpoint how both Nguyen's and Heller's literary subversions owe a debt to the hidden history of Orange County's military posts.

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Now let us put on once again the panoramic lenses of refracted history to focus on other, and more significant, similarities between Phạm Xuân Ẩn and Nguyen's narrator. Other than having saved a friend and having had to pretend being good and docile anti-communist Asians in a Southern California college, one would not fail to note how both the real spy and his fictional counterpart share more common ground. Both were mentored by a CIA spymaster; both served in the NLF *and* in the ARVN (Berman 69); both were communist spies *and* founding members of the CIO, the South Vietnamese intelligence agency (Bass 180); and both are part of a group of "loyal friends" called "the Three Musketeers" (Bass 67; *TS* 15), formed by another communist double agent (Cao Giao/Man) and by a CIA operative (Nguyen Hung Vuong/Bon).[76] Both fall in love with America, with the narrator partying hard in California and showing off an enviable collection of records of "Elvis and Dylan" (*TS*, 13), and the real 'poetic spy,' an admirer of "American independence of thought and speech" (Berman 111), setting out for a coast-to-coast tour of the States before getting back to his Party-mandated mission. Both have a modest-looking humble lady, who is no "Cochin-Chinese Mata Hari" (*TS* 220), as their courier, with the narrator receiving his messages from the revolution camouflaged as packets of *bánh chưng*, and Ẩn, conversely, supplying Nguyen Thi Ba, an itinerant vendor of toys, with film canisters disguised as *nem ninh hòa* or *nem chua* (Berman 123; Bass 170) equally wrapped in banana leaves.

Moreover, Bass (173) reports how another courier of Ẩn, a Nguyen Van Thuong, was part of a network which gatherings took place not far from the very location where, in the novel (*TS* 25), Nguyen's protagonist and Man have their weekly debrief meetings. In both cases, the secret encounters occurred near the Notre-Dame Cathedral Basilica of Saigon, in a square that

[76] Even if Man, strictly speaking, ought to correspond with Ẩn's case officer and supervisor, Mười Hương, who, unlike the latter, was later apprehended and tortured by the Diemist police (Berman 115; Bass 111).

131:3322510751

now bears the name of the Paris Commune but that was previously named after John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Finally, both Ẩn and the narrator share a relationship with Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1956). This is but one among the several tangles of intertextual references one can stumble upon when reading the novel. As Karl Ashoka Britto argues, "*The Sympathizer* often wears its web of allusion lightly" (2019b, 373), incorporating all kinds of "narrative spaces" (Prabhu 393). Whereas Nguyen's narrator wrote his thesis on Greene's novel, Ẩn reviewed the 1958 movie adaptation in the college newspaper. In doing so, he maintained a delicate balance between his political beliefs and his friendship with Lansdale. The latter not only worked as an adviser to the movie—one who, in fairness, was instrumental in butchering the source material—but was also one of the alleged inspirations for the character of Alden Pyle, the titular 'Quiet American' (Berman 94). And intriguingly, Ẩn himself contributed to the new, Party-endorsed 2002 filmic adaptation of Greene's novel in the capacity of movie consultant, in that director Philip Noyce decided to rewrite the character of Hinh basing it on Ẩn himself—furtherly blurring the borders between facts and fiction (Bass 232). This not only means that Ẩn ended up being the inspiration for at least *three* fictional spies—including Quan from *Past Continuous* and 'the captain' from *The Sympathizer*—but that he and Nguyen's narrator also share the profession of Hollywood consultant besides that of the "poetic spy."

But on top of all these connections, there is one crucial point left to examine. It concerns the respective destinies of Ẩn and of his fictional counterpart after the moment both waited for years— the collapse of South Vietnam. April 1975 is the fork in the road, the 'what-if' moment; here is where *The Sympathizer* becomes a counterfactual history, warping the image of Phạm Xuân Ẩn and bending his story to make it look like a parable. "The counterfactual imagination," Catherine Gallagher argues, "has become a familiar feature of [American] culture" (2), crossing from science fiction to mainstream narrative at an exponential rate during the last decades. The

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American defeat in Vietnam, for one, is heavily featured in such narratives—just think of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (2013), in which the U.S. win the war through the good offices of a superhuman weapon. However, parts of the Vietnamese diaspora bask as well in a counterfactual fantasy of their own. Nguyen himself acknowledges that in "Black-Eyed Women," the opening story of *The Refugees*, by putting these words in the mouth of the protagonist's mother:

> "If we hadn't had a war," she said that night … "we'd be like the Koreans now. Saigon would be Seoul, your father alive, you married with children, me a retired housewife, not a manicurist." (11-12)

South Korea as a possibility, that is, a counterfactual version of things in which the South has kept its capitalist system and its 1954 borders, as Seoul's regime did, to then moving towards becoming a liberal democracy, is a recurring trope in the diasporic imagination. And even if today's Socialist Republic of Vietnam reaps the benefits of massive Korean investments, and Busan and Gangnam's shiny skyscrapers are not that far removed from the urban landscape of present-day Hồ Chí Minh City, this idea is still cherished and alive in the minds of many. Needless to say, what is a stake here is more pressing than American fantasies about reversing the war's outcome to quench the nation's thirst for closure. Every diasporic subject, one could argue, is him/herself a counterfactual character. The choice of staying or leaving, often made in a matter of minutes, changed many lives. Many people had to leave dear ones and possessions behind, reshaping family destinies, as Nguyen stages in yet another story from *The Refugees*, "Fatherland." However, *The Sympathizer* deals with a very different class of counterfactual imagination. Here, the counterfactual stakes, so to speak, are lower. If we choose to adopt

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Gallagher's terminology, Nguyen's is no "alternate-history novel" (3), but rather a "thought experiment" (11), which creates

> counterfactual characters charged with a peculiar kind of indeterminacy, visibly wavering between actual and alternative destinies and saturated with unspent potential. No longer flattened against the outlines of their actual destinies, these counterfactual characters have the vitality of the permanently unfinished. (13)

In *The Sympathizer*, the "poetic spy" is indeed "no longer flattened" against the outline of his actual destiny. In the novel, the narrator is tasked with following abroad the General and his entourage in order to prevent them to launch a counterrevolution. After a brief stint in the U.S., which sees him taking part into a fictionalized version of the political assassinations of Vietnamese journalists that terrorized the community during the 1980s (Thompson), and the Philippines interlude, 'the captain' decides to go back to Vietnam along with Bon and the anticommunist guerrillas. His "John Woo-esque" decision to join the patrol team in Thailand to have Bon's back lands the two of them in the reeducation camp. Here, the narrator is held prisoner for a year despite his revolutionary credentials, and is forced to write his "lý lịch," the autodiegetic I-Confession, to then be tortured in the snow-white room with the *KUBARK* methods, as we have seen.

Instead, in real life Phạm Xuân Ẩn was something like a failed 'sympathizer.' Initially, the plan was for him to "continue spying in a postwar assignment to Washington," where he had already sent his family (Bass xix). According to Larry Berman, the task—that has been given "serious consideration" (212) from the upper echelons— "made no sense to him personally" (210). As per Thomas Bass, Ẩn "was hoping to be evacuated" to fight the "war-after-the-war, a bitter period … in which the United States might launch covert military operations" (3). Be that as it might, because of a "power struggle … between the military

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intelligence agents … and reticent officials in the Politburo" (Bass 222), Ẩn was forbidden to leave the country, and put "in the political deep freeze for a decade" (Bass 224). According to Berman (212), none other than a PAVN top brass, General Văn Tiến Dũng (Berman 212)—whose "five wings of troops," as the latter puts it in his memoir, had entered Saigon "like the five points of a big star coming together in the city bearing Uncle Ho's name" (Dũng 236)—stood in Ẩn's way preventing him to continue his mission. In this sense, the character arc of *The Sympathizer*'s narrator is a "thought experiment," a counterfactual version of the life and times of the "poetic spy" that exploits the "vitality of the permanently unfinished." 'The captain' is a younger, unattached Phạm Xuân Ẩn, eager to return to "the land of supermarkets and superhighways" (*TS* 27)—one who gets the assignment and leaves Saigon instead of staying back. This fork in the road complicates matters, allowing Nguyen to craft a narrative that touches upon trickier issues, and that checks more boxes when it comes to the memory of the war in Vietnam and its representations—one that would not have been possible had the fictional character acted as the real 'sympathizer' did.

Instead, Nguyen's reimagining puts the spy on the other side of the bamboo curtain. Unlike Ẩn, 'the captain' is forced to face both the South Vietnamese exilic condition and the way in which Hollywood, as a part of the American "military-industrial complex" (*TS* 173), had gobbled up and spat out the war in Vietnam into a new, distorted version to be exported in theaters all around the world. In addition, by leaving the country on the eve of the Fall of Saigon, 'the captain' delays his reckoning with the failures of Vietnamese communism back at home. When he is finally made to face the bleak "wasteland" (*TS* 302) of his country—a paranoid police state whose ravaged landscape has been scarred by Agent Orange and bomb craters—his disenchantment is absolute. *The Sympathizer*'s ending, despite the (vague) rays of hope of the final "refugee paean," is an ideological blank slate. It marks the beginning of *The*

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Committed, which is supposed to play the role of the Hegelian antithesis in the (so far) incomplete novel trilogy (Nguyen 2022b→Appendix). And in truth, despite not leaving Vietnam and becoming none of the things the narrator would be, even Phạm Xuân Ẩn faced a somewhat similar fate once the war was over.

Indeed, one thing makes it clear how "the idea of Phạm Xuân Ẩn in general" propelled the third act of *The Sympathizer*. Nguyen trusted the process and figured out the ending of the novel while writing it (Bell). The culmination of his (anti)hero's journey, as we have seen, is the camp section and everything that comes with it. Kafka, Dostoevsky, Ellison, Beckett, Eliot—all such influences concurred to the Coda and to the final crisis. But the thought experiment of having an agent of revolution put in solitary confinement and 'reeducated' by his own case officer came straight from the story of the "poetic spy," who was in turn held for ten months in a facility outside Hanoi and taught how to speak "the new postwar Vietnamese," an "ugly language" made of terms "borrowed from Marxist-Leninist Russia and Maoist China" (Bass xx).

To be fair, even in this case Nguyen's novel leans toward the counterfactual. In both cases the emphasis—as in Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*—is on words and semantics. But where Nguyen's narrator is sadistically tortured by Man because he is not able to grasp a pun, Ẩn had only to bite his tongue for a little to then get back home with a bunch of medals on his chest. In point of fact, the real 'sympathizer' largely stayed out of trouble and never had to experience something akin to "white torture." Even if their captivity periods perfectly coincide (1978-79), Ẩn's new home was no labor camp such as the one depicted in the novel, but a political institute for high-level cadres named after one of the aliases of Hồ Chí Minh—Nguyễn Ái Quốc ('Nguyễn the Patriot'). Ẩn, as Nguyen's character, was a "bad student" whose jokes were "never understood" (Bass xx), and whose love for America and "objectivity in journalism"

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(Bass 3) was viewed with suspicion by his fellow revolutionary brethren, who believed him to be a triple agent trying to double-cross his double-cross. "'I had lived too long among the enemy'," he confided to Bass, "'They sent me to be recycled'" (224). Decades after, he said to Berman, the revolution was "still unsure" (19) who he really was.

Even if Ẩn's was no reeducation, he as well had to write a confession. He was compelled to reveal all his wartime sources and contacts, disclosing details of how he facilitated Dr. Tuyến's escape on April 29, 1975. "They wanted to know about all my connections, they wanted me to report names, of all my friends, everyone I worked with," he recalled to Berman (183). Perhaps Ẩn was no John Woo protagonist, but—if we are to believe him—he gallantly protected his friends, feigning amnesia while intentionally keeping his record vague (Berman 238). And speaking of the *Sympathizer*'s Coda, one would not fail to highlight a last thing in common between the "poetic spy" and his fictional counterpart: as if describing the if-clauses passage from Nguyen's novel, *Time*'s correspondent and Ẩn's friend Bob Anson recalls how the latter had the "'custom of responding to questions … by starting at the fifteenth century and tracing his answers forward from there'" (Berman 27).

In conclusion, Nguyen's narrator is a counterfactual Phạm Xuân Ẩn, and *The Sympathizer* a "thought experiment," in the definition of Catherine Gallagher. Nguyen reshaped the story of a wartime spy passing intel from the Southern to the Northern regime—one whose military importance, by the way, according to Frank Snepp (2022) has been greatly exaggerated by the biographers[77]—into a postwar sleeper agent tasked with the very assignment Ẩn

[77] Snepp provided me with the English transcript of a speech made by third-ranking Politburo member Lê Đức Thọ on December 15, 1980. On that occasion Thọ—who in his time personally inducted Phạm Xuân Ẩn into the Party—candidly admitted that "in all of our past attacks [efforts to insert spies into the enemy's ranks], including during the resistance against the Americans, [the Politburo] never obtained strategic intelligence… [as they] only knew about [American war strategy] through [a] collation and analysis of information - because [they] did not have this type of strategic intelligence agent." I hereby express my deep gratitude to Mr. Snepp for helping me.

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ultimately never got to obtain. By putting the poetic spy in Vietnamese California during the 1970s, and then on the set of a Hollywood war movie, and finally making him return to the homeland, and to the colonizers' country, Nguyen created the ultimate diasporic allegory. The spy, in Nguyen's perspective, becomes a stand-in for second-generation subjectivities—strangers in the house of their parents, as well as eternal foreigners and potential 'fifth columnists' when outside of it. By means of the spy character, Yunte Huang argues, Nguyen channeled the "lasting lure of the Asian mystery" (387) in new, fresh, and unexpected ways. As an archetype, 'the sympathizer' not only turns on its head the old racist assumption about 'Asian inscrutability/doubleness,' showing a character being betrayed by *his own* capacity for empathy, but it also shows the "minority insider anxiety" of becoming a "traitorous informant" posited by Crystal Parikh, the anxiety shared by those that "belong[s] to everything" and are thus at home nowhere. Also in this occasion, therefore, refracted history allows the author to use events and characters that are unknown to most to build a different class of narrative, one which also contains elements of critique. Now, let us see how Nguyen did the same with the most renowned retellings of the war—how he distorted and diverted movie plots in lieu of historical sources. That is, it is time to dissect how Nguyen dealt with the cinematic (mis)representations of the war in Vietnam that inspired the "act of revenge" underlying some of the most scathing passages of the novel. It is time, in other words, to tackle *The Sympathizer*'s Hollywood subplot.

138:2231388219

3. A Gallery of Stills: The Hollywood Subplot

3.1 Fantasies of revenge

> "[N]ot only will America come to your country and kill all your people, but what's worse … they'll come back 20 years later and make a movie about how killing your people made their soldiers feel sad."
> Frankie Boyle, *Hurt Like You're Never Been Loved* (2016).

While pouring me tea in her Huntington Beach house, legendary movie star Kiều Chinh told me one thing that was not in her memoir. The freshly published volume lied on the table between us next to a luscious tray of pastries. Its photo-filled pages told the story of a woman who lived many lives. After a decades-long career in the South Vietnamese movie industry, in 1975 Kiều Chinh escaped Saigon a mere week before the Soviet-made tanks of the Northern forces would enter the city. She left with only a purse, a handful of crinkly dollar bills, and a little address book full of Hollywood contacts. Upon landing in Singapore, she was apprehended by local authorities, since the government that had issued her passport was no longer in power. To make matters worse, Chinh was returning to the island city-state after only a week-long absence. In mid-April, she had wrapped up the shooting of a movie about the city's youth culture. She had left Singapore a glamorous diva only to find herself received as an unwanted alien. In a surreal moment, she recognized her own face on the green cover of a *Female* magazine in the hands of one of the prison wardens overseeing the jail bathroom line. At the height of her fame, with her nation in its death throes, a distressed Chinh begged the

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Singaporean guard to open up the centerfold to connect the dots between the blue-clad actress featured in the magazine's overstory and the emaciated prisoner standing in front of him. A phone call to the Embassy granted her the chance to leave Singapore within 48 hours.

However, the clock was ticking for South Vietnam. Back home, the noose was tightening around Saigon's neck. No foreign consulate issued Chinh an entry visa. As she writes in her memoir, *An Artist in Exile* (2021), the actress became "homeless among the clouds" (151). In the next four days, she circled the globe one airplane flight at a time. Living out of on-board meals leftovers and airport bathroom faucets, she eventually landed in Canada on April 30, 1975, thus becoming "the first Vietnamese refugee in Toronto" (151). With nothing but 30 dollars to her name, Chinh was forced to work in a poultry farm for a while. Fifteen days before, she was one of the most recognizable faces of Asian cinema. Now, she was cleaning after the chickens. As *The Sympathizer*'s narrator summarizes, recontextualizing Kiều Chinh's absurd odyssey in fiction as but the last straw of an insane list of (presumably true) refugee anecdotes, "none of [Chinh's] American movie star friends return[ed] her desperate phone calls until with her last dime she snagged Tippi Hedren, who flew her to Hollywood" (*TS*, 69).

Ms. Chinh in her house with the *Female* issue from 1975.

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Alfred Hitchcock's muse was not only to become Chinh's sponsor, but also America's "mother of nails," as the latter puts it in her memoir (365). Tippi Hedren's efforts to help the women of the Sacramento's Hope Village refugee camp were the sparkles that started the ever-thriving Vietnamese American nail salon industry, as documentarist Adele F. Pham reconstructs in *Nailed It* (2018). As for Chinh, Hedren helped her get her life back on track. After a short while, the South Vietnamese diva returned to the set. Her native country's film culture (Chinh 2019) was no more, only to survive in bootleg version through the "fragmentary and dispersed form" (Guha, 92) of the nostalgia-infused "sphere of circulation" (91) of the Vietnamese diaspora. But there was always Hollywood. With the right connections, Chinh landed a role in the famed *M*A*S*H* TV show, to then reclaim her spot under the limelight. Eventually, she remade her career in the American film industry. This, however, only occurred at the price of "Oriental masquerading" (Guha, 94), that is, of having to play Chinese or Korean characters in accordance with "Hollywood's (mis) casting norms when it comes to Asian and Asian American actors" (95).[78] Nonetheless, Chinh's second stint as an artist in exile also granted her the chance to star in acclaimed features like Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club*, and to become a dedicated humanitarian in the process. In her memoir, Chinh recalls one day in the Upper New York Bay, years later, when she found herself looking back at Tippi Hedren's help. Looking up at the Statue of Liberty, she whispered Emma Lazarus' lines about the tired, poor, and wretched masses yearning to breathe free, as inscribed on the famous bronze plaque one can found inside the Statue pedestal. "Lady Liberty," she muses in her memoir, "is the ultimate symbol of America: A sponsor" (379).

[78] Ironically, though, *M*A*S*H* itself as a TV show has been described "a crypto discussion of the Vietnam war" (Cawley 72), thus making Chinh's casting as Korean woman oddly appropriate.

141:8509695802

During our conversation, Chinh also told me the story of her failed attempt to reach out to Trần Lệ Xuân, better known as Madame Nhu, the disgraced iron lady of South Vietnam. Madame Nhu was the wife of Ngô Đình Nhu, brother of President Ngô Đình Diệm and chief of the secret police under the First Republic (1955-1963). For eight years, Madame Nhu was *de facto* Saigon's first lady. Her brother-in-law ruled South Vietnam with an iron fist and Washington's full blessing. At the height of the political turmoil that marked the latter end of Diệm's presidency, Madame Nhu often made the headlines because of her controversial statements. Her antics made her famous worldwide as the face of a growingly unpopular family powerhouse. In fact, Diệm's reign ended tragically. In 1961, Vice President Lyndon Johnson had hailed him as an Asian Winston Churchill. Two years later, an U.S.-backed coup ousted him and his brother from power. Madame Nhu was visiting abroad and barely escaped the bloody end of the regime. In the following years, any possible misfortune befell her: she lost her daughter in a car accident, her brother killed both of their parents, her own nation ceased to exist. She spent the remainder of her days slowly fading into obscurity in a ghastly villa located in the outskirts of my hometown—Rome, Italy—declining any visit. At one point, Chinh and a London-based director wanted to make a movie about her life. When Chinh tried to call Madame Nhu from a booth right under her windows in Via Trigoria, she slammed the phone on her, violently refusing any such request.

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Books about Madame Nhu on display in a Houston, TX, shopping mall.

In hearing this story, I could not help but think about another incarnation of Lady Liberty other than Chinh's metaphor for refugee sponsorship. A mere four days before that Kiều Chinh would greet me in her driveway, I had a brief chat with another prominent refugee from the 1970s, also in Huntington Beach. On the desk of Frank Jao, head honcho of the Orange County-based real estate empire Bridgecreek Development—one of the men who built Little Saigon—sat a curious piece of furniture. The knick-knack was a miniature depiction of New York City's most famous copper statue. Had one popped the torch-bearing arm, though, it would have turned out to be a paperknife—a rather sharp one. Jao is a shrewd businessman, a self-made millionaire who climbed his way up from a refugee boat. His greatest legacy is the Asian Garden Mall, the largest Vietnamese shopping center in the U.S., the beating heart of Orange County's Vietnamese community. As I was discussing Vietnamese history with him, it dawned on me that his Lady Liberty knick-knack was indeed "the ultimate symbol" of America's promise. In 1963, Madame Nhu helplessly saw pictures of her brother-in-law lying in a puddle

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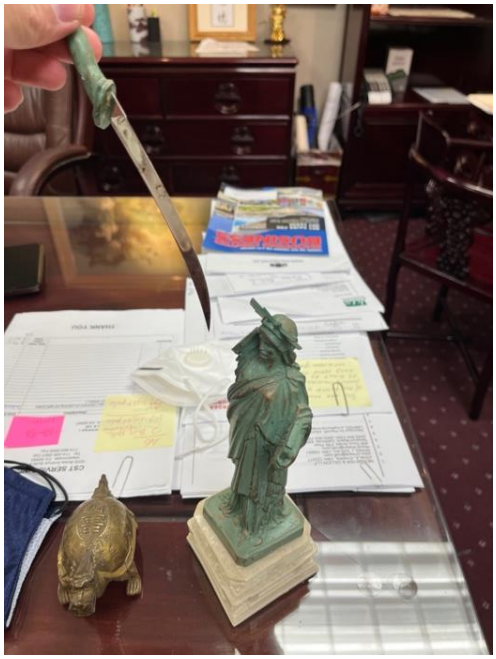
of blood in the back of an U.S.-supplied armored personal carrier. Beside him lied the handcuffed, bullet-riddled body of her husband. As *The Sympathizer*'s narrator would have it, the picture's "subtext was as subtle as Al Capone: *Do not fuck with the United States of America*" (45). Had Madame Nhu ever held Frank Jao's Lady Liberty miniature in her hands, she would have undoubtedly concurred that America's promises always come at a price. Once a powerful woman, she died a recluse at age 87, and no big-budget movie tells her tragic story. Outside of the diaspora, she is now mostly known as a side villain whose antics bring color to a bunch of documentaries. "As long as I live," she yelled at Chinh that day in Rome, "nobody will do a movie about me!" (Chinh 2022). As Viet Nguyen's narrator would put it, she knew that her representation was not hers to own anymore.



Frank Jao's Lady Liberty.

And Madame Nhu's was not the only Vietnamese war story to be reduced to a footnote. As *The Sympathizer* shows, the war in Vietnam did not end with the last chopper leaving the

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U.S. embassy's rooftop in the wee hours of April 30, 1975. South Vietnam's not-yet-rotting corpse was to be dug up and dissected, its pieces rearranged as colorful tabletops decorating the backdrop of America's tragedy. Indeed, Hollywood was quick to turn the war into a spectacle. The 1970s and 1980s saw the release of countless movies centered on the conflict. Their success can be explained as a "return of the repressed" (Ghislotti 20), a collective exorcism only possible because of the passing of time. The American imagination recast the name of a country into the name of a war, and the name of a war into a gallery of movie stills. The icons of America's cinematic Vietnam still loom over the collective unconscious: Robert De Niro pointing the gun to his temple, Willem Dafoe raising his arms to the sky in sacrifice, Sylvester Stallone's scarred chest covered with bandoliers. As Ben Tran would have it, "[i] its attempts to come to terms with military defeat abroad and divisive conflicts at home, the United States' collective memory of the war often focuses myopically on the country's own projections" (2018, 413). Cliché-ridden tales of Alamo-like sieges, blonde kids losing their innocence, and disaffected veterans resorting to "reimport Vietnam's violence" (Comber and O'Brien 257) into American streets, all left an ever-lasting mark. Short after its end, the war was reimagined by a variety of filmmakers in a variety of styles. Critically acclaimed New Hollywood classics like *The Deer Hunter* stand side by side with cheap, New Right-inspired revenge fantasies like the Chuck Norris-led *Missing in Action* saga. Often, such reimaginations tend to "depoliticize the struggle [by] turning it into a test of manhood, a rite of passage, or a personal trial" (Tomasulo, 147). The underlying moral crisis always stays the same, and it can be summed up with the final words of Charlie Sheen's character, private Chris Taylor, in Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986): "we didn't fight the enemy, we fought ourselves, and the enemy was in us."

Hollywood, Viet Thanh Nguyen argues, cut the Vietnamese out of the picture. If American war narratives generally devote little space to the enemy's point of view, this rings

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even truer when it comes to cinematic depictions of Vietnamese communists (Rosso 2003, 157). In this case, the racist dehumanization of the enemy was absolute. From the very outset, the American imagination refashioned the Việt Cộng into a novel strand of movie monsters. Sometimes, that happened in a literal sense; to give but one example, it is not hard to recognize the ever-elusive movie VCs in the creatures seen in movies like James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986). Here, the (stereotypical) iron will associated with communist guerrillas becomes a supernatural trait. The Asian enemy is transformed in an unstoppable, hive-minded killing machine whose monstrosity derives from the U.S. Marines' inability to understand its motivations. Cameron's take on the xenomorphs, Long T. Bui observes, also hints at the idea of the alien as a "parasitic" being whose purpose is to propagate its "predatory species by impregnating human bodies … [as] the Vietcong communist forces [tried to influence] impressionable people" (2022, 135). The scene in which the hubristic soldiers are decimated in the alien hive, for one thing, clearly re-awakens many American war ghosts. The rear-echelon officers sending the soldiers to die without heavy weapons in fear of them hitting the colony's fusion reactor are possibly meant to represent the American government dreading nuclear escalation with North Vietnam's superpower patron, the USSR. *Aliens*' eyeless monsters, for their part, are as inhuman and as relentless as Hollywood's shadowy VC guerrillas. In fact, it is no coincidence that their tactic of attack heavily recalls the Maoist-style 'human wave.'

Things, for that matter, do not get better when it comes to filmic depictions of America's allies. The whole panoply of stereotypes regarding South Vietnam is shown in a six-vignette panel of Thi Bui's graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do*: in movies the South Vietnamese come off as "bar girls and hookers, corrupt leaders, papa-san[s], kids looking for handouts, small effete m[e]n" (207). Even before the war had ended, Hollywood had already turned the Republic of Vietnam into a nameless crowd of two-dimensional extras. Passive victims caught

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up in the crossfire, loyal savages grateful to the U.S., silk-robed seductresses speaking in poor English, and sleazy conmen like the Engineer from the *Miss Saigon* musical still inhabit popular culture as phantasmatic projections. Hollywood's South Vietnam is a space of the American imagination, either full of treacherous natives who cannot be trusted, or of infantilized, hapless civilians waiting for a white savior come to their rescue. Needless to say, most diasporic retellings of the conflict strongly resist this kind of depiction. In a way, one could even say that *The Sympathizer* itself was written as a direct response to it.

All of this, however, was far from clear when Kiều Chinh was taking her first steps in the Century City backlots where *M*A*S*H* was filmed. As she told me that sunny afternoon in Orange County, there is indeed one episode of her life missing from the book. Through the good offices of director Robert Wise—of *The Sound of Music*'s fame—she once caught the attention of a brash Italian American filmmaker bent on bringing the Vietnam tragedy to the silver screen. None other than Francis Ford Coppola, coming on the heels of his two vastly successful *Godfather* movies, wanted Chinh to star in his then-in-progress war epic *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Chinh's was meant to be a minor role in the all-male story. She was to portray Colonel Kurtz's native mistress, a character derived from *Apocalypse*'s literary source, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In the three-plus versions of Coppola's masterpiece one can watch, one invariably sees the mistress' stern gaze following Captain Willard for a few quick shots in the Kurtz's compound sequence. Moreover, Chinh was also to work for Coppola as a technical advisor, as she would do on other Hollywood sets such as that of John Irvin's *Hamburger Hill* (1987). As she put it to me, she was to make sure that every cultural detail would add up: "the way in which she talks is correct? The way she wears the *áo dài* is correct?" (2022) Eventually, the part of Kurtz's mistress went to an uncredited actress. Chinh had to pass on the opportunity because of her inability to leave the U.S. due to her refugee status. Had she

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landed in the Philippines, where Coppola was already recruiting hundreds of local hands to build massive sets from scratch, her stateless condition would have made it impossible for her to safely return to the U.S. As Pujita Guha duly notes, "[i]ronically, if her Vietnamese and/or her Asian identity made it possible for her to land a role in *Apocalypse Now*, the same identity as a Vietnamese immigrant proved to be a bureaucratic barrier for her as well" (84).

Had Chinh got the job, though, she would have become what 'the captain' becomes in *The Sympathizer*. In Nguyen's book, the protagonist-narrator is hired as a consultant by an egomaniacal Hollywood director, the Auteur. As Nguyen makes abundantly clear in the "Postface," the character is a (purposefully) two-dimensional caricature of Francis Ford Coppola. The plot of the fictional movie he directs is a blurred mix of Vietnam War films, famous and not, good and not, all crammed together. The movie, called *The Hamlet*, is a "a mash-up of Hollywood's sins against not only Vietnamese but also Asians and Asian Americans at large," as Sylvia Shin Huey Chong summarizes (2018, 371). When it comes to Orientalist cliches and war movie stereotypes, the Auteur's movie checks every imaginable box. Its white protagonists are steely badasses, its Asian villains are cartoon-like, and none of its Vietnamese characters has "an intelligible word to say" (*TS* 124). On set, the narrator's task is to ensure accuracy and to manage the Vietnamese extras recruited from a local refugee camp. As Eleanor Coppola writes in her production diary—one of Nguyen's sources—there was indeed a young "group leader" (29) managing *Apocalypse Now*'s Vietnamese extras. As far as I can tell, there is no mention of him anywhere else. Once again, Nguyen built his narrative on an obscure episode unknown to the most. Whoever this group leader was in real life, in *The Sympathizer* he becomes one with Nguyen's "poetic spy," his literary reimagining of Phạm Xuân Ẩn. In the novel, the spy's motivation in taking the job is to "to influence the filmmaker's depiction of the Vietnamese in the memory industry" (Kumamoto Stanley 292). Ever the

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infiltrator, this time he tries his hand in the film industry.[79] In the Philippines, he and the Auteur violently clash, with the first going as far as trying to have the second killed during a set-related accident. Later on, when the narrator returns to Southeast Asia to join the anticommunist Front, he watches the movie, titled *The Hamlet*, in a Bangkok theater—only to notice his name missing from the movie credits. The message is all too evident: "Failing to do away with me in real life," the narrator muses, "he had succeeded in murdering me in fiction" (*TS* 277).[80]

Once again, Nguyen's characters are meant to embody 'larger forces.' The Auteur's literal and figurative murder perfectly mirrors Hollywood's erasure of the Vietnamese.[81] With the Movie subplot— "a morality play crossed with a backstage musical" (Chong 2018, 371)—Nguyen's intentions are made translucent and practically visible. As Sunny Xiang points out, it is impossible not to treat Nguyen's fiction and nonfiction "as a single coherent project" (421). In many respects, his novels are designed to push the reader into making connections, holding his/her hand through each passage and feeding him/her just enough allusions to safely navigate the referential framework. Generally speaking, the thriller of ideas as a genre leaves little room for ambiguities. The fabric of Nguyen's thought is transparent—every reference is on display as the book of the month in a storefront window. Such is the unwritten agreement he struck with his reading audience, such is the method that makes the slippage between criticism and fiction narratively possible. Arguably, this method is nowhere as evident as in the Hollywood

[79] This checks up with the Vietnamese title of the novel in the bootleg translation of Lê Tùng Châu. Ideally, "sympathizer" would translate as "cảm tình viên." Châu goes instead with "kẻ nằm vùng," which denotes a sleeper agent waiting for orders in enemy territory. In the bootleg translation, 'the captain' would thus become a perpetual 'infiltrator' instead of a perpetual 'sympathizer,' with relevant implications when it comes to the overarching theme of the spy as a symbolic stand-in for diasporic subjecthood. I hereby express my deep gratitude to Nguyễn Văn Thuần for language advice.

[80] The episode was likely inspired by a personal recollection of one of *Apocalypse Now*'s Ifugao extras, an Edgar Dupingay. As the latter told Deidre McKay and Padmapani L. Perez, the man "went to Bayombong, Nueva Viscaya (the nearest cinema) to see the film and was dismayed by how many scenes were missing. "I didn't even see my face there…." (5)

[81] Conversely, I do not feel like wholly accepting Min Hyoung Song's hypothesis that the Auteur could also embody "the forces of conformity and the deadening of creativity that Nguyen associates with the contemporary university" (407), as I see no textual connection between the character and academia.

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subplot of *The Sympathizer*. In this sense, *Nothing Ever Dies* works as a sort of scholarly companion to its "novelistic sibling" (Chihaya 364), forming a "fict-critical" diptych whose two halves are one the mirror of the other.[82] One need only to read the passages centered around *The Hamlet* and *Apocalypse Now* to put two and two together. As per Nguyen the scholar, Hollywood's Vietnam War matched the real one as a long-term "celluloid campaign to refight [the war] on global movie screens" (2016, 13). *Apocalypse Now,* he argues with reference to W.G. Sebald, is a "second-hand memory" (103), a "modern-day Grimm's fairy tale" (103) that global audiences all too often mistake for the real thing. The allure of war spectacle, he points out, waters down any possible antiwar message:

> Perhaps Coppola [by using *The Ride of the Valkyries* as D. W. Griffith did in *The Birth of a Nation*] was criticizing American culture by comparing American soldiers riding on helicopters to the Ku Klux Klan on their steeds, but the seductive power of his cinematic, airborne assault makes that critique hard to see. (117)

The movie, Nguyen maintains, exposes American savagery only at the price of dehumanizing the Asians. The Conrad-esque theme of the river journey as a voyage back in time and into the depths of the human soul quite literally reduces local peoples and landscapes to one thing. As white pain takes center stage, *Apocalypse*'s Vietnamese, Filipino, and Ifugao extras are but colored stains on a lush matte painting. Often, Frank P. Tomasulo argues, "dramatic license … exacerbates the unconscious racism of the film's figurations" (154). A shining example of this is the use of "aboriginal weapons" on the part of NLF guerrillas in one of the movie's scenes. In Michael Comber and Margaret O'Brien's words, *Apocalypse*'s "world of horrifying

[82] As Nguyen put it to Richard Wolinsky, "*The Sympathizer* grew out of the research for *Nothing Ever Dies* … Basically what happened is that *The Sympathizer* is the fictional book end of a project of which *Nothing Ever Dies* is a nonfiction book end" (2016d).

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otherness … is one in which the Viet Cong and the Cambodians conveniently act as demons or ignorant tribesmen — supporting the recognisable vision of Vietnam as primeval arena for man's basic instincts" (253). In this respect, exactly the way Coppola borrows from Conrad, Nguyen's critique owes much to Chinua Achebe's famous essay on *Heart of Darkness*, "An Image of Africa" (1978). Conrad's novella, Achebe argues, "projects the image of Africa as … a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity … [nothing more than a prop] for the break-up of one petty European mind" (9). For his part, Nguyen the scholar recontextualizes Achebe's argument this way:

> *Apocalypse Now* deploys a limited ethical vision that offers insight into the white man's heart of darkness, where he is both human and inhuman, but at the expense of keeping the other simply inhuman, as either savage threat or faceless victim. (2016, 121)

As poet/novelist Ocean Vuong once put it in a podcast interview, the Vietnamese American plight is that "if we're visible at all, we're visible as a corpse" (Doyle). By narrating the (post)war from the perspective of "the other," Nguyen shifts the focus. It is as if he had moved the shot from Captain Willard's drunken weeping in the opening scene of *Apocalypse*—the Saigon hotel scene—to the implied, offscreen perspective of the Vietnamese housekeeping lady forced to clean vomit from his sheets the morning after. His, Sylvia Chong synthesizes, is a "critique of memory industries as war industries" (2018, 371). Such a critique echoes Jean Baudrillard's contention that in the case of Vietnam and *Apocalypse* "[t]he war became film, the film becomes war, [and] the two are joined by their common hemorrhage into technology" (59). "[T]he war and this film," insists the French philosopher, "are cut from the same cloth [;] … if the Americans … lost the other one, they certainly won this one [, in that] *Apocalypse Now* is a global victory [achieved by a c]inematographic power equal and superior to that of

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the industrial and military complexes" (59).[83] Opposite to Hollywood's weaponizing of the past in order to transform "memory into spectacle" (Kumamoto Stanley, 290), Nguyen fights back by taking away the weapons. To demonstrate how the distance between a special effects department and an armaments factory operated by a defense contractor is shorter than is commonly appreciated, Nguyen the novelist puts a literary stand-in of his in the shoes that would have been Kiều Chinh's had she got her American citizenship a few years earlier. He devises a fictional Vietnamese movie consultant that, for a change, is less than happy to see his fellow countrymen reduced to movie props. Nguyen, in the words of Anjali Prabhu, strives to "undo the adulation of Coppola in American popular culture and by cinephiles the world over … [by inserting] the paucity of Vietnamese self-representation into the critical framework of the novel" (393). Once again, designing a communist spy that thinks like an ethnic studies professor proves fruitful. As Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi notes, *The Sympathizer* is unique as it exceeds the diasporic literary standard of historical fictions focused on one or two "subject positions," producing instead "a single composite character … that can speak to multiple issues of Asian (American) representation and cultural production that the author … may wish to address" (60). In a sense, Nguyen's satire is a fantasy of revenge in its own right. With their movies, Sylvester Stallone and Chuck Norris continued "the fight begun by John Wayne" (Williams 130), by killing scores of imaginary Vietnamese communists to the cry of "Sir, do we get to win this time?". On the stroke of the tenth anniversary of American defeat, they both refought the war on the silver screen as to exorcize national trauma, finding fertile ground in "the contemporary conservative mood that resulted in Reagan's landslide victory in 1984"

[83] However, it should be also said that Nguyen equally rejects Baudrillard's sophism that "the war in Vietnam 'in itself' perhaps in fact never happened [as filmmakers turned it into] a dream, a baroque dream of napalm" (59). In turn, Nguyen points out how the power of "Western popular culture" (2016, 65) turned Vietnam's carnage into a feature presentation, to the point of audiences "not acknowledging the real bodies of the dead, only the dead extras on the screen."

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(Williams, 129). In a way, Nguyen attempts something similar; only that his target are *them*, as well as the whole production system underlying "the celluloid campaign" they enlisted in. In the Philippines chapters of *The Sympathizer*, Nguyen places one of his alter egos on the set of the one movie that compelled him to shed critical light on Hollywood's "simulacrum vision[s]" (Gradisek 15). By the means of this latest "thought experiment," Nguyen the scholar/novelist puts his theories to the practical test. In *Nothing Ever Dies*, he posits how Hollywood's Vietnam was born out of memorial revanchism. By dint of box-office hits, he argues, America won the war ex-post—the war in Vietnam being the one case in which history was written by the losers. In the essay/manifesto, he goes deep on the imbalances in memory and representation foregrounded by American war cinema when it comes to the memory of the Vietnam conflict. Now, through the fiction, he has the unique chance to criticize such depictions in real-time, *as they were made*.

To accomplish this task, Nguyen abruptly changes gear, performing one of the typical "polyvalent shifts in tone and register" (Scranton 179) one can find in the novel.[84] The

[84] Even if the tone of this section, as Karl Ashoka Britto points out, is "darkly comic" (2019, 376), we are not that far removed from the fragmented mess of the Coda. As Britto observes, "[some] details draw our attention to the link between these two parts of the novel: certain moments of dialogue during the narrator's interrogation appear in screenplay format, and the room in which the scene of violence recounted by the narrator occurs is called 'the movie theater.'" Such a connection is quite evident, and others have already drawn attention to them. As Debra Shostak notes, also the subsequent 'movie theater' sequence—the rape of the communist agent—is a "witty parody of murderous misrepresentation" (223). Indeed, the fatal altercation between the Auteur and the narrator in Chapter 10 occurs because of the latter's hesitancy in shooting the rape scene—as to signal his repressed guilt for his complicity in the 1972 episode at the Special Branch headquarters. The 'movie theater' sequence acts as a mirror of Mai's rape in *The Hamlet*, as happens with Binh's fictional torture and the Watchman's ordeal. Not incidentally, all these sequences are textually intertwined, and the parallels abound; for one, both the Saigon 'movie theater'

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Hollywood subplot, as Pat C. Hoy II notes in his review (686), is in all respects a narrative sharp turn. Here, the scholar and the novelist perfectly overlap, performing a veritable "slippage/border crossing" (according to Sara Chihaya and Sandra Kumamoto Stanley's respective definitions) between fiction and critique. In lieu of *Nothing Ever Dies*' severe timbre, here the tone is nothing but farcical; satirical imitation is Nguyen's weapon of choice. In the next chapters, we shall see how, why, and to what extent he turned a cinematic classic that tops every film critic's list into a jingoistic mess packed with trite characters and ready-made dialogues—one that no cinephile worth their salt would ever stand to watch. We shall tackle the fictive movie as a work of art *vis-à-vis* the real film it was purportedly based on, by reconstructing its plot, cast, and sources. Specifically, here I contend the following: 1) as opposed to what many critics hastily claim, *The Hamlet* is not *Apocalypse Now* as much as a Frankenstein monster of a movie made of bits and elements of as much as seven other films; 2) Nguyen's satire is not directed at the movie as much as at the legend that surrounds its troubled making; 3) the Auteur is not Francis Ford Coppola but a mix of himself and John Milius, and *The Hamlet* is not Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* but John Milius'. That is, *The Hamlet* is but a counterfactual *Apocalypse Now* partially based on the original 1969 screenplay—a poorer, more bellicose, and racist version of the same story. To prove the above, in the next three chapters I will make use of all the sources Nguyen mentions in the novel's "Postface" regarding Coppola, as well as Gérard Genette's theories of intertextuality, with particular regards to the latter's takes on satire, parody, and pastiche. All such speculations concur to foreground my argument that Nguyen's distortions are always to be seen as deliberate, as well as my idea of

flashback and the Bangkok movie theater scene in which the narrator watches *The Hamlet* equally feature a seated audience of passive onlookers.

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the ‘voice that carries everything,’ that is, that everything we read in *The Sympathizer* is to be seen as a reimagination rather than a chronicle.

3.2 *The Green Berets,* A film by Francis Ford Coppola

Apocalypse Now certainly needs no introduction. As many know, the plot of Coppola’s war epic revolves around one man’s quest to find another. Captain Benjamin Willard is tasked with reaching Colonel Walter E. Kurtz’s station deep into the Cambodian jungle, going up a snake-like river on an army’s riverine patrol boat (PBR). His assignment is to “terminate the Colonel’s command,” as his superiors would have it. Willard’s mission is a postmodern, psychedelic take on the classic archetype of the hero’s journey. In its background unfold the horrors and absurdities of the American involvement in Indochina, as listed by Willard’s raspy, hard-boiled voiceover. The movie paints a picture of the war in Vietnam as a “bad trip” (Comber 252) of the American mind. By means of Vittorio Storaro’s Caravaggio-style cinematography and Dean Tavoularis’ spectacular sets and sceneries, the movie turns Southeast Asia into a primeval landscape, a nightmarish jungle rife with burning crosses and pyramids of skulls. In fact, Coppola’s Vietnam is not a real place as much as a repository of Western imaginary. Its geography makes little to no sense, with nonexistent rivers, impossible distances, and place names signifying nothing. Its tiger-infested jungles are punctuated by giant carcasses of warplanes covered with moss, looming over the heroes as gateways to dark worlds. When the enemy strikes, it comes in the form of a rain of arrows, or of bursts of gunfire appearing out of nowhere. On his path, Willard faces hurdles and meets helpers to then find (and kill) Kurtz, whose “perverse integrity” (Comber and O’Brien) has got on the nerves of the army’s top brass

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as much as it has elicited Willard's admiration. Kurtz dies "like a soldier, standing up," with Willard being of two minds whether to call an Arc Light strike that would wipe any trace of his private empire from existence. With his last breaths, Kurtz, like the Conradian character he is based on, 'sums up and judges.' His dying words— "The horror! The horror!"—are his will and testament to his son; a testament entrusted to his killer, Willard, who might or might not decide to honor Kurtz's request, as *Heart of Darkness*' Marlow ultimately does not. Coppola famously struggled with the ending of the movie. His source for it was James George Frazer's retelling of the legend of *Rex Nemorensis*—the mythical priest who guarded Lake Nemi until a worthy opponent would supplant him in single combat. As with the *Rex*, Willard is immediately accepted as Kurtz's replacement by the tribe of Montagnards who form Kurtz's private army. Willard, however, decides not to take the baton and to put an end to Kurtz's kingdom. As the magically acquiescent crowd of natives lets him pass, the captain leaves the compound in the quiet of the nightfall, sparing them from the bombing.

Borrowing from John Bryant's theory, one could safely add *Apocalypse Now* to the ranks of those works of art that meet the definition of "fluid texts" (1). A fluid text is a literary object "that exist[s] in more than one version" (1). Mine could be seen as a stretch, as Bryant's definition specifically concerns written words rather than light effects and camera movements. However, when one considers that Coppola's movie is in itself an adaptation, an "extension of the creative processes initiated by the writer" (93)—that is, a part of the 'fluid' legacy of *Heart of Darkness*—there should be no trouble in reading *Apocalypse* under these lenses. In a way, *The Sympathizer* itself is also an extension of *Heart of Darkness*' fluid text. As a satire of *Apocalypse Now*, which is an adaptation of Conrad's novella, one could see Nguyen's book as an overgrown, rebellious branch which poses a threat to the stability of the tree it grows from. When it comes to Coppola, as Jeffrey Chown argues,

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the Romantic conception of the auteur as an individualistic artist seeking personal expression through an artistic medium is made ludicrous when we consider … Coppola sifting through a parade of influences including Joseph Conrad, John Milius, and Sir James Frazer, and then determining his ending by scrutinizing audience questionnaires and computer printouts. (9)

In other words, not only is *Apocalypse* a fluid text in that it adapts Conrad's novella, constituting thus an "act of cultural revision," as Bryant (93) would put it, but it is also susceptible to be read as a "narrative of revision" (113)—a multilayered body of work resulted by concerted efforts. To date, *Apocalypse* exists in three (to four) editions: the 1979 Theatrical Cut, its alternate 35mm version featuring end credits, the 2001's *Redux* extended edition, and the 2019 Final Cut. All such versions present significant plot differences. In the *Redux* edition, for instance, there are two additional scenes that take the story in new directions and ground it further down in the Western canon (Jachia). As screenwriter John Milius often stresses in interviews, Willard stealing Kilgore's surfboard, as well as the Medevac episode in which the PBR's crew exchanges fuel for sex with stranded *Playboy* models, are to be seen as references to the *Odyssey*—to the Cyclops and Sirens' episodes, respectively (Cowie 41, 88).[85] One of the playmates, Coppola reveals (2022), was originally supposed to read tarot cards to Willard. Thus, other than a Siren, the character would have recalled Homer's Circe and Tiresias—as well as T.S. Eliot's Madame Sosostris. Other unearthed sequences also concur to change the way the audience perceives Willard as a character, occasionally making him more caring and sympathetic towards his travel companions. And then of course there is the famed French plantation sequence, in which Coppola translates into film dialogues the old refrain made

[85] In the 1975 draft of the script the Medevac episode is also preceded by a small vignette involving water buffaloes marked with paint by the U.S Army, as to recall the sacred cattle of Helios in *Odyssey*'s Book XII.

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popular by Frances FitzGerald's *Fire in the Lake* (1972), according to which the Vietnamese communists were the ones who received the nationalist baton from their anti-Chinese ancestors and continued a thousand-year tradition of resistance against foreign invaders (Goscha 312; for a refutation of this nationalist myth see also Nguyen 2020).[86]

Apocalypse's "narrative of revision" ought also to include discarded storylines and plot possibilities. Coppola amassed 1.5 million feet of film, amounting to more than two hundred and fifty hours of unedited footage (Bergan 57). He long struggled to find a proper ending, aware as he was that "the questions that [the] story kept putting [him], [he] couldn't answer, yet [he] constructed the film in such a way that to not answer would be to fail" (Bahr and Hickenlooper). Even prior to that, one should also consider the various drafts stemmed from the original John Milius' script, which has undergone extensive re-writes since 1969. Milius' *Apocalypse* is a more chauvinistic, gung-ho, and unequivocally prowar version of the story, rooted in 1960s surf culture and in the darker elements of coeval youth movements. Its opening scene, as Jeeshan Gazi puts it, is "a confusion of signifiers that conflates hippie aesthetics with colonial brutality" (5). Milius' script features a long-haired, Charles Manson-like version of Kurtz that is quite different from Marlon Brando's take on the character. The rock-n-roll', drug-infused, climatic last stand with which he closed the script is of great importance to understanding *The Sympathizer*'s Hollywood subplot.

But on top of that, it is my contention that reading *Apocalypse Now* as a fluid text means more than just considering script revisions and scenes left on the cutting room floor. An ever-lasting mythos surrounds the making of the movie, a true epic-behind-the-epic. *Apocalypse* is a Hollywood miracle, a 30-million-dollar disaster turned masterpiece, a risky bet that paid off.

[86] Not incidentally, FitzGerald's book is the same text that Nguyen's pseudo-Coppola—the Auteur—would cite as one of his sources for understanding Vietnamese "psychology" (126).

158:3164409246

Flipping through the sources detailing its making feels like reading Dostoevsky's *The Gambler*. On the eve of the long-waited 1979 U.S. summer opening, Coppola told one journalist that he felt he had "half-blow[ed his] personal life just to make a movie," and that he was "always going to bed in a cold sweat" (Philips and Hill, 49). Industry insiders read the production of the movie "as a recapitulation of the Vietnam War" (Chong 2012, 154), with Coppola himself encouraging such a comparison on several occasions. *Apocalypse*'s troubled history has been well documented (Alonge, Bergan, Chown, Cowie, Halstead, Larwood, Rennell, Sellers) to the point of becoming the stuff of film legend. Eleanor Coppola's diary (1979) and the documentary *Hearts of Darkness* (1991) well chronicle the logistical nightmare it was. "The degree of personal risk Coppola took with his film," Jeffrey Chown argues, "cannot be minimized" (146). To bring the project to completion Coppola risked going bankrupt, being forced as he was to mortgage his Napa Valley house and winery to raise the necessary funds. All sorts of impediments plagued the production: a budget spiraling out of control, a shooting going wildly over schedule, a typhoon, a last-minute recast, a lead actor almost killed by a heart attack—not to mention an 'auteur' struggling to figure out a way to end the film while in the very process of shooting it. The history behind *Apocalypse*'s making transpires the 'fluid' nature of Coppola's war epic. Depending on shooting circumstances, the movie could easily turn out to be way different from how it looks today. In fact, *Apocalypse* was largely improvised on the spot. As cinematographer Vittorio Storaro would have it, the film changed every day—and the filmmakers changed with it (2016). At one point, "[t]he Milius screenplay had been almost jettisoned," with Coppola typing "fresh pages, fresh scenes, sometimes just fresh lines," and giving the actors daily call sheets marked as "Scenes Unknown" (Cowie 71). As Coppola once told his wife, "I don't make the person play the part, I make the part play the person" (Coppola 1991, 157). Indeed, Marlon Brando famously based his monologue on cue cards, making up

159:1411421645

lines as Coppola whispered him comments through an earpiece (Cowie 80). Had Brando not read *Heart of Darkness* last minute and decided otherwise, the movie would have featured a haired, overweight deuteragonist called Colonel Leighley instead of the now-iconic, dim-lit bald head of Kurtz emerging from the darkness.

As it may be inferred, a large literature details the facts and anecdotes I am listing. In the "Acknowledgments" of *The Sympathizer*, Viet Thanh Nguyen makes reference to a great variety of sources, drawing from articles, biographies, and interviews. These sources add on to *Apocalypse*'s "narrative of revisions," providing a picture of infinite possibilities, of what-ifs, of hundreds of never-seen *Apocalypses*. For instance, had Coppola not fired the initial lead, Harvey Keitel (Cowie 53), Willard would have been a more active, all-of-a-piece tough guy, instead of the "passive onlooker" (Bergan 55) portrayed by Martin Sheen. Or again, had Coppola not decided to follow cinematographer Vittorio Storaro's advice on editing during post-production, the movie would have followed a different pace, possibly a more conventional one (Storaro 2016). The fictional movie featured in *The Sympathizer*, however, is much more than a counterfactual *Apocalypse Now*. Notwithstanding some (basic) points of contact, their plots could not differ more. In *The Hamlet* there is neither a river nor a Cambodian temple in sight. The iconic, masterfully shot helicopter battle at the center of *Apocalypse*'s first section is moved to the rear end and it is described as a generic, war film climatic final set piece. Apart from a couple of obvious references (Beethoven's Fifth in lieu of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries"; a character's last words echoing Kurtz's), the only apparent connection is the fact that *The Hamlet* is a Vietnam War movie that features two male protagonists. Most critics gloss over the discrepancies between *Apocalypse* and the Auteur's cinematic oeuvre, seemingly coming to the haste conclusion that the second is but a "hyperbolic send-up" (Xiang, 421) of the first (Britto 2019, August 2018, Chong 2018, Gandhi, Kumamoto Stanley, Prabhu, Song).

160:6069364196

In light of this, here I posit that *The Hamlet* is not a "satire-cum-critique" (Boyagoda) of *Apocalypse Now*, as much as a "satire-cum-critique" of *its making*, heavily informed by Achebe's critique of Conrad. Nguyen's "searing indictment against *Apocalypse Now*" (Kumamoto Stanley 291) is performed more by way of dismantling its artistic aura than by parodying its plot. Put simply, rather than the spoof of a movie, Nguyen's is an elaborate act of sabotage directed against the myth that surrounds it.

To commit it, he drew from more than *Apocalypse*'s fluid text. *The Hamlet*, as he puts it, is "a mash up of the greatest hits of the American imagination about … Vietnam" (2016d), a Frankenstein monster of a movie whose limbs are taken from as many as seven other cinematic retellings of the war. The general layout is modeled on that sub-strand of Alamo-like movies meant to invoke the 1968 Battle of Khe Sanh, comprised of B-pictures such as *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978) or *The Siege of Firebase Gloria* (1989), in which a besieged American compound "is very like a fort in Indian territory" (Cawley, 75). Tropes, scenes, and characters can also be traced back to *Platoon* (1986) (the young and naïve protagonist), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) (the motorcycle's mugging), *Casualties of War* (1989) (Mai's rape as a central plot point), and maybe *Rambo: First Blood part II* (1985) (Mai's death as the impetus behind American revenge). The two-dimensional baddie, King Cong, is purportedly based on the cartoonish villains seen in the *Missing in Action* series. *The Hamlet*'s main template, however, is undeniably John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968). The latter is a widely disregarded piece of anticommunist propaganda designed to put the then-ongoing American military intervention under a sympathetic light. In hindsight, *The Green Berets* was more an isolated case than a precursor. Between 1964 and 1977, Sylvia Shin Huey Chong observes, "studios and producers shied away from financing any venture that did not more than obliquely reference the war" (2012, 127). *The Green Berets* sticks out like a sore thumb amongst the cultural landscape of

161:8406834804

the late 1960s. In the midst of such an increasingly unpopular conflict, Wayne came out with a work so transparently rightwing that it did not fail to provoke strong reactions by antiwar audiences worldwide (Ghislotti 23). In the movie, as Leo Cawley notes, "Wayne showed what a difficult time America was having in disentangling from its World War II self" (74). "The film," Cawley continues, "boiled special warfare down into a formula that is basically a Western … The Americans are the good guys, the Vietcong are the bad guys, and the peasants are the frightened townsfolk who need protection and the rule of law" (74). Not incidentally, while *Apocalypse Now* went on to earn general praise and is still universally revered, *The Green Berets* is by no means any critic's darling. Intriguingly, though, both movies revolve around the exploits of a Special Forces colonel. *Apocalypse* is set between Saigon, Nha Trang, the Delta, and Cambodia. In *The Green Berets*, the action takes place in Central Vietnam, as in Milius' original script (and as in *The Hamlet*). The heroes' task is to secure the construction of a military base, aptly called "Dodge City," protected by bamboo spike barricades not unlike those historically used in the Strategic Hamlet Program. Throughout the movie, American air power and military strength are extolled as benign forces protecting the innocent South Vietnam from communist aggression. Near the Green Berets' camp lies a Montagnard hamlet, whose innocent villagers are ruthlessly massacred by the enemy. Their gruesome death acts as a catalyst for American rage. In particular, the murder of a young girl serves the purpose of winning over a skeptical journalist with left-wing sympathies. The movie culminates with the hostile extraction of the movie's big baddie, the sleazy communist official Pham Son Ti, in a heist sequence that sees the only prominent female character—Lin—used as a sexual bait. As in *Firebase Gloria*, the character of the Vietnamese orphan is key, "acting as the conductor for the sentimental energy that transforms imperialism into a beneficent paternalism" (Comber 250). The movie ends with a highly ridiculed blooper involving Wayne's character, Colonel

162:3285109339

Kirby, and the orphan, Hamchuck, walking hand-in-hand in front of an impossible sunset over the South China Sea; impossible, as Central Vietnam's coastline faces east.

One could virtually superimpose these last lines with a synopsis of *The Hamlet*. In *The Sympathizer*, the reader learns about the latter through the narrator's recollections, scattered around both sides of the diegetic confession. Accordingly, the movie events are presented following the fictive shooting order rather than a linear storyline. The plot is centered around the exploits of a blond sergeant, 21-year-old Jay Bellamy, "a Green Beret who has to save a hamlet" (*TS*, 119). Bellamy is a preppy boy full of ideals tasked with training local militiamen (as in *Go Tell the Spartans*). The titular hamlet is full of communist infiltrators, "friendly faces only masks for calculating wills" (122) (again, as in *Spartans*). In his mission to protect the village from King Cong, Bellamy comes under the wings of a seasoned Korean War veteran, Captain Will Shamus. Shamus conflates Wayne's character in *Green Berets* with Burt Lancaster's in *Spartans*, and both with Kurtz. Not incidentally, two out of three of them also served in Korea. If the pun behind Will Shamus' name ("will shame us") is on the nose, the sound of Bellamy's "flowery name" could allude to Brando's initial choice of having Kurtz named "Leighley" (Ondaatje 69). The villain's moniker, on the other hand, manifestly hints at one of American pop culture's most recognizable embodiments of alterity. Nguyen may have got the idea from a passage of Peter Cowie's *The Apocalypse Now Book*: "The Green Berets, Martin Sheen has said, referred to the VC as, quite simply, 'Kong', big and powerful" (160). The novelty of King Kong, Jean Baudrillard argues, is the fact that for the first time the monster is "wrenched from his jungle and transformed into a music-hall star" (133). Kong, Baudrillard says, heralds an unprecedented "inversion of meaning" (134). For the first time since the days of medieval bestiaries, "all inhumanity has gone over to the side of men, all humanity has gone over to the side of captive bestiality" (134). However, still a beast King Kong is—a monster

163:6110484823

out of control unleashing hell on American landmarks. Perhaps, with this allusion Nguyen wanted to suggest that Hollywood turned the VCs into movie monsters in two different ways: either as dangerous entities best kept in the primeval jungle from which they come (as in *The Green Berets*), or as misunderstood creatures of pure will forced to revolt against oppressors (as in *Apocalypse Now*). One thing is for sure though: as with King Kong, Hollywood has long transformed the Việt Cộng into an American fantasy. Indeed, if one considers the role they play in *Miss Saigon*, a (controversial) Broadway staple based on Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* and set in wartime South Vietnam, the Vietnamese communists have now truly become 'music-hall stars,' as King Kong did in his own time. Add to this the racist subtexts of the original 1933 movie and you will see how *The Hamlet*, in Sylvia Chong's words, merges the war in Vietnam "with an entire line of wars, colonialisms, and exploitations that tie different Asian American groups to each other and to other oppressed populations of color" (2018, 373).

The Auteur's movie sees King Cong placing his battle-hardened guerrillas in the hills around the titular hamlet, to then commit all kinds of atrocity against civilians. The action presumably starts with Bellamy arriving in Saigon and being mugged by a local who steals his camera and run away (mirroring Joker and Rafterman's mishap in *Full Metal Jacket*), and with Shamus being summoned by a general who assigns him to the village as retribution for having exposed a corrupt allied colonel (*Go Tell the Spartans,* again). Bucolic country scenes are interspersed with training sequences, motivational speeches, and night skirmishes (*Green Berets, Spartans, Firebase Gloria*), while American soldiers sporting ironic catchphrases on their helmets (*Full Metal Jacket, Platoon*) build the village's fortifications, and King Cong's men ruthlessly slit the throat of a little girl in retaliation (*Green Berets*). On the narrator's advice, three Asian characters join the all-American cast: Binh/Benny, Mai, and Danny Boy—three orphans adopted by the Green Berets. "Each racial stereotype comes in two models,"

164:3510912633

argued Jeffery Paul Chan and Frank Chin back in 1972, "the acceptable model and the unacceptable model" (65). The three orphans unmistakably belong in the first category. They are walking Orientalist fantasies on their own, the perfect foil to King Cong. Danny Boy is the mascot, *The Hamlet*'s version of Hamchuck or of *Firebase Gloria*'s Vietnamese orphan. They are symbolic stand-ins for the country and its populace—vulnerable, guileless, and in need of American protection. In both *Green Berets* and *Firebase Gloria,* the kid mascots are taken under the wing of a 'Bellamy,' a young G.I. who will ultimately die to save them. The symbolism is crystal clear: the naïve soldier epitomizes the sacrifice of the 58,000 Americans who fell trying to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people. Intriguingly, however, in *The Hamlet* Bellamy lives and takes the orphan abroad, thus fulfilling America's fantasy of 'saving the Vietnamese from themselves.' Binh is the next immediate step in *The Hamlet*'s stereotype ladder, the docile native willing to become Americanized. Nicknamed Benny by the Green Berets, Binh "fits into [that] long tradition of close friendship between Anglo-American and nonwhite men [made of characters] like the Lone Ranger's Tonto and the Green Hornet's Kato, an unthreatening, domesticated, emasculated, and completely loyal companion" (Marchetti 151).[87] King Cong has him and his African American equivalent, sergeant Pete Attucks (a descendent of Crispus Attucks, "the first famous black man to sacrifice his life for the cause of white people," *TS* 160) gruesomely killed, with Binh tied on a wooden plank and waterboarded by four VCs. Mai, for her part, is a classic example of 'Lotus Blossom Baby'—a passive, delicate, ultra-feminine love interest to whom it is assigned "the role of expendability in situations of illicit Asian-white love" (Tajima, 311). Her ill-fated relationship with Bellamy

[87] *The Lone Ranger* was a Western TV series that aired on ABC during the 1950, centered around the exploits of a masked crime fighter. Tonto was the Ranger's wise and loyal Native American sidekick. *The Green Hornet* is a franchise that sees the eponymous vigilante backed by a martial arts expert of Asian descent, Kato. Most notably, Kato was the character that launched Bruce Lee's career in the U.S., as the Hong Kong-born legend entered stardom by portraying him in the 1960s one-season *Green Hornet* TV show.

165:3817101666

fits perfectly into the large family tree of Hollywood tales of cursed miscegenation. As Gina Marchetti demonstrates, this manifold strand of narratives is old as the film industry itself. "Portions of Hollywood plot formulas involving interracial romances between Asian and Caucasian characters," Marchetti argues, "resurface and recombine into different patterns that evoke earlier rape, seduction, captivity, salvation, sacrifice, or assimilation patterns" (203). Hollywood's Vietnam is rife with instances of what Marchetti defines "the Pocahontas paradigm" (90), that is, the archetypical story of a native "beatified traitor" (90) that through romantic intercourse comes to accept the conqueror's civilization "and the inevitable conquest of her own supposedly backward and inferior people" (89). The first example that comes to mind is Co Bao, the female agent who helps Rambo in *First Blood II*. Despite Co Bao's hope of following Rambo in the U.S., she dies an untimely death in the hero's arms, following the unstated "truism that forbidden interracial love leads to tragedy" (140). In fact, virtually all Hollywood Vietnam narratives have Vietnamese women serving as "disposable tokens of the cruelties of war" (99), either as mute cadavers or as passive victims of sexual violence. As the real war it depicts, Hollywood's Vietnam is often marked by a distinctly gendered kind of violence. "These narratives," continues Marchetti, "silence the Asian woman from the outset, making her a beautiful corpse for the visual contemplation of the camera [and thus confirming] the passivity of Vietnam metaphorically" (100). Hence, at some point all Vietnamese women have to fade away from the story; either out of self-sacrifice, as newfound Mesdames Butterfly entrusting white lovers with their Amerasian children, or by someone else's hand (American or Vietnamese, depending on the director's politics). Their deaths perpetuate the image of a "feminized Vietnam" (108) whose sufferings legitimizes (or discredits) American military involvement in a variety of ways.

166:1685392821

Accordingly, in *The Hamlet* Mai is stole from the arms of Bellamy and raped by the VCs on King Cong's orders. Here, once again Nguyen recenters the violence. He stages a reenactment of Brian De Palma's *Casualties of War* with communist rapists instead of American G.I.'s, as to bring back Hollywood's Vietnam to its unspoken racist premises, thus doing away with the moral tricks of the (presumedly) liberal politics of prestige cinema. Mai's rape is a graphic yet finely made sequence that elicits revulsion by means of the Vittorio Storaro-like "painterly Renaissance shading" (*TS*, 275) of the cinematography. Her suffering sparks the fury of the Green Berets (as with Rambo in *First Blood II*), who wipe out the enemy in the final set piece of the movie. First, Shamus calls in a white phosphorous strike to destroy the village cemetery where a squad of suicide VCs has been hiding (*Spartans*). Then, a climactic firefight ensues at King Cong's hideout (*Green Berets*). The scene combines *Apocalypse*'s iconic helicopter attack with the more generic, run-of-the-mill final battles omnipresent in war cinema (*Platoon*, *Firebase Gloria*, *Spartans*, *First Blood II*). Shamus and Bellamy ride the choppers like "airborne steeds" (*TS*, 278), merging Wayne's Colonel Kirby in *Green Berets* with Robert Duvall's Colonel Kilgore in *Apocalypse*. Then, the Green Berets go on a killing spree in a conclusive, cathartic "Old Testament slaughter" (*TS*, 275) performed with the help of their KA-BAR knives. After the battle, the reader is presented with a subtle callback to Coppola's movie:

SHAMUS

You hear that?

BELLAMY

I don't hear anything.

SHAMUS

167:4530777934

Exactly. It's the sound of peace.

(*TS*, 170)

Movie fans worldwide are familiar with the "smell of victory" famously invoked by Kilgore in a scene of *Apocalypse* clearly not to be interpreted as serious. With the memory of the Saigon evacuation still fresh on their minds, 1979 audiences would have appreciated the bitter irony of hearing an American field officer in Vietnam waxing about "victory." Kilgore is heavily implied to be seen as a foil to Kurtz, his shenanigans and devil-may-care attitude juxtaposed as they are to Kurtz's "perverse integrity," to his warrior-poet ways, lucid awareness, and ascetic style. "The film viewer," Margot Norris argues, "is forced … to choose between nightmares" (732). On the one hand, there is "the corporate … ideologically rationalized and morally deceptive violence of the military machine" embodied by Kilgore and the Nha Trang's higher-ups. On the other, the "blatant, undisguised, ideologically stripped and frank barbarism that [Kurtz] turns on the Vietnam War as the military's 'unvarnished mirror.'" In *Apocalypse*, Kilgore is depicted as a liminal figure, who sets a trial to be passed. He is the first threshold on Willard's path, an obtuse yet dangerous Polyphemus to be duped in order for the journey to continue. In *The Hamlet*, on the other hand, with a synesthetic overlap the smell of victory becomes "the sound of peace," turning *Apocalypse*'s liminal episode into a conventional, self-serious John Wayne ending. Here, Kilgore's line becomes Kurtz's, and *Apocalypse*'s surreal color palette of psychedelia makes way to the solemn, unintentionally comic atmosphere of a traditional war movie where country-loving values are upheld and made sacred. Come to think of it, both Kilgore and Shamus go by the name of Will—if the first one "will kill," the second "will shame." Thus, in *The Hamlet* corporate violence and frank barbarism become

168:8519760418

undistinguishable. In Nguyen's fantasy of revenge, the two nightmares become one: Shamus, a sort of 'Kurtzgore' invested with John Wayne values, embodies both.

Then, *The Hamlet* ends with a last scare in an unexpected twist reminiscent of *Go Tell the Spartans*, where, as in Herodotus' account of the Battle of Thermopylae which gives the title to the film, the army is betrayed by a local, none other than the madam who runs the village brothel tries a sneak attack on Bellamy and Shamus. "Mama San" blasts the latter with her dead son's AK-47, whereupon Bellamy quickly retaliates by filling her with lead. The madam's execution clearly points out to the 'hyperrealist' visual solutions typical of Hollywood's Vietnam, as per which "[t]he graphic effects of violence, plus the camera's relentless … stare seem to equate visibility with truth" (Chong 2012, 138). "Mama San" goes out in a slow-motion death ballet that strongly recalls the demise of the female sniper in *Full Metal Jacket*, with fake blood spurts and a "quick montage … highlight[ing] the body's loss of control over … its movements" (138) clearly designed to elicit audience satisfaction. For his part, Shamus' dying words are the last (and more obvious) callback to Coppola. The captain's last gasp is a parodic reversal of the Kurtzian motto "the horror, the horror," addressed to the woman who bested him: "The whore! The whore!" (*TS*, 171). Bellamy avenges Shamus by calling in an Arc Light strike that makes a clean sweep of King Cong's lair, as Willard does with Kurtz's in John Milius' *Apocalypse*, and as it happens in the alternate 35mm version of Coppola's movie. Even in this case, the violence is recentered from American to Vietnamese instead that from American to American. In the Auteur's movie, Americans do not fight themselves because 'the enemy is in them.' With *The Hamlet*, Nguyen sets the record straight, flushing out all arthouse smoke and mirrors. The Movie's message is plain and almost too clear—'we have to save the good yellow people by killing the bad yellow people.' In the final images, a crying Danny Boy hovers over the devastated landscape of Vietnam bound for St. Louis, Missouri, where he will

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be adopted by Bellamy's family and given a golden retriever. In lieu of Colonel Kirby investing Hamchuck with the titular green beret in the feel-good ending of John Wayne's movie, *The Hamlet*'s little orphan is "crowned with a Yankees cap and airlifted into the heavens" (152). Thus, Nguyen swaps the symbols of American military might with those of American soft power, as in a neocolonial context—he suggests—such domains often overlap. Finally, the credits roll—contrary to what happens in *Apocalypse Now* that lacks credits altogether.[88]

To craft this miscellany of American war fantasies, Nguyen drew not only from movie plots but especially from behind-the-scenes trivia. Equally illustrative of his critique/satire project is *The Hamlet*'s fictive cast. In designing the characters-behind-the-characters, Nguyen reversed the ratio of stereotypes. While the two white protagonists, the Thespian and the Idol, are two-dimensional cartoons going by names-function, the trio of "coethnic proxies" portraying the three orphans, as Sylvia Shin Huey Chong (2018, 373) demonstrates, is meant to evoke real-life performers from the 1950s-60s. This "partial genealogy of Asian American actors," Chong maintains, shows how even the cliches of Vietnam War films "have their own venerable prehistory" (374). Based on their descriptions, Danny Boy, James Yoon (Binh), and Asia Soo (Mai), Chong argues, strongly recall Patrick Adiarte, James Shigeta, and Nancy Kwan—all artists caught up in the pitfalls of racist typecasting. While Asia Soo's name, Chong contends, may be seen as a nod to porn star Asia Carrera—and maybe to actor Jack Soo, who stars in *Green Berets*—James Yoon's given name could also point out to James Hong (who plays a part in *Spartans*), who had spent decades navigating Hollywood's minefield while

[88] After the first summer screenings, *Apocalypse* was released in 35mm format. This version greatly differed from the original 70mm presentation in that it featured a never-before-seen end-credit sequence showing the destruction of Kurtz's compound. The sequence's filming lasted nine days and featured aerial footage with an infrared camera ("Vittorio Storaro"). Contrary to what happens in *The Sympathizer*, the hazardous shot claimed no victims, intended or otherwise. Then, Coppola scrapped the end credits altogether by replacing them with an opera libretto distributed in theaters. Thus, the Theatrical Cut, the Redux version, and the Final Cut all feature no credits. However—for a change—the scene in *The Sympathizer* in which the narrator watches the movie in a Bangkok theater is not an impossibility, as he definitely could have watched the 35mm version released in Thailand.

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taking up as many undistinguishable 'Asian Everyman' roles he could. When it comes to the leading stars, though, it is a different story. The two top names on *The Hamlet*'s bill are purported to stand in for *Apocalypse Now*'s main stars. However, I do not endorse Chong's clear-cut assessment of the Idol and the Thespian as "thinly veiled references" to Martin Sheen and Marlon Brando. Their ages, for one thing, do not add up. At the time of the filming, both the final Willard (Sheen) and the original choice (Harvey Keitel) were gritty forty-somethings, as opposed to the 21-year-old Idol, who is said to be a world-famous teen heartthrob.[89] Moreover, neither of them was an Elvis, Frank Sinatra, or David Bowie-like singer-actor who rose to stardom thanks to "a bubble-gum pop hit" (TS, 151), like the Idol is said to have done. The same, in a way, goes for the character. Bellamy's backstory looks nothing like Willard's: "He's dropped out of Harvard and run far from his St. Louis home, his millionaire daddy, and his fur-cloaked mother" (122). This reminds one more of Chris Taylor, the character played by Martin Sheen's son, Charlie, in Oliver Stone's *Platoon*. Like Bellamy, Taylor quit college and enlisted out of idealism. Willard's is not a coming-of-age arc; in understanding Kurtz's drive and "unsound methods" he but finds confirmation of his preexisting inner demons. On the opposite end, Bellamy's is a classic narrative of lost American innocence. He starts the movie as a clean-shaven college dropout full of good intentions, not as a returning veteran casting thousand-yard stares at the camera. It is as if Nguyen had merged the two Sheens into one character, and then, perhaps, fused both with *Full Metal Jacket*'s loudmouth protagonist, Private Joker, who could also be a candidate when it comes to Bellamy's war-makes-you-a-man character arc. Bellamy's relationship with Danny Boy, on the other hand, unmistakably mirrors that between *Green Berets*' Sergeant Petersen and Hamchuck. And if we decide to stay

[89] The same, for that matter, can be said of all those other actors who passed on *Apocalypse*, as none among the potential, counterfactual Willards (Steve McQueen, Al Pacino, Jack Nicholson) was younger than 35.

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within *Apocalypse*'s credits list, Bellamy's clean face resembles more that of Sam Bottoms' Lance B. Johnson, a young and blond California surfer thrown into war's hell, than Martin Sheen's hallucinated look. In short, Bellamy's no Willard.

In fairness, one should not forget that *The Hamlet* is less modeled on prestige cinema and more on B-movies. Overall, Jay Bellamy exudes a markedly 1950s-60s 'good warrior,' Steve McQueen allure, albeit combined with New Right, Chuck Norris-style trigger-happy violence. If one goes past the gore, the snappy one-liners, and the antihero antics, *The Hamlet* is a black-and-white, unambiguous American fairy tale far removed from the highbrow nuances underlying the works of Cimino, Coppola, and Kubrick. The comparison is even more unfavorable when it comes to the Thespian and Will Shamus. As a character, the latter is described as a rough, cigar-smoking Burt Lancaster/John Wayne type completely lacking Kurtz's gravitas and charisma. However, if Shamus is not Kurtz, the Thespian is unquestionably Brando. The fictional movie star is described as a Broadway-trained method actor who never breaks character—one who sleeps in a military tent, walks carrying a loaded gun, and is always dressed up in uniform between takes. One of his quirks is also based on Brando's co-star Dennis Hopper's on-set habit of "never taking a shower" (Sellers). When the narrator reminds the Thespian that "no soldier ever passed up the opportunity for …a bath" (*TS* 171), the star retorts that "[i]t is exactly because no soldier has done this that [he is]." Judging from the sources listed in the "Acknowledgments," it is not clear how much research Nguyen did specifically put in on Marlon Brando. However, this would add up with Frank Snepp's appraisal of Brando as one "fetishistically interested in Vietnam" because of his guilt for having escaped the draft during the Korean War (2022).[90] Be that as it may, the Thespian's hubristic sound bite is consistent

[90] Snepp also provided me with a personal anecdote that reflects Brando's 'fetishistic' interest. At the time he and Brando were working together on a movie script. Once, the two of them had a disagreement regarding the

172:2222754209

with the Auteur's contention that "[a] great work of art is something as real as reality itself, and sometimes even more real than the real" (*TS* 172). In *The Sympathizer,* Nguyen transforms Coppola's famous 1979 Cannes' speech, in which the filmmaker declared that "[m]y film … is not about Vietnam [, i]t *is* Vietnam" (Bergan 53) into a pep-talk directed to the crew:

> Long after this war is forgotten, when its existence is a paragraph in a schoolbook students won't even bother to read, and everyone who survived it is dead, their bodies dust, their memories atoms, their emotions no longer in motion, this work of art will still shine so brightly it will not just be about the war but it will be the war. (172)

In *The Sympathizer,* slogans occasionally become double-edged weapons. In the final chapter of the Coda, the narrator reverses Hồ Chí Minh's motto ("Nothing is more important than independence and freedom", "Không có gì quý hơn độc lập, tự do," a phrase engraved in letters of gold in the marble of hundreds of statues and mausoleums across Vietnam) by putting the emphasis of the word "nothing." In doing so he concludes that the revolution was for nothing—that by trading a kleptocracy for a Stalinist regime the oppressed played a joke on themselves by becoming oppressors. In the final epiphany, language itself falls apart and fails the speakers. Words are being deprived of their meanings to become "empty suit[s] turned inside out" (360) through endless repetition. Something similar takes place here, with Nguyen turning Coppola's brash outburst on its head to the point of proving it true in the worst possible way. To many people around the world, *Apocalypse Now* is indeed synonymous with the war in Vietnam. Geopolitics and power dynamics have led Hollywood dictating the way in which this conflict is remembered. Over the years, its memory has clotted about the iconographies of American cinema. No NLF officer ever used Russian roulette as a punishment, no Air Cav division ever

possibility of imagining "how it is to kill someone." "No, you can't, Marlon," was Snepp's reply, "Never imagine that you can imagine it. Never even begin to believe you can" (2022).

173:8735340838

attacked a village blaring out Wagner—yet *this* are the Vietnam War images most people are familiar with. Coppola, Nguyen implies, was completely right—over time, his movie truly became "Vietnam." As the narrator concedes, "art eventually survives war" (*TS* 172). Coppola managed to overlay his fantasies on top of collective memory by crafting a cinematic object so brilliant that its shine blinded everybody. The difference lies in the fact that Nguyen reads this circumstance not only in light of Coppola's prowess but especially in view of the unjust power dynamics at work behind it. The fact that a movie can be synonymous with a war, he argues, is not a testament to its greatness as much as to the crying disproportion between the two "industries of memory" that made this fact possible.

However, there is more to the Hollywood subplot than that. At its core lies the idea that the quality gap between a good war movie and a shoddy one may be shallower than expected. Consider for instance the way in which Vietnamese communists are depicted both in *The Hamlet* and in *Apocalypse Now.* King Cong is a black-and-white baddie, a pure creature of rightwing, prowar filmic renditions like the *Missing in Action* saga. The lineage of such a stock character, the 'Oriental villain,' can be traced back to a rich Hollywood tradition, that of 'Yellow Peril' stereotypes meant to embody American anxieties regarding Asians as unassimilable aliens. Yellow Peril stereotypes predate the birth of cinema, going back, as Yến Lê Espiritu reminds us, to "hundreds of garishly illustrated and garishly written [1880s] dime novels" (2007, 176) depicting Chinatown districts as dangerous underworlds filled with degeneracy. Oriental villains are a recurrent trend in the history of American popular culture. The evil grin of Dr. Fu Manchu still looms over the collective imagination, with generations of white actors in yellowface donning the silk robes of the mustached crime boss. With the rise of U.S. imperialism, Oriental villains quickly poured into war cinema. "The fiction of the Yellow Peril stereotypes," Espiritu notes, "became intertwined with the fact of the United States' war

174:1155209748

with Japan, and the two became one in the mind-set of the American public" (2007, 177). After 1945, the Asian fascists took a backseat to the Red Scare. First, "Communist Chinese evildoers replaced the Japanese monsters" (177), then to make way to the ultra-determined, ever-elusive Hollywood VCs embodied by the various 'King Congs' of the 1970-80s. Apparently, there is no such character in *Apocalypse Now*. However, if one digs deep enough, it would be impossible not to see the parallels between the bloodthirsty, pantomime enemies depicted in B-movies and the apocryphal tale of Vietnamese communist guerrillas cutting the arms of vaccinated children told by Colonel Kurtz in Coppola's movie.[91] In a way, King Cong is a perfect merge of the two. As stated in the Auteur's screenplay, "nothing makes King Cong lick his lips like the ferric scent of the white man's blood." In this respect, he is reminiscent of a Chuck Norris villain. However, it is also said that King Cong "will die for his country, which is more than can be said for most Americans" (121), and that is the basic message underlying every version of *Apocalypse Now*, released or otherwise. The reason why America lost, says *Apocalypse*, is because she was not ready to fully embrace 'the horror,' to go native, to assimilate to the enemy mindset. "[T]hey are noble … Because they fight with their guts, like animals," says Kurtz in the 1975 draft of the script, "And for an idea! That's rich. We fight with ingenious machines and fire, like Gods, and for nothing." And again: "Look into the jungle … You can't — it's too terrible. You have to smear yourself with warpaint to look at it … That's why warpaint was invented. Then it becomes your jungle." Accordingly, Willard 'kung fu-fighting' in his hotel room or donning 'brownface' when emerging from the mud in the final scene, Sylvia Chong argues, are both attempts at embracing the same "primordial violence"

[91] This story was concocted by Fred Rexer, the Green Beret friend of John Milius who helped inspire the character of Willard. Since Peter Cowie reported the anecdote as veracious evidence in his *The Apocalypse Now Book* (2000, 158), this American *miles gloriosus* eventually managed to fool even philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who took it as true and mentioned it in an essay of his (McNeil).

175:5934235779

that led to American failure in Vietnam (2012, 173). Willard's, Margot Norris concurs, is "an … experience of orientalizing himself" (1998, 736). As Chong demonstrates, the whole Hollywood POW/MIA subgenre, a strand of rescue narratives centered on American soldiers left behind, is equally permeated with this kind of "yellowface minstrelsy sans yellowface" (2012, 252). Flicks like *First Blood Part II* and *Missing in Action*, Chong maintains, entail "a triumphant cannibalization of the oriental other under the banner of white American masculinity" (2012, 254). These movies, Richard Slotkin argues, obsessively rehearse the old formula of the captivity narrative; they are "like rituals for transforming the trauma of defeat into a symbolic victory" (1998, 649). Their protagonists get to "play the war movie in reverse," as ragtag rebels who defeat "a rigid, regularized, totalitarian enemy who has [them] outnumbered and outgunned" (1998, 649). A key feature of this "film falsification of war," Leo Cawley maintains, "is the importance of the individual, the solitary hero of American myth whose lineage goes back to James Fenimore Cooper's *Deerslayer*" (71). John Rambo is the quintessential American icon of cannibalized alterity, an "imperialist guerrilla … who rejects … technology to obliterate truckloads of the enemy with bow and arrow" (Studlar and Desser 108). His own attire appropriates Native American iconography and gestures towards the myths of the American frontier. Rambo is a modern-day Daniel Boone, a "man who knows Indians," as Slotkin would put it—one who, as in the frontier days, "could beat the Indians at their own game, live on less food, kill more animals, and even take more scalps" (1973, 403). Ironically, Gaylin Studlar and David Desser note, Rambo's "appropriation of the iconography of the noble savage also permits [him] to symbolically evoke the Indian as romanticized victim of past government deceitfulness disguised as progress (that is, genocide)" (108). In the MIA/POW movie strand, the American veteran becomes a wounded warrior that restores the honor of the nation by beating "the Indians" at their own game.

176:4162153202

Prestige cinema, for its part, does not fare much better. Rambo and Braddock sneak on their enemies using guerrilla tactics and becoming one with the jungle. Willard ends the movie as a shirtless, mud-covered warrior brandishing a machete, and Kurtz runs his kingdom from an abandoned, Angkor Wat-esque Cambodian temple adorned with (native) corpses, thus making the "cannibalization of the oriental other" invoked by Chong quite literal. In all these cases, the white American self wins by using the enemies' own 'oriental' barbarity against them. As with the Cuban subplot of Coppola's *The Godfather Part II*, in which the emphasis is put on the drive and motivation of Castro's supporters, *Apocalypse Now* suggests that in Vietnam the communists won the war because of their moral fortitude and lack of scruple. Their immovable faith, their unyielding will to resist, and their brutality in combat are extolled as warlike virtues which Americans would have vitally needed when facing them. In his monologue, Kurtz celebrates the "strength" of those who manage to put aside humanity in the name of a cause. But what is the difference—Nguyen contends—between commending and condemning inhumanity, if the truth of the matter remains that one's enemy is inhuman? Considering this, even an arthouse movie whose realization was hindered by the Department of Defense on the grounds of giving the army a bad rep (Robb 141) can be made to seen as "a work of propaganda" (*TS* 166), a product of the industrial military complex, "a sequel to our war and a prequel to the next one" (173). The unequivocal prowar message of *Missing in Action* and the "nebulous fence-sitting stance" (Tomasulo 157) of *Apocalypse*, the Hollywood subplot shows, are more alike than most cinephiles would realize. All things considered, the message underlying both, Nguyen insinuates, is always the same. For all its sophistries, *Apocalypse*'s moral is that savagery trumps innocence, and that next time we shall take notes.

However, we should not forget how *daring* such a perspective is. From a film historian's point of view, to utter the names of Francis Coppola and Chuck Norris in the same sentence is

177:5407895011

pure blasphemy. Nguyen knows that well—in fact, this is precisely the point he makes. In comparing what Kurtz says (that is, Marlon Brando's magistral improv routine) with the sadistic sneer of two-bit villains like *The Green Berets*' Pham Son Ti or *Missing in Action*'s Colonel Yin, the risk of throwing out the baby with the bathwater is very real. However, Nguyen's argument is that this time the bathwater is muddier than commonly appreciated. A shared genealogy of stereotypes, he argues, can be found both in critically acclaimed depictions and in second-rate films—a genealogy whose roots sink deeper than Hollywood's Vietnam. Furthermore, behind the majestic scenography of *Apocalypse* there is as much "horror" as in front of it. To expose this state of things, Nguyen performs two tricks on the reader. Firstly, he overemphasizes the points of contact between prestige war cinema and B-movies to prove how the two are more alike than one would want to admit. With *The Hamlet*, he merges tropes of antiwar and prowar narratives to show how, despite plot differences, both *Apocalypse Now* and *The Green Berets* tell the same story. Secondly, he paints a less-than-benign picture of the 'Hollywood miracle' narrative surrounding Coppola's war epic by stripping it of its aggrandizing aura and reducing it to its most dark (and ridiculous) elements. It is not enough to apply the Auteur's high-flown statements on art, war, and immortality to a forgettable B-movie. It is not enough to call it *The Hamlet*, as if to reference Shakespeare, and through the Bard the entire literary framework underlying *Apocalypse* (Conrad, Eliot, Homer, etc.). It is not enough to turn a creative triumph about a man's journey into his heart of darkness into a tawdry "epic about white men saving good yellow people from bad yellow people" (*TS* 129). It is not enough, in other words, to put into place the ultimate revenge fantasy—having Francis Ford Coppola directing *The Green Berets*. To prove that, deep down, Coppola's movie is as prowar as Wayne's, one has to lift the curtain to see what is under it. To show how an arthouse movie can be seen as 'a sequel to a war and a prequel to the next one,' one has to draw connections between

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the power and the technology that make both wars and war movies possible. To dismantle the 'Hollywood miracle' narrative, one has to expose the neocolonial dynamics at work behind it. To show how Coppola's greatest achievement is founded on hypocrisy and exploitation, one has to I.D. the skeletons rattling in Hollywood's closet one by one. And sometimes, as we are about to see, one has to do it in a *literal* sense.

3.3 Of extras and corpses

> "While in the refugee camp in the
> Philippines/ my parents were hired as
> extras/for the movie *Apocalypse Now*. /
> *That's me driving*, my father tells me. /
> When I look hard, I can see him/ in a white
> helmet, dressed as a Viet Cong; / … Now I
> write poems for my father — / …The letters
> collapse around my pen —/ I write a poem
> that never seems to fit him."
> Cathy Linh Che, "Dress-up" (2014)

As Nguyen glosses over *Apocalypse*'s brilliance, he equally shows no mercy when it comes to Coppola's troubles. When one reads the sources that Nguyen lists in the "Acknowledgments," it is clear that he deliberately bypassed the most epic details surrounding *Apocalypse*'s making. There is no failure-to-masterpiece story behind the making of *The Hamlet*. The fictional shooting lasts seven months (*TS*, 171)—which is a long time for a movie—but there is no mention of typhoons, recasts, budget issues, and heart attacks. The narrator reports that the

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shooting goes on for that long of a time, but he does not say why. By all accounts, everything seems to go smoothly. The only on-set accident seemingly occurs to the narrator, and it is heavily implied *not* be an accident. "I could see the film shoot was going to generate tales… that would be passed on for decades" (150), muses the narrator. However, he seemingly refers more to the crew indulging in revelries and profligacies than to financial catastrophes, delays, and artistic dead ends. More than an epic-behind-the-epic, *The Hamlet*'s production history is a farce-behind-the-farce. "At the hotel where the crew were based," said *Apocalypse* production assistant Doug Claybourne, "it was party heaven …. hundred beers lined up around the swimming pool … people diving off the roofs, it was crazy" (qtd. in Sellers). That seems to be happening in Nguyen's fiction as well, with the director throwing himself "a welcome party replete with barbecue, beer, burgers, Heinz ketchup, and a sheet cake big enough to sleep on" (150). The Auteur embodies all the quirks of an "Ayatollah Coppola" (Philips and Hill, 45) director who spends millions in hefty shipments of tomato juice from Italy and throws lavish banquets in the jungle—one who reads biographies of Genghis Khan (Coppola 1991, 87) looking for inspiration. The local crew still remembers Coppola's legendary temper tantrums: "'[he] had a habit of getting so frustrated that he would throw his walkie talkie into the sea or out of a helicopter …[we] had a big chalkboard where we would make bets on how many he would break or lose" (qtd. in Larwood). If anything, his frenzied ramblings in the *Hearts of Darkness* documentary go along perfectly with the Auteur's bursts in Chapter 8, where the latter goes from waxing poetic over the Hollywood sign to pontificate on authenticity and universality in a matter of few lines.

A passage from the Auteur's introduction in Chapter 8 also strengthens his connection with Coppola. Here, Nguyen recontextualizes a real-life anecdote from *Apocalypse*'s pre-production phase. Even in this case Nguyen's symbolism is never casual. Word is that Coppola

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once threw his five Oscars out of a window in frustration (McGovern). In an establishing moment for the character, the narrator describes the Auteur's single Academy Award statuette as a "kingly scepter or a mace for braining impertinent screenwriters" (124). In real life, the story goes that Coppola destroyed his Oscar while venting against the limits of his power. In *The Sympathizer*, the narrator's gaze re-fits power back into place, as the target of violence is no more the symbol of power but those subjected to it (the screenwriters/movie consultants). In the early stages of the Hollywood subplot, movie industry prestige is made visible as a literal weapon, foreshadowing the narrator's ultimate demise as an "infiltrator into a work of propaganda" (166). "Crushing victims in its path, the Movie rolled with the momentum of a Panzer division" (168): *The Hamlet* itself, in turn reduced to a name-function (the Movie), becomes a giant weapon, a tool for mass destruction. The narrator compares the "technical genius" of its director to that of "a master gunsmith" (276). The Oscar as a mace, the Movie as a tank, the Auteur as an armorer, are all crystal-clear allegories of an industry that turns the past into a weapon and 'memory into spectacle.' The Hollywood subplot is a narrative offshoot of *Nothing Ever Dies*' overarching theme of Hollywood's Vietnam as a "celluloid campaign" aimed at winning the war in memory. Here, the line between fiction and criticism is practically dissolved.

And in fact, Nguyen's fantasy of revenge goes much further than reducing Coppola to a cartoon. By the means of fiction, he tackles matters more serious than the eccentricities of a filmmaker. With the subplot, Nguyen exposes Coppola's hypocrisy in critiquing American foreign policy while receiving help (and helicopters) from a pro-American, authoritarian government. Nguyen's deconstruction of the Hollywood miracle narrative, of the epic-behind-the-epic, rests primarily on Coppola's deal with Filipino president Ferdinand Marcos. This aspect is key to understanding the character of the Auteur, whose movie—unlike Coppola's—

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does not seem in any hurry to denounce U.S. missteps in Indochina. The choice of *Apocalypse*'s location, Sylvia Chong stresses, "is itself proof of the continuing force of American imperialism in the independent Philippine state" (2012, 155). As the U.S. did with South Vietnam, importing "consumer, rather than capital, goods" and thus creating an "illusion of prosperity" (Catton, 31), a "gilded underdevelopment in which the abundance of consumer commodities concealed the destruction of the country's industrial basis" (Nguyen 2020, 122), Coppola unsettled the local economy with temporary job creation and large cash injections. As a result, *Newsweek* journalist Maureen Orth reported, "the robbing of local coconut plantations stopped, rents for homes shot up astronomically, and every night the high-school principal … went from bar to bar in his jeep urging Filipino workers not to waste their windfall wages on liquor and women" (qtd. in Cowie, 126). "If waste and excesses characterized American involvement in Vietnam," Jeffrey Chown points out, "so too did it Coppola's production" (125). Coppola's HQ was not that different from General Corman's in *Apocalypse*'s Nha Trang sequence. He set his own empire of air-conditioned bungalows supplied with steaks and wine provisions, thus "creating the very situation he was trying to expose" (Rennell). For his part, Ferdinand Marcos lent Coppola enough of an arsenal to wage a little war of his own. As Chong argues,

> Marcos came to possess such military technology in the first place because of his neocolonialist relationship with the U.S., which supported his regime as an important cold war ally despite his authoritarian tendencies. … Coppola's choice of the Philippines as a substitute for Vietnam is unintentionally befitting, as his patronage of Marcos's regime continued previous eras of colonial and neocolonial involvement and mimicked U.S. support for various South Vietnamese governments during the course of the war. (2012, 156)

A passage from *The Sympathizer* perfectly echoes Chong's assessment: "all in all the Philippines made a nice substitute for Vietnam itself, which is why the Auteur had chosen it"

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(144). As he told me in Dallas (2022b→Appendix), Nguyen had to leave out from the novel a vignette based on a famous anecdote involving Filipino helicopters walking off the set in the middle of a take to fly off and fight the rebels. However, the spirit of the scene is still there. Neocolonial ties and misrepresentation, the scholar/novelist suggests, walk hand-in-hand, as the military technology that makes both possible is the same. This sort of convergence informs most of the Hollywood subplot. The weapons "used to actually obliterate natives," the narrator realizes, "came from the military-industrial complex of which Hollywood was a part, doing its dutiful role in the artificial obliteration of natives" (173). In such a view, real and fictionalized mass murder become one.

In this sense, the fact that *Apocalypse*'s production was hampered by the Department of Defense matters little. Coppola appealed to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and to President Jimmy Carter to get the equipment he needed, but to no avail (Robb 122, 141). When the Australian military turned him down as well, he resorted to Manila. Not for nothing, *The Hamlet*'s fictive credits do not fail to include a shout-out to all the higher-ups of the regime up to Lady Imelda Marcos. In the 35mm print version of the movie, *Apocalypse*'s credits feature instead a vaguer word of thanks to "the people of the Philippines" while the background shows Kurtz's compound exploding into confetti.[92] Still, the fact remains that an autocrat like Ferdinand Marcos helped Coppola shape his vision. In this respect, the difference between Nguyen's pseudo-Coppola and the real director essentially lies in the quality of their work. In the novel, the Auteur is portrayed not as a tortured genius as much as a self-absorbed boss. "A film director is … one of the last truly dictatorial posts left in a world getting more and more democratic," Coppola himself admits in the *Hearts of Darkness* documentary. "That, plus being

[92] To be fair, in this respect *The Hamlet*'s end credits recall more those of the third installment of the Chuck Norris-led *Missing in Action* saga, where the producers do their utmost to mention the whole Filipino Ministry of National Defense.

183:2324255348

in a distant, Oriental country… did contribute to a state of mind that was like Kurtz." Coppola's ultimate fear—he confesses to his wife's tape recorder—was that of making a "pompous film on an important subject." With his fantasy of revenge, Nguyen obliges him by means of fiction. In *The Sympathizer*, *Apocalypse* is reimagined exactly this way, with an additional tinge of John Wayne cliches.

On closer inspection, however, when it comes to the film's message Coppola himself played a little bit of a shell game. As Frank P. Tomasulo argues, *Apocalypse* is ambivalent in that it implements a "strategy of 'having it both ways'" (149), "vacillating between a generalized antiwar/anti-American commentary and a specific critique of the military higher-ups" (152). Especially outside of the U.S., *Apocalypse* tends to be perceived as a movie that exposes war's absurdities instead of one whose "sequences have been used to rev up people to be warlike" (Perry). As Tomasulo puts it, *Apocalypse* has either been read as "an antiwar statement because many scenes depict the absurdity and outright lunacy of America's Vietnam policies," or as a work of art in which "[m]any scenes and cinematic techniques work to further a promilitary, prowar interpretation" (149). That would make it one of those movies that tells you that war is bad while simultaneously making it beautiful to watch. "Perhaps part of the reason the film succeeded commercially," movie scholar Jeffrey Chown surmises in turn, "was that it depicted the sensations of war in a way that the curious liberal could accept, whereas those inclined to enjoy the violence for its own sake were able to ignore the sentiments not appealing to their political viewpoint" (138). Coppola has long played coy on the matter, alternately declaring that "the film is certainly 'anti-war'" (qtd. in Cowie 36), or that it "has stirring scenes of helicopters attacking innocent people [and] that's not anti-war" (Perry). The ambiguous message underlying the helicopter battle scene (is a denunciation of racist war? is it not?) is key to understanding Nguyen's satire/critique. Frank P. Tomasulo observes that the

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battle aestheticizes violence in order to "appeal to a twisted patriotism," in that "the use of wide-screen, low-angle long shots of helicopters in tight formation flying up from the horizon into a rising sun creates a grandiose, romanticized, an even heavenly aura … that changes destruction and death from acts of horror into Armageddon-like sights of awe-inspiring beauty" (149). Tomasulo also points out how the battle "provides the American audience with a victorious rush that is accentuated by the lack of concern with Vietnamese lives," as the villagers are made "faceless and tiny in the frame as they are gunned down" (149). On the subject, Nguyen often recalls an exchange he had with a member of the press during a promotional tour in my country. An Italian journalist with an antiwar background struggled to recognize the contradiction between "her being opposed to the American war in Vietnam [...] with liking this movie in which the Vietnamese people are [...] completely silenced and erased" (Walker). This anecdote not only shows how a certain antiwar aura still surrounds *Apocalypse*, but especially how Nguyen wrote the Hollywood subplot while in full awareness of it. Chown—one of his sources—argues that the sampan scene, Coppola's reimagining of the 1968 Mỹ Lai massacre, is "difficult to read as anything but an indictment of American involvement in Vietnam" (138). In the movie, a routine check on a Vietnamese sampan goes horribly wrong, with the high-strung crew of the PBR gunning down innocent civilians. To minimize damage, Chief urges Willard to rescue the one survivor. Willard unceremoniously puts a bullet inside the young girl's head, "as though euthanizing an animal" (Norris 1998, 733), tersely replying "I told you not to stop" to his shocked helmsman. In the voiceover, Willard justifies his action with a world-weary, noir-movie-style remark: "it was a way we had over here of living with ourselves… we'd cut them in half with a machine gun and give them a Band-Aid." As Chown notes, "[t]he implication is that Willard has joined Kurtz now as an enlightened warrior who sees through 'the bullshit of Vietnam' and is able to take appropriate action" (139). The audience struggles

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with understanding his motivations, as Willard is seemingly "preoccupied with winning a war [while showing] little concern for the people on whose behalf the war was supposedly fought for" (130). Nevertheless, no one would count the sampan scene amongst those "used to rev up people to be warlike." The scene is an "emotional roller-coaster ride …based on a tension-relief-despair structure" (Tomasulo 152) designed to elicit sympathy in the viewer. Not incidentally, there is no such episode in *The Hamlet*. Whatever his intentions were, Coppola did insert at least one 'antiwar' sequence in the movie—one whose addition, by the way, did not fail to elicit the ire of screenwriter John Milius, who remarked that Coppola wanted to "liberalize" his vision and turn *Apocalypse Now* "into *Hair*" (qtd. in Chown, 139). Yet, this is precisely *the* scene that inspired Nguyen's own fantasy of revenge. As he recalled in an interview with NPR's Steve Paulson:

> I first saw [*Apocalypse Now*] probably when I was 10 or 11 on the VCR, and it completely traumatized me … that [scene] left me so shaken that even 10 years later, in college, as I was recounting the scene to a film class, my voice would shake with rage and anger. This is testimony to the power of the movie and the power of art and the power of storytelling, that I respect that movie very much as being a great work of art. But … it [also] gave me the sense that I had to respond in kind, that this novel would be my revenge.

Nguyen's oft-repeated anecdote of the first time he watched the movie resonates with a passage of Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* illustrating the "paradox of an Arab regarding himself as an 'Arab' of the sort put out by Hollywood" (325). Elsewhere, Nguyen recalled he felt "split in two," no longer sure whether he was "the American doing the killing or … the Vietnamese being killed" ("American Cultures Lecture"). His could be seen as a Vietnamese American twist on W. E. B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (2). As some have noted (Goyal, Xiang), Du Bois' concept

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resurfaces in the novel in a variety of forms, and Nguyen himself cites it in *Nothing Ever Dies* in relation with Maya Lin's Vietnam War memorial in Washington, DC (53). His could also be seen as an add-up to what Sylvia Chong describes as the "mirror stage" (2012, 104) of 1960s Asian American political subjecthood. That is, the moment in which, as Sucheng Chan sums it up, many "Asian American college and high school students realized with a shock that the 'enemy' whom American soldiers were maiming and killing had faces like their own" (174). Except that, in the case of Nguyen and of other Vietnamese American authors, the idea that the war was "not only an imperialist but also a racist one" came to them by watching VCRs in the 1980s rather than Walter Cronkite broadcasts in the 1960s. Their own mirror stage, in other words, was not induced by the war but by its representations. If one rethinks the sampan sequence and the whole "is *Apocalypse* antiwar or prowar" conundrum in this light, things will look different. As Nguyen's personal recollection makes clear, one man's antiwar commentary can be another man's mirror shock.

Besides, behind the sampan sequence there is more than meets the eye. As Peter Cowie reports, the scene features refugees who "had literally just arrived, two days before, as fugitives from their native country" (96). Between these unnamed extras there were "a lawyer and a doctor, all of them boat people and all desperate to earn some money." Imagine fleeing persecution in a war-torn country, surviving the perils of a treacherous sea-crossing, and *then* find yourself forced to play a role in someone else's fantasy. To see oneself in such a story is to go beyond unwilling identification with hapless casualties of war. The implication is that one has to rethink the whole framework of power (im)balances that made this identification possible. The point is not so much seeing oneself in the shoes of a dehumanized victim but to see oneself in those of the impoverished refugee forced to play his/her part. Put simply, Nguyen went from the shock of imagining himself in that sampan to devise a fiction in which he was

187:1018697192

the one who managed the extras being machine-gunned inside of it. His revenge against Coppola was using this offshoot of himself, a communist infiltrator turned industry infiltrator, to expose the power (im)balances at play by mud-slinging the Hollywood miracle narrative surrounding Coppola's movie.

Without straying too far, however, to unravel the question of whether his critique is fair or else—that is, the question of whether *Apocalypse* is pro- or antiwar—one should look no further than to Coppola's letter to Donald Rumsfeld. In the letter, the Italian American director swore up and down that his movie was not to be seen as "anti-military" or "anti-U.S." (qtd. in Cowie, 50). Ten years earlier, the DOD had lent John Wayne all the aircrafts and weaponry he needed for *The Green Berets*; "the cost to the Pentagon for assistance … [was] over a million dollars" (Cawley, 74). Now, Coppola complained that he was treated unfairly. With the Hollywood subplot, Nguyen blurs the line between the two by creating a fiction in which Coppola shoots Wayne's movie. Had Coppola accepted the DOD's conditions and effectively "toned down" his story and characters "in order to get the military's cooperation" (Robb 259), he suggests, perhaps *Apocalypse* would have looked exactly like *The Hamlet*.

But more than that, in addition to removing *any* ambiguity in the matter of whether *Apocalypse* is pro- or antiwar, Nguyen also emphasizes Coppola's on-set embrace of a neocolonial attitude. By superimposing details of decadent feasts featuring blonde-dyed Filipina strippers plunged in a "fake cauldron … to play white women boiled alive by natives" (*TS*, 150) to the over-the-top, rightwing extravaganza that is the plot of *The Hamlet*, Nguyen strips the 'Hollywood miracle' narrative of its anecdotal allure. If you go past *Apocalypse*'s artistry—he implies—all that is left is hypocrisy, exploitation, and a lot of money thrown down the drain. In *The Sympathizer*, the focus is rather put on the margins of the shot. As a literary persona, the narrator himself is proof of this. Nguyen took what would have been side villains

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or supporting characters (the communist double, the ARVN captain), packed them all together, and extracted a single protagonist out of the whole bunch. Then, he devised a fictional, run-of-the-mill war movie where such a character could have appeared had he been conceived within the walls of a Hollywood writers' room. He put him on the set and gave him the task of the lowest of the low, of those who never make the credits—the 'native' consultant, the assistant in charge of the extras. Then, he turned the tables. He reduced the main cast (the Thespian/Shamus, the Idol/Bellamy) and the director to two-dimensional stereotypes, both in the metadiegetic movie and in the diegetic behind-the-scenes narrative of its making. But on top of that, he (quite literally) dug up from the dirt the stories of those others who went unmentioned. Namely, *Apocalypse*'s Vietnamese extras, who were recruited from the Morong refugee camp in Bataan and prominently featured in pivotal scenes such as Kilgore's attack and the sampan massacre. These refugees, local interpreter Gerry Luglug remembers, "always [played the part of] dead people but they didn't complain [as] having to play dead was better than not having any job at all" (qtd. in McKay and Perez). One can see their flushed faces emerging from the grounds surrounding Kurtz's compound in the *Hearts of Darkness* documentary. Between takes, as Eleanor Coppola recalls it in her diary, one could look at their "severed heads … drinking Cokes" (144). *The Sympathizer* takes into account the perspective of refugees fleeing communist persecution forced to play the role of communist guerrillas. As Nguyen said to Richard Wolinsky, "[he] had to put that into the novel because [the] irony is too rich." Such is the premise, the paradox that inspires the whole Hollywood subplot: Vietnamese refugees forced to play a part in their own misrepresentation. Journalist Dirck Halstead reports that at the time Coppola relieved the Philippine authorities "by caring for hundreds of Vietnamese refugees that had come to their shores [moving] them to Luzon [where they] set up

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their own villages right on the set."[93] Similarly, also around that time the much less valuable *Go Tell the Spartans* employed sixty Vietnamese refugees from the Los Angeles area. By acting in the background of a reconstructed Vietnamese village, these refugees were uncannily "allowed to inhabit, albeit phantasmatically and temporarily, a country and a history to which they [could not] return" (Chong 2012, 163). Ten years later, Oliver Stone too would do the same with his *Platoon*. In fact, it is not hard to hear Vietnamese voices nor to spot the signs of the passage of on-set Vietnamese consultants in any of the films cited above. Even the background of a cheap B-movie like the first *Missing in Action* always features impeccable Vietnamese signs complete with diacritics. If the main villain, the love interest, or the sidekick are often played by "coethnic proxies," there is no shortage of Vietnamese faces in the nameless multitudes walking the boards of Hollywood's Vietnam. Human waves of enemies, columns of hapless civilians, city crowds replete with hookers and beggars are all "memorable Asian masses" that, as Renee E. Tajima puts it, convey "the kind of invisibility that occurs when individual personalities and separate identities become indistinguishable from one another" (314).

It goes without saying that the part that these refugees played in *Apocalypse*'s Hollywood miracle narrative did not receive much attention. Nguyen fashioned their perspective from the occasional mention one can find in the vast body of resources cited above. In *The Sympathizer*, he recontextualizes their unheard stories into a quasi-symbolic domain. From Eleanor Coppola's diary (136) he draws the outlandish (yet true) command "Dead Vietnamese, take your places!" (*TS*, 169) radioed to the extras when the camera pans over

[93] Also from Halstead's account Nguyen derives the surreal moment in Chapter 9 that sees a nostalgic narrator walking the village sets. Halstead, who had previously covered the war in Vietnam, wrote that he felt like he was "transported through time and space back to Vietnam in the 1960s." Once again, Nguyen recenters the point of view from American to Vietnamese, with the narrator basking in the counterfeit nostalgia of the scenography, seeking comfort in the make-believe "dusty lanes, thatched roofs…earthen floors" (147) of the sets.

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Kurtz's compound. The narrator reimagines them as yet another pop culture icon of (repressed) alterity—the living dead.[94] "An obedient tribe of zombies rose from the earth, a score of dismembered dead mean stumbling forth from the makeup tent all bruised and bloodied" (169). This army of dis(re)membered Vietnamese extras marching blindly into the collective unconscious is then appropriately paired with Filipino cadavers freshly dug out a local cemetery. In his satire, Nguyen turns Oscar-winning scenographer Dean Tavoularis into an unprincipled grave robber. His fictional counterpart—Harry—is said to have hired "a local fixer to furnish actual corpses from a nearby graveyard" (276) to then answer, "I didn't think it was illegal, officers" (277) to the policemen come to arrest him. Luckily for Harry, the whole thing blows over when the Auteur bribes the local authorities into silence. In reality, it was producer Gray Frederickson who arranged the deal. As Robert Sellers reconstructs it:

> They'd got the stiffs from a guy who supplied bodies to medical schools for autopsies. … Later, a huge truck showed up and soldiers started loading the bodies inside. "Where do we take these," one of them asked. "I don't know? The cemetery?" Frederickson answered. Turned out they couldn't because nobody was going to foot the bill to bury them. "Oh, don't worry," they said. "We'll dump them somewhere."

Eleanor Coppola recalls asking the propman about the corpses, to which he replied that "[t]he script says 'a pile of burning bodies'; it does not say 'a pile of burning dummies'" (126). The 'Hollywood miracle' narrative glosses over such occurrences by dismissing them as funny anecdotes—additional touches of color to the surreal palette of *Apocalypse*'s making. In most accounts, the incident with the police is described as little more than trivia material. Albeit

[94] Not incidentally, in *Nothing Ever Dies* Nguyen speaks of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* as a nod to the 'search and destroy' operations conducted by the U.S. Army during the war in Vietnam. "Romero," he argues, "understood necropolitics before [Achille] Mbembe coined the term [while recognizing] that America needed zombies of the literal or figurative kind, the living dead whom one could kill or pacify without guilt" (174). On Romero's movie as an allegory of the "Vietnam Era," see also Higashi.

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remaining within the confines of satire, in his fiction Nguyen redefines the episode under a very different light. In the novel, the bodies are not the butt of the narrator's joke—Harry is. The casualness with which Gray Frederickson and the Filipino soldiers dismissed the fate of these human remains reflects understated disregard. In the novel, this disregard reaches paroxysmal levels. Nguyen cuts out the middlemen; is the scenographer himself to get the bodies in lieu of the assistant producer, and the local fixer, for his part, skips the morgue and finds what he was seeking right from the loose soil of a graveyard. Turning to Judith Butler's ideas on "grievability," one could read this episode as inscribed in a logic according to which some lives are deemed to be mourned and some others "are considered ungrievable" (38). "An ungrievable life," says Butler, "is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all." Butler's framework reads war as something "dividing populations into those who are grievable and those who are not."[95] To an extent, such a definition can also be adapted to the neocolonial dynamics underlying the making of both *Apocalypse* and *The Hamlet*. Even a (mis)representation of war, the subplot shows, can put similar processes into place, especially considering the origin of the technology that made it possible. Even a celluloid war, Nguyen says, cannot be waged without the help of the military-industrial complex. The mere making of a movie can also "divide populations into those who are grievable and those who are not." In the novel, all is contained within Harry's words of innocent disbelief ("I didn't think it was illegal"). Consider the power ratio such a phrase entail—imagine the contrast between a Filipino troupe shooting a film in California robbing a local cemetery in the name of movie accuracy. In this sense, Nguyen's co-option of Achebe's critique of *Heart of Darkness* as a work that reduces 'Africa to the role of props' becomes literal. In *The Sympathizer*, this is

[95] It should be noted, however, that in *Nothing Ever Dies* Nguyen rejects part of Butler's framework, in that, in his opinion, "[i]n the urgency and immediacy of her work, responding to American apathy and to an ongoing war, Butler cannot or will not treat the other as much more than a victim" (76).

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all that is left of the 'Hollywood miracle' narrative surrounding the making of *Apocalypse Now*: Asian corpses used as props. Justifying such a thing on the grounds of "making something as real as reality itself" (*TS*, 172), as the Auteur does, is to venture into a dangerous territory. Once again, Nguyen's way of defusing a similar rationale is to make the reader forget all about *Apocalypse*'s artistry. By applying this same logic to the making of a second-rate film instead of one still studied in cinema schools around the globe, the scholar/novelist reminds us that desecrating graves in the name of art is still equal to desecrating graves.

Things certainly do not improve when it comes to breathing bodies. For their part, the extras who get to play living people in *The Hamlet* are invariably pigeonholed in roles farcically marked as "Possibly Innocent but Also Possibly Viet Cong and Therefore Possibly Going to Be Killed for Either Being Innocent or Being Viet Cong" (156). In a way, Nguyen's indictment against Hollywood follows a logic not much different from the one underlying the "if-clauses" passage in Chapter 21. The Vietnamese extras in *The Hamlet* are too but the last link of a chain of casualties/causalities. America, he shows, 1) first (indirectly) makes you a refugee; 2) then, it leaves you begging for scraps under the table; 3) then, it either kills you again in fiction or forces you to play the role of your enemy in a revenge fantasy designed to soothe its own pain. In this respect, the lessons of Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (2003) also echo throughout the Hollywood subplot. Said speaks of Orientalist depictions as ones whose grip on the audience obscure "the fact that [said] audience is watching a highly artificial enactment of what a non-Oriental has made into a symbol for the whole Orient" (21). When it comes to "cultural discourse," Said argues, "it needs to be made clear … that what is commonly circulated by it is not 'truth' but representations" (21). Nguyen's answer, as we are seeing, is not to put back 'truth' into circulation but rather to produce a series of *counter*-representations. His are deliberate distortions and diversions that, with their own existence, not only question whose

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truth gets told but especially whose does not. As UCLA professor and archive curator Thuy Vo Dang once put it to podcaster Kenneth Nguyen, "if you do not represent yourself, someone else will represent you, and you may not like the stories that they tell" (May 6, 2022). In such a scenario, as author Thi Bui contends, telling one's own story feels "like claiming real estate" (July 21, 2022). If this holds true for a great variety of minority experiences, the diasporic Vietnamese "mirror stage" of seeing oneself simultaneously butchered *and* erased by Hollywood has fewer equivalents. As most of the Vietnamese diaspora comes from a history of defeat and erasure, such an experience conflates the shame inherited from one's fathers with one's role in American racial hierarchy. Erased by Hanoi's state propaganda, erased by Hollywood's fabrications, the South Vietnamese linger in the collective unconscious like "a haunting ghost and [an] absent presence" (Bui 2017, 22). What is more, their story has been made to fit the uncomfortable boxes forming the genealogy of Orientalist stereotypes underlying Hollywood's Vietnam. Therefore, in watching *Apocalypse Now* one might find himself/herself unwillingly tossed against the background of someone else's tragedy, put into the shoes of a passive Lotus Blossom, or in the rubber sandals of a bloodthirsty King Cong.

Not that Coppola did not give a thought about the concept of "representation." Decades before Nguyen would reduce him to a caricature, Coppola famously shoehorned himself in his movie as a television news crew member. Colonel Kilgore's introduction, the "mop-up operation" scene, begins with a vignette involving a troupe formed by Coppola, Storaro, and Tavoularis broadcasting the ongoing destruction for an American network. As in the novel the Auteur commands the Vietnamese extras to "just act natural" (159), in the movie Coppola shouts at Willard to "just go by like you're fighting." "The director's brief walk-on," Frank P. Tomasulo notes, "is an obvious self-reflexive in-joke, but it also implies the absurd, game-like nature of the war" (152). This famous cameo, Margot Norris contends, not only reminds us how

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broadcast journalism influenced the home front during the war, but especially how "*Apocalypse Now,* like photojournalism, is neither war, nor simulation, but a representation obliged to problematize itself" (759). At least in some (crucial) respects, Nguyen argues, this problematization never truly occurs. By enacting a representation of a representation (himself as a photojournalist), Coppola raises the forever question of what is 'true,' of where art begins, and truth ends. Similar issues come and come back again in the American canon on the war in Vietnam. The idea of the Second Indochina War as a war that defies representation, the "first terrible postmodernist war," as per Fredric Jameson's definition (44), resonates with countless passages about true war stories and not-knowing-what-you-saw-until-years-later taken from the works of Michael Herr and Tim O'Brien. Coppola's self-reflexive cameo foregrounds a similar dynamic. The message behind his game of mirrors (himself directing Willard while directing himself directing Sheen) is that even his monument of a movie is nothing but a fantasy. *Apocalypse* denounces the war in Vietnam as a giant American lie but does so only at the price of creating another. Coppola knows that; "[t]he film," Michael Comber and Margaret O'Brien note, "displays a certain self-consciousness about itself as a text incorporating other texts" (253). How else one would interpret the scene in which Kurtz recites aloud T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," a poem whose epigraph reads "Mistah Kurtz – he dead"? But what the film does not show, Nguyen implies, is what *exceeds* the frame of his camera lenses. Coppola's representation of a representation evades the army of dis(re)membered Vietnamese zombies and Filipino corpses that lurk behind the margins of the shot. Using "Vietnam" as a metaphor, as a literary construct, as a mirror for one's own inner tragedy certainly makes for great art, but only at the expense of millions of corpses reduced to raw material. To illustrate that, Nguyen gives life to a *misrepresentation of a misrepresentation*. Tucked inside *The Sympathizer*, the Hollywood subplot provocatively juxtaposes Brando's method acting, Coppola's hubristic

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rants, and all kinds of inexcusable excesses to Chuck Norris villains and John Wayne shallowness. In this universe, the definitive movie depiction of the war in Vietnam is described as a monstrous thing, a (deformed) body of work equally made of vapid elements and Oscar-worthy ingredients. By means of caustic fiction, in other words, is Nguyen the one that takes the extra step and *truly* problematizes Coppola's representation. By dismantling both the epic and the epic-behind-the-epic, he shows us how a "highly artificial enactment" of war looks like when seen through the eyes of those that were erased by it.

In fact, not only Nguyen's counter-representation tackles a specific representation (Hollywood's), but also the concept of representation per se. One of the axes of *The Sympathizer* is the idea of the "means of representation" (173)—of the unbalanced power ratio underlying the production and dissemination of narratives. As the author put it in a public encounter at Yale, "You can't change the problem of representation simply by producing another representation. You actually have to change the system of representation itself" (2016c). "[N]ot to own the means of representation is… a kind of death," muses in turn his narrator upon returning to California from the Philippines, "[f]or if we are represented by others, might they not, one day, hose our death off memory's laminated floor?" (187). Even in this case the Nguyenian framework is remindful of Said's imprint. In one of the topical moments of the Hollywood subplot, the narrator quotes nothing other than *Orientalism*'s exergo, a line from Karl Marx's "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte":[96]

[96] As Sylvia Chong maintains, the reference is likely to be interpreted as a nod to Said rather than to Marx, "since Marx was concerned with political representation, whereas Said was concerned with discursive representation" (2018, 371). However, one should also not forget that *Orientalism* was published in 1978, roughly around the time that, in the fiction, 'the captain' is apprehended and detained in the reeducation camp. Given that the narrator had read Marx firsthand (*TS*, 2) this would mean that, in the fiction, Nguyen's character immediately precedes Said in

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They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. Marx spoke of the oppressed class that was not politically conscious enough to see itself as a class, but was anything ever more true of the dead, as well as the extras? (172)

As Sunny Xiang argues, in Nguyen's paradigm "the actually dead, the socially dead, and the representationally dead" (420) become one. "Anonymous corpses, disenfranchised refugees, and cultural stereotypes" all merge in a blurred picture from which it becomes impossible to tell cinematic death apart from actual death. In such a framework, death and misrepresentation are made equal. This is evidenced by the novel's most heart-wrenching moment, the episode in which the narrator claims for himself a fake headstone in the cemetery set built by the scenographer. He pins a picture of his dead mother on it only to see grave, picture, and cemetery explode "for the sake of entertainment" (174) during the shooting of the movie. In the Hollywood subplot, fake tombs and real memories, suffering and spectacle soon become virtually undistinguishable. *The Hamlet*'s Vietnamese extras, limited in number and thus forced to 'die' several times at the Auteur's command, stand in for the whole of Southeast Asia, bombed to the stone age during the war, decimated by the defoliants, and then killed again on the screen to placate the American audiences' thirst for closure.

Thus, by means of the Hollywood subplot Nguyen strikes back by 'misrepresenting the misrepresenter.' On the one hand, the scholar/novelist puts us in front of an array of 'ungrievable' Asian bodies and stories. On the other, he reduces Kurtz's grandiose and iconic demise to a moment of farce. By playing havoc on diegetic levels, he (re)tells the story of the

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making the same connection. This would make Marx's quote in Chapter 11 another instance of Nguyen's refracted history—that is, another deliberate distortion.

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Hollywood miracle from the perspective of dirt-covered refugees. My point, however, is that in doing so he once again bends facts to the point of unrecognizability. To make the fantasy of revenge work, he needs to divest Coppola's masterpiece of its undeniable artistic power. Had *The Hamlet* been infused with the same qualities of *Apocalypse Now*, Nguyen would not been able to drive the message home. Had that been the case, one could even justify the Auteur's argument that great art survives war and towers through the centuries over millions of dead bodies. The only way to disarm such a thesis is to disarm art by means of art—to smear the white marble of Coppola's statue with the mud and soil that covered the earthed Morong refugees drinking Coke between takes. To put it in Saidian terms, to offer such a counter-representation is to not let beauty deceive one into believing that a given representation holds truth. And in a way, in the upcoming TV adaptation of *The Sympathizer* things will come full circle. Apparently, none other than Kiều Chinh will have a part in the show (Hailu), thus adding more weight to the idea of a diasporic counter-representation calling into question the fabrications of Hollywood's Vietnam. One can appreciate the irony of seeing the one refugee actress who was supposed to play Kurtz's native mistress stepping into the role of a homesick woman longing for home. Even more so, one can see the irony in watching Francis Coppola's would-be movie consultant partaking in a series focused on a fictional version of herself getting nearly blown up on director's orders. At this point, as it remains to be seen how Park Chan-wook's imprint will mold Nguyen's satire, this is little more than speculation. Even now, however, one thing is for certain: fantasies of revenge can take unexpected shapes.

We have seen how Nguyen dismantled *Apocalypse*'s aura by 1) creating a fiction in which Francis Coppola directs *The Green Berets*; 2) emphasizing the most hideous aspects of the 'Hollywood miracle' legend, with particular regard to neocolonial dynamics. Now, let us move

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to the third and final strategy of implausibility he adopted in the *Hamlet* subplot. Before wrapping up our own 'Hollywood section,' let us turn to Nguyen's recreation of John Milius' original *Apocalypse Now.*

3.4 *Apocalypse Now,* A film by John Milius

"And if his story is a really a confession, then so is mine."

Benjamin Willard, *Apocalypse Now*

Movie scholars have long debated *Apocalypse Now*'s proper authorship. Undoubtedly, the final movie owes much to John Milius' original 1969 script and to its following redrafts. Most of *Apocalypse*'s memorable lines (the napalm quote, "Charlie don't surf," etc.) directly stem from Milius' screenplay. However, Francis Coppola's stamp was pivotal in turning a potential "part zany comedy, part terrifying psychedelic horror" (qtd. in Chown, 123) into the movie(s) we know today. As Jeffrey Chown puts it, compared to the final product the original script is decidedly "less reflective … [its tone] evokes more of a comic book or 'B' movie approach to the violent and sexual aspects of the characters" (133). Its apex is marked by a savage battle which is fought by manic soldiers under the influence that "smile while they fire their weapons" (133). If Coppola's movie ends up with a gentle rain that "symbolically puts out the fire of the opening images of napalmed Nature" (Tomasulo 155), Milius' screenplay climaxes with the "visceral catharsis" (133) of an all-out carnage perpetrated by blood-soaked warriors high on LSD. The different endings epitomize Coppola's and Milius' different views of the story. If one will, these latter may be made to fall under the two respective meanings of the word

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"apocalypse"— "revelation" (Coppola) and "destruction" (Milius). Indeed, the consensus is that this "divided authorship may account for some of the film's unresolved combinations of dovish and hawkish elements" (Tomasulo 149). *Apocalypse*'s prowar/antiwar conundrum, in other words, may partially derive from the creative differences underlying its making.

In the case of *The Hamlet*, this kind of issue does not arise. The first mention of the Auteur in *The Sympathizer* makes clear that the man operating the "Panzer division" crushing memory into spectacle is alone in command. The Congressman states it plainly in Chapter 7: "[t]he director's also the writer" (119). We have seen how Nguyen had made Coppola the director of *The Green Berets*. Now, in yet another thought experiment he merges him with John Milius into a singular, caricatural persona harnessing the worst qualities of both. Accordingly, one could describe the Auteur's character as two-faced. On the one hand, he is presented as an Oscar-winning maestro hot on the heels of two critical successes. As with *The Hamlet*, even in this case the reader is provided with two brief synopses. The Auteur's debut, *Hard Knock*, is described as a "critically lauded movie about the travails of Greek American youth in the inflamed streets of Detroit" (124). Ethnicity swap aside, the description of such a street youth coming-of-age narrative may fit Coppola's *Rumble Fish* or *The Outsiders* (or, alternatively, his friend Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets*). The blueprint, however, is probably *The Godfather* trilogy. *Hard Knock* is said to be "loosely autobiographical" (124). Even if the Corleone saga is based on Mario Puzo's novel and is obviously no personal account, many saw glimpses of Coppola's personality in the way in which the trilogy depicts power and family culture. Most notably, Coppola was assigned to direct *The Godfather* because "Paramount needed a hungry young director … whose Italian name might pacify the Italian lobby who felt the subject was demeaning to their people" (Bergan 38). *The Sympathizer*'s narrator also poses the question in similar terms. "The Auteur [was] born with an olive-tinged Greek surname he had bleached in

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typical Hollywood fashion" (124), to then focus his efforts on "cocaine-white ethnicity" by producing *Venice Beach*, a critical darling "about the failure of the American Dream." Even though *Venice Beach*'s plot ("a dipsomaniac reporter and his depressive wife writing competing version of the Great American novel") finds no match in Coppola's filmography, the overall 'prestige' aura it exudes could be seen as an allusion to *The Rain People*, Coppola's fourth go at the director's seat. Or again, it may be a nod to *The Conversation*, his 1974 Michelangelo Antonioni-inspired oeuvre about loneliness, paranoia, and surveillance.

What is certain is that no such arthouse gem can be found in John Milius' resume. *Hard Knock* could be loosely juxtaposed with Milius' own semi-autobiographical, coming-of-age opus—*The Big Wednesday*, a surf epos about Malibu's youth in the 1960s. However, the self-proclaimed Hollywood outsider is known to most as the mind behind reactionary fantasies like *Conan the Barbarian* or *Red Dawn*. In this latter, a Soviet/Cuban invasion of Colorado prompts local kids to form a Rockie's version of the Việt Cộng to repel the attackers, thus foregrounding once again *Apocalypse*'s theme of the necessity to 'go native' to best fight communism. For Milius, Jeffrey Chown proclaims, "war is a place where dreams come true" (136). Likewise, Nguyen's Auteur is said to be a gung-ho, military-crazed fanatic "who never served a day in the armed forces, just got fed John Wayne and Audie Murphy movies as a kid" (*TS*, 119). This would add up to the description of Milius as one who was rejected by the Marines albeit desperately wanting to enlist—one who "was living the war vicariously by pumping returning veterans for tales of what was transpiring overseas" (Chown 122). The original plan for *Apocalypse* was for him to write it and George Lucas to direct it, producing a 16mm, black-and-white "super-John Wayne movie" (123) shot on location when the war was still on. This never-made *Apocalypse*, a sort of Cinéma Vérité version of *The Green Berets*, would have

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turned to be a crazy experiment.[97] In this early stage, Coppola was supposed to take a backseat and only funnel the money through his fledgling movie company, American Zoetrope. Eventually, things went in a different direction. First, the U.S. lost the war. Then, Lucas struck gold with *Star Wars*. As Milius was in turn involved with other projects, Coppola decided to take the job himself. In the process, he completely overhauled the rightwing tone of the "super John Wayne movie," either out of some developing "antipathy toward the ideas that had seduced him back in 1969" or because he had come to the cynical conclusion that "a pro-American-involvement-in-Vietnam film would not play in the late 1970s" (Chown, 124). Be that as it may, the final *Apocalypse* differs significantly from the original Milius script. Coppola's "ambivalent attitude" (127) toward the latter, albeit deftly concealed by the movie's artistry, clearly transpires from the finalized product, with relevant implications when it comes to the matter at hand here.

In fact, no such an ambiguity marks *The Hamlet*. As Nguyen explicitly revealed to Richard Wolinsky, the main inspiration for it other than *The Green Berets* was indeed "the John Milius version of *Apocalypse Now* that never got made" (2016d). Nearly every source on *Apocalypse* that I am using in these chapters is also Nguyen's. Therefore, one can surmise that he knows all about the adaptation process of the original script. As *The Hamlet* is a blurred mix of Hollywood (mis)representations, the Auteur is an odd amalgam of Coppola and Milius. His physical description, for one, fits both uncannily well. If at the time Coppola and Milius were chunky, dark-bearded men in their thirties, the Auteur equally showcases a "hirsute show of manliness ruffled along his forearms and from the collar of his shirt" (*TS*, 124). He is himself a Frankenstein monster made of equal parts artistry and mayhem. His creature is a movie

[97] Milius' admiration for Wayne is evident by a fourth-wall breaking joke that one can find in the 1975 draft of *Apocalypse*'s script: "COLONEL: You know much about … Green Berets, Captain? WILLARD: I saw the movie, sir."

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industry impossibility: an outstandingly crafted B-movie, a sophisticated low-quality film, a crass slugfest filmed with mastery. Far from being a last-minute assignment—as with Coppola—*The Hamlet* is the Auteur's pet project. His script is a "fantasyland" (119), the fever dream of an armchair general who never set foot in a warzone. Such a definition matches both Tavoularis' sets for *Apocalypse* and Milius' imaginary Vietnam, which is described in dialogues and scene headings of the original screenplay as a "primeval swamp," "a prehistoric planet," "the jungle of a million years ago," and the like. Milius' Montagnards, for one, are a hodgepodge of racist clichés if ever there was one. Wild and barbaric, they strike one as savage natives out of a dime novel from the 1930s. Without apparent reason, they worship Kurtz like a god and would walk into fire for him. They also have a penchant for shrinking enemies' heads, a custom attested among the Jivaroan tribes of the Amazon Forest that would be incomprehensible to Southeast Asian ethnic minorities. For their part, Kurtz's American militiamen wear loincloths, Native American style feathers, and scalp dead communists. By meshing Conrad's Congo with Cambodia and making equal use of stereotypes on North/South American indigenous peoples, Milius gives rise to one of the many "confusion[s] of signifiers" (Gazi, 5) abundant in the script, all aimed at extolling 'native savagery' in lieu of American hypocrisy. Here lies an apparent point of divergence with Coppola's take on Conrad, in that Coppola to an extent denunciates (neo)colonial brutality, albeit not without failing to spectacularizing it. Milius, on the other hand, fully embrace it insofar those who practice it fight "for the right side" (Gazi, 5). Had Milius directed *Apocalypse Now* with Coppola's means and monetary budget, it would be easy to picture him paying Filipina strippers to walk into a cauldron as the Auteur does.

But this never came to pass. Soon, Milius' original story got lost in a convoluted tangle of rewrites. Him and Coppola "took it in turns to enhance, embellish and even fundamentally

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alter both characters and narrative" (Cowie 36). However, most of the script elements are still there for all to see. At the core of all the *Apocalypses* lies the (debatable) idea that the war in Vietnam was 'a California war.' A note by Coppola on the script's margins makes clear how he traced the idea back to Conrad: "L.A. vis-à-vis the jungle … The colonialists always take their civilization with *them*… here it's surfboards" (qtd. in Cowie 41). "He was the tragedy—the tragedy of this war" says Milius' Willard over the dead body of Lance, with the implied meaning that the death of a blond surfer from Malibu weighs more than millions of Southeast Asian lives. If Nguyen's novel gives literary dignity to the postwar intrigues of Vietnamese California, Coppola's movie reshapes Southeast Asia into a drug-induced hallucination scored by The Doors, exactly as it may have appeared in the nightmares of the young conscripts seen in Milius' *The Big Wednesday*.[98] This idea of an American 'surfboard colonialism' wreaking havoc on Vietnamese soil is foregrounded by the helicopter battle sequence. Here, Kilgore destroys a whole village for Lance to show his Malibu skills and ride the local swells. Indeed, the California/Vietnam dichotomy informs most of the movie. Even more so does Milius' 1975 script, which begins on a "luxury cabin cruiser" docked at Marina del Rey, mimicking Marlow's introduction on the *Nellie* in *Heart of Darkness*.[99] "'Los Angeles,' [Willard] tells a woman on the deck, 'was once one of the dark places of the earth'" (Cowie, 44). To strengthen this 'California war' fantasy, Milius' Kilgore—at first named Kharnage—does not wear the cavalry hat sported by Robert Duvall in the movie but a regular, suburban dad-style L.A. Dodgers cap. As for Milius' Kurtz, he is no less a Californian both in terms of origins and imagery. In the script, he is a lean, long-haired Charles Manson type who trades in opium as

[98] The script title itself is a twist on the peace symbol buttons wore by California hippies. In lieu of their "Nirvana Now" buttons, Milius recalls, he "made one with a tail and engine nasals, so that the symbol became a B-52, and read APOCALYPSE NOW" (1998). The self-proclaimed "Zen Anarchist" (Gazi, 7) wore the button on his surfboard, in compliance with his personal ideology of rebellion made of drugs, rock'n'roll, and rightwing fantasies of destruction.

[99] In one of the other drafts, the narrative frame is instead set at the mouth of the Potomac (Cowie 44).

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his Conradian counterpart did with ivory. This *ur*-Kurtz is a product of the "darker undercurrent" (Gazi 8) of sixties California counterculture, a trigger-happy cult leader who passes marijuana joints to his men as he was partaking in a warrior ceremony.[100] In a way he is not that different from Coppola's Kilgore. He calls in a devastating B-52 strike as he was making a "lightshow," selecting The Doors' "Light My Fire" as the soundtrack that goes best with it. For Milius' Kurtz, as with both Kilgores, war is indeed a place where dreams come true.

If Coppola's version of the story is a bit ambivalent, Milius' *Apocalypse* overtly lionizes Kurtz and his private crusade. Milius' *ur*-screenplay portrays the war in Vietnam "not as immoral, only mishandled" (Tomasulo, 149). His scene descriptions read "total psychedelic war," "the biggest firework in history," "helicopters moving through the FRAME: …almost a dance of dragonflies," and so on. Milius' sheer enthusiasm for destruction is palpable. Reading his script drafts feels like watching a kid playing with toy soldiers on the floor. Story-wise, script and movie do not differ much. Near all the stages of Willard's journey are already there: the call to adventure, Kilgore, the Playboy/USO show, the Do Lung Bridge, the French plantation, Kurtz's compound… The only difference is the "*Gotterdammerung* ending" (Chown, 141) that concludes the script, a psychedelic take on the classic war movie archetype of the final set-piece battle. Here, Kurtz's brigade of stoned renegades fights an entire NVA division with guns, bows, and arrows. If Kilgore/Kharnage blasted Wagner to scare the enemy, Milius' Kurtz blasts The Doors. His men drink LSD-flavored water and chant the word "napalm" as if it were a Buddhist sutra. As thousands of enemies storm the compound, Willard calls in a purgative air strike. The scene descriptions themselves wax poetic about explosions

[100] Even if Coppola's Kurtz differs much from the original Miliusian prototype, Charles Manson also resurfaces in the finalized movie. As the PBR's crew reads aloud a stateside newspaper mentioning the 1969 Cielo Drive murders, the header mentions the Family's conception of slaughter as "a symbol of protest," thus echoing Kurtz's methods and brutality. Frank P. Tomasulo reads the occurrence as a sign of Coppola trying to undercut "some of the prowar sentiment established in other scenes [by] subtly linking 'back-home' madness (Manson's apocalyptic rampage) with the Vietnam debacle" (152).

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that “hit and grow, outward like some sort of cosmic flower [or] a death ray guy, radiating outward with ice-blue energy … it is beautiful to see.” The morning after, Willard rushes to save the wounded Kurtz, who dies in his arms uttering “the horror, the horror.” Then, a crazed Willard opens fire on the American helicopters that come to rescue him (!). His tale ends with an account of his visit to Kurtz’s widow in Californian suburbia some years later, mirroring *Heart of Darkness*’ finale. The woman asks him what Kurtz’s last words were. As does Marlow with the Intended in Conrad’s novella, Willard outright lies to her: “he spoke of you, ma’am.”

Originally, the movie was supposed to end as the script does. “The guys putting up the money thought there was a battle at the end,” Coppola told journalist Tony Chiu, “so I figured since we built this set, we’ll blow it up and I’ll get a big scene I can play with” (qtd. in Philips, 46). As per Coppola, “[t]he explosions are purely a graphic device, not a story point” (47). Nguyen’s Auteur, however, is of a completely different opinion. In *The Hamlet*, Bellamy calls in an Arc Light strike merely to “do a victory dance on King Cong’s corpse” (*TS* 171):

> The scene was a massive industrial production that required the digging of several trenches, which were then filled with two thousand gallons of gasoline, as well as a thousand smoke bombs, several hundred sticks of phosphorous, a few dozen sticks of dynamite, and untold numbers of rockets, flares, and tracers, all deployed to simulate the explosions coming from King Cong’s detonating ammunition stockpile, supplied by the Chinese and the Soviets. Everyone on the crew had been waiting for this moment, the greatest blowup ever in cinematic history. It is the moment, the Auteur proclaimed to the massed crew during the last week, when we show that making this movie was going to war itself. When your grandchildren ask you what you did during the war, you can say, I made this movie. I made a great work of art. How do you know you’ve made a great work of art? A great work of art is something as real as reality itself, and sometimes even more real than the real. (171)

When we compare such a passage with the novel’s documentary sources, the irony is clear. Ultimately, and with a similar expense of explosives, Coppola too had to destroy his set.

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Initially, his decision was to put the sequence as the background of the end credits. Then, he scrapped it altogether only to recycle some of the shots in *Apocalypse*'s opening montage. The Auteur, on the other hand, regards *The Hamlet*'s grand finale as his greatest accomplishment. Far from being a "graphic device," his explosive ending is extolled as the veritable peak of his career, as well as a milestone in the history of the medium. In the universe of *The Sympathizer*, movie greatness is measured by the amount of TNT. With the line "we show that making this movie was going to war itself" Nguyen makes the equivalence between war and war movie explicit once and for all. The Auteur is a 'Francis Ford Milius' equally enamored of his art and of his weapons, who shoots with camera lenses instead of M16 rifles. His heroes pester the audience with rhetorical soliloquies, as did the script's *ur*-Willard before that the Michael Herr-penned narration would replace his diegetic tirades with a more fitting film-noir-style voiceover (Cowie, 45). As with Milius, the ghost of John Wayne looks down upon the Auteur's screenplay. *The Hamlet* has the worst of both worlds: it conflates "the populist, imaginary Norris-Stallone Vietnam constructs" (Williams, 129) with Milius' psychedelic fantasies, and both with the Alamo-esque suggestions of *Green Berets*.

Yet, unlike these latter, *The Hamlet* is purported to be a masterpiece. In the Bangkok scene, the narrator rejoices in seeing the theater audience desecrating the pretenses of the Auteur by providing the screening with an extra soundtrack of chit-chat, loud sneezes, baby lullabies, and the like. However, he also grudgingly admits that the Movie is indeed "a thing of beauty and horror" (*TS*, 276). *The Hamlet* is no *Apocalypse Now*, but its aura is presented as equally strong. Nonetheless, any textual evidence seems to point in the opposite direction. Basing on the description, *The Hamlet* truly comes off as the never-made "Super John Wayne" *Apocalypse* that Milius and George Lucas intended to shoot. Not incidentally, nearly all the excerpts and dialogues are presented in script form, as if the narrator would rewrite them in the confession

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as he *read* them instead of *heard* them. "I didn't want to have just the typical John Milius ending," once said Coppola, "when the NVA attack and there's a gigantic battle scene, and Kurtz and Willard are fighting side by side and Kurtz gets killed, etc. … I wanted to explore the moral side" (qtd. in Bergan 56). If one substitutes "Kurtz" and "Willard" with "Shamus" and "Bellamy," one could safely use these lines as a recap of *The Hamlet*'s finale. Once again, it is up to Nguyen to realize Coppola's worst fears. Coppola struggled for years on how to end *Apocalypse*. Up until the preview screenings, he was still lending questionnaires to viewers to figure out what to do. Nguyen fixes the issue by bringing the story back to square one. The "climactic firefight at King Cong's lair" (*TS* 168) with which *The Hamlet* ends is devoid of any exploration of "the moral side." The Auteur is described as a sadistic child torturing his toys; "to satisfy [his] need for realistic bloodshed, all the extras also had to be killed off" (169). The only true difference with the "John Milius ending" is the absence of mind-altering substances. *The Hamlet*'s heroes are not warmongering hippies but old-fashioned American champions. As Wayne's Green Berets, they fight and die for the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese, not in the name of a renegade empire founded on blood and opium. Shamus is no Charles Manson—he has none of Milius' Kurtz "acid fascism" (Gazi 9). Besides this, however, the characters are virtually superimposable. Both are described as lean men in uniform (even if the *ur*-Kurtz's is "ripped and bloodied") who always carry a firearm. As Peter Cowie notes, the *ur*-Kurtz's identity "as a John Wayne of the jungle is unmistakable: 'He wears a green beret and he has close-cropped hair and a tough jutting jaw'" (38). This is consistent with Shamus' aura of a seasoned cold warrior who was "baptized in the blood of his own comrades on the beaches of Normandy, survived another near-death experience under a Chinese human-wave attack in Korea, then hauled himself up the ranks on a pulley oiled with Jack Daniel's" (*TS* 121). Shamus looks nothing like Brando's Kurtz, the latter being a warrior-poet in black pajamas that never

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leaves the rooms of his compound. Unlike Brando's character, we see Shamus in action all right. Like Milius' *ur*-Kurtz, he dies fighting the enemy. Bellamy too is closer to a Milius character than to a Coppola's. His looks and attitude are perfectly in line with the "Green Beret mentality" permeating Milius' screenplay, a mentality "born of an arrogance, a self-image that does not allow one to wallow, even momentarily, in self-pity as Willard does" (Chown 141). If we consider that the character was initially supposed to be played by Steve McQueen, it all adds up. *The Hamlet* is an oddity, a classic war movie of the 1960s made with the same impetus behind the "imaginary Norris-Stallone Vietnam constructs" of the 1980s. This is precisely what springs from the fingertips of the Auteur: a "super John Wayne," an unambiguously prowar, counterfactual *Apocalypse Now,* at the end of which Willard is shown *mourning* Kurtz instead of killing him. Put simply, *The Hamlet* ends up like John Milius' *Apocalypse*, not Coppola's. As Nguyen *did* read the above quotation by Coppola about disliking Milius' script's ending and acknowledges the existence of a "John Milius version of *Apocalypse Now* that never got made," one could equally surmise that he devised the scene (and the movie) accordingly. But why? What is the point in having John Milius directing *Apocalypse Now*?

The answer lies in the second part of Coppola's quotation ("the moral side"). As we have seen, Nguyen pierces through *Apocalypse*'s contradictions with the precision of a surgeon. In his fiction, the movie becomes "a thing of beauty and horror." Nguyen strips it of its artistry by reducing it to its rotten roots ("horror"), until the only thing left is the craftmanship that made it possible ("beauty"). Such craftmanship makes the film much more dangerous that if it was a regular B-movie. *The Hamlet* is said to be "a creation whose purpose was destruction" (*TS*, 276). It is like a shiny silver pistol with a pearl grip made by "the technical genius of a master gunsmith." Harry's sets and the "Renaissance painterly shading" (*TS* 275) of the cinematography are put at the service of a director who will cement his legacy only by the

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means of the "greatest blowup of cinematic history." Reducing *Apocalypse* to his explosions is only possible by cutting down Coppola's movie to its foundation. Accordingly, Nguyen eradicates any contradiction by bringing the movie back to its former evolutionary stage. Giaime Alonge argues that determining how much is left of Milius' screenplay within *Apocalypse* is a false problem, in that the script is but the canvas on which Coppola painted (2). Nguyen would undoubtedly agree. He devised *The Hamlet* as a counterfactual *Apocalypse* in which the Miliusian elements stands out from the rest—in a way, he painted the canvas back to white to better show surface imperfections. His point is that Coppola's *Apocalypse* is *still* Miliusian to the very marrow. If one scratches the surface, not only Coppola's (supposedly) antiwar movie still hides inside the jingoistic rhetoric of Milius' "super John Wayne movie," but both treat the Vietnamese and the Montagnards as little more than landscape elements. Coppola's "moral side," that is, Kurtz's epiphany, according to which the Americans have to 'go native' and embrace the enemy's savagery, is but a long and convoluted way of saying what Milius' script does since the opening sequence. One needs no more than read the very first lines of the 1975 draft:

1. PRIMEVAL SWAMP - EARLY DAWN

> It is very early in the dawn - blue light filters through
> the jungle and across a foul swamp. A mist clings to the
> trees. This could be the jungle of a million years ago.

The only difference between the blatant racism of a screenplay that reduces age-old lands and cultures to "primeval swamp[s]" and the finalized movie is that the latter conceals the same

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view under a strong critique of American hypocrisy. Had *Apocalypse* been made as it was originally intended, it would be rife with King Congs yelling things like "Drive the Yankee Devil into the sea! —we have nothing to lose but our chains!" (qtd. in Cowie,43) as the 1969 script is. Even in this case, the novel exposes this state of things by mercilessly zeroing the distance between the two. If the making of the film was indeed a roll of the dice, *The Hamlet* was one of the other five numbers that could have come up but did not. Under Brando's stellar performance, Coppola's frantic rewrites, and Walter Murch's brilliant editing—Nguyen says—still lies the original Milius' imprint. Under the thin veneer of *Apocalypse*'s artistry, still lurks the "super John Wayne movie."

Keep in mind, Nguyen is not asking us to "cancel" the movie. Nobody is asking anybody to burn DVDs of a work of art that is taught in international film schools worldwide. The point is rather to rethink Coppola's work from a different angle. In fact, the following truths can coalesce: 1) *Apocalypse Now* is a masterpiece of a movie; 2) *Apocalypse Now* is a dangerous movie; 3) *Apocalypse Now* is a dangerous movie *in that* it is a masterpiece of a movie. Yes, *Apocalypse Now* is beautiful. Yet, it also erases the Vietnamese. Yes, *The Deer Hunter* is a gut-wrenching testament on how the war shattered a whole generation. Yet, it also distorts facts and depicts the Vietnamese either as "demonic or decadent variations of the 'yellow peril'" (Quart 165). Yes, *Full Metal Jacket* is a finely made examination of how the military turn kids into monsters. Yet, its portraying of Vietnamese women did some serious damage (Nguyen 2021c). The whole point of the Hollywood subplot is to make one see both sides of the issue—as 'the captain' always does. This is yet another duality in *The Sympathizer*'s crowded landscape of double-edged truths. Prestige cinematic depictions of war, the novel shows, are all equally made of beauty and horror. It is impossible to focus on one to the detriment of the other—one has to take into account both.

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In fact, one could even make the case that the plot of *The Sympathizer* is in itself a sort of secret remake of *Apocalypse Now*. The fact that Nguyen's narrator has the same military rank of Willard is not to be seen as accidental. In both cases, we see a captain embarking on a perilous journey into Southeast Asia to find a mysterious man. The only difference is that the journey of Nguyen's captain is not a voyage back in time but a voyage back in ideology. At the end of it, his quest does not lead him into the folds of a Miliusian philosophy of "going native," but into a rude political awakening which strips Nguyen's revolutionary of his revolution. In both cases, however, we see the captain reaching the culmination of his journey by encountering a character shrouded in shade. Man's is indeed "a 'voice' reminiscent of Kurtz deep in the heart of another darkness," as Pat C. Hoy II notes (689):

> At the far end of the room was a platform bed, draped in a cloud of mosquito netting behind which a shadow stirred. …[*H*]*e* emerged from the bed recesses, a visage of fearful asymmetry. … He coughed, and a marble rattled in his throat. (*TS* 311)

Both Man and Kurtz emerge coughing from a bed in the shadows of an unhealthy place. Both are sick men delivering higher truths (the need for 'going native'; the failures of Vietnamese communism). Both Willard and Nguyen's narrator come to accept these higher truths because deep in their hearts they already knew them. Also, both Coppola and Nguyen discard the idea of ending the story with a 'Miliusian' bang rather than with a whimper. As Nguyen revealed to Jing Tsu, in his initial plans "the ending of the novel was actually, … much more Hollywood-esque … there would be a big shootout and a 'mano a mano' confrontation" (2016c). Instead—as Coppola did—he closed the novel with a prolonged confrontation between two men. If one thinks about it, the spaces where this confrontation happens are also very similar. The reeducation camp and Kurtz's compound are both 'modernist' places whose walls echo quotes

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by T.S. Eliot and James Joyce. All around them lies a dark wasteland or an impenetrable wilderness. In fact, both stories do not want to "reference specific geography" and turn Southeast Asia into a "nonspecific," "mythical" fantasy landscape. Both stories see a quester forced to embrace a new philosophy by his captors while detained in a bamboo cage. Both stories end with the man shrouded in darkness asking the captain to kill him, thus putting him out of his misery. But more than anything, both stories are "confessions" told by a first-person narrator to an undisclosed audience in an undisclosed setting. In Milius' *Apocalypse*, Willard tells his story on the deck of a cabin cruiser. In Coppola's version of the story, the "lieu narratif" and the narratee(s) remain ambiguous. In *The Sympathizer*, the "lieu narratif" is the camp itself, and the narratee/confessor is the man shrouded in darkness. However, we learn of this not before having passed the hurdle of the first 295 pages. Thus, Nguyen's fantasy of revenge, as scathing as it is, cannot do without circling back to the very story it is making fun of.

* * *

Summing up, Nguyen's fantasy of revenge is a two-pronged attack, a double strike as lethal as the ones called in by Bellamy and Willard. He turns *Apocalypse Now* into *The Green Berets* and simultaneously reverts it back to Milius' jingoistic script. But what is key here is the stylistic register he adopts. The Hollywood subplot baffles many readers as it seems to appear out of nowhere. Here, the pace of the early part of the novel stops abruptly. The narrator transmutes from a paranoid double agent into a cinephile who reminisces about his time as a "lovelorn movie fan passing Saturday afternoons in the cinematic bliss of matinee screenings" (*TS*, 123). As we have seen, here 'the captain' becomes a narrative vessel for the author's (scholarly) perspectives. To exact his revenge, Nguyen makes fun of Hollywood's Vietnam

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tropes and cliches by mixing them until is impossible to tell one apart from the other. Accordingly, almost every critic and scholar describe *The Hamlet* simply as a "parody" of *Apocalypse Now* and its ilk. Nonetheless, if we draw from Gérard Genette's theories on transtextuality such a definition may appear narrow. As Genette argues,

> The notion, so commonly found, of a 'parody of genre' is a pure chimera, unless one sees it explicitly or implicitly as a *parody* in the sense of satirical imitation. One can parody only particular texts; one can imitate only a genre (a corpus, no matter how narrow, that is treated as a genre)—for the simple reason … that *to imitate is to generalize*. (84, in italics in the text)

Satirical imitation seems more to be the case of *The Hamlet*. Far from being a mere "hyperbolic send-up" of *Apocalypse Now*, the fictive movie takes it out on Hollywood's Vietnam as a whole. Borrowing another Genettian definition, it could be defined as a "caricature," that is, "an imitation in satiric mode whose primary function is derision" (85). The ideal state of a caricature is that of an "imitation *perceptible as such*" (87, in italics in the text), that "always 'exaggerates' the characteristic traits of its model" (87). Thus, its prerequisite is the awareness of the model on the reader's part. "[A] nonidentified imitation … does not necessarily provoke laughter" (86), says Genette. In fact, if one is not familiar with Hollywood's Vietnam, *The Hamlet* as a satire does not make much sense. Nguyen's caricature rests on the fact that an aware reader would immediately associate Shamus' final words to Kurtz's, the motorcycle mugging to the one in *Full Metal Jacket*, Danny Boy to Hamchuck, and so on. However, there are ways and ways of imitating a genre. Genette distinguishes between "pastiche" and "caricature" as imitation modes insofar as the first conveys a "comic" effect and the second a "satiric" one (88). To give a practical example, let us consider a real Vietnam War movie spoof, Jim Abrahams' *Hot Shots! Part Deux* (1993). The protagonist, Topper, is a laughable, over-the-top

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version of John Rambo, with headband and all, portrayed by Charlie Sheen. In the case of *Hot Shots,* the connections with Hollywood's Vietnam are obvious. Not only the movie references *Platoon* by having the same actor as the lead, but it has also Richard Crenna from the *First Blood* saga reprising his Colonel role from the original Rambo movies. What is more, a scene contains a cameo by Martin Sheen in full Willard attire reading the Kurtz dossier on the deck of a facsimile of *Apocalypse*'s PBR. In the scene, Charlie Sheen and his father Martin merge Willard's voiceover from *Apocalypse* with that of Chris from *Platoon*, playing up the notion of the real-life kinship between the two actors. In doing so, *Hot Shots* also establishes a genealogy of cinematic Vietnam veterans waxing hard-boiled monologues. As both actors repeat the same lines from the original movies, the joke is meant to be a wink to an aware audience. Even so, the mockery is light in tone. *Hot Shots* makes fun of the 'Hollywood Vietnam' genre without questioning its politics. It is a harmless, "comic" depiction; using Genette's terminology, one could call it a "pastiche." *The Hamlet*, as we have seen, is instead scorching and vitriolic to say the least. The movie references (*Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, *First Blood Part II*) are mostly the same of *Hot Shots*, but the spirit is wildly different. The wink to the audience is always there, except this time is not accompanied with a benevolent smile, as in Abrahams' film, but with the bitter, scoffing smirk of defiance of someone exacting his long due revenge. The mode is satirical, the allusions are identifiable, and the "primary function is derision." In Genettian terms, that would fit the definition of "caricature."

If we look more closely, however, *The Hamlet* proves harder to classify. For starters, one should not forget that this is *not* a movie. *The Hamlet* is a rather unique case—a *literary parody film*. Bits of movie script, scene descriptions, are all still part of a *text*, the fragmented film novelization of a never-made movie. Now, Genette speaks of film adaptations as "*hyperartistic* practices" (384). He makes clear that such derivational practices "exceed [his]

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competence" (384) and does not include them in his nomenclature. At one point, however, he does mention Woody Allen's *Play It Again, Sam* as a case of "cinematographic hypertextuality (hyperfilmicity)" (156) because of the movie's connection with Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca*. In the case of *The Hamlet,* we do not have a movie adapting a movie, but a novel subplot adapting a film genre. To make sense of such a textual element, let us go back a little bit. Genette's system (1997, 1-5) is comprised of five subtypes of transtexuality: 1) intertextuality (quoting, plagiarizing, alluding); 2) paratextuality (those "secondary signals" such as pre/postfaces, footnotes, headers, etc., that provide a text with a "setting and sometimes a commentary"); 3) metatextuality (the more or less explicit critical relationship which "unites a given text to another"); 4) hypertextuality; 5) architextuality (how a given text is designed as part of one or more genres). The fourth subtype is the one around which Genette's *Palimpsests* is centered; it specifically concerns texts derived from other preexistent texts. In his words, "[b]y hypertextuality I mean any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext* to an earlier text A (I shall … call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary" (5). A given hypertext can have one or more hypotexts depending on the case. Genette speaks of "*devaluation*" (354) in the case of derived texts that refute or demystify their models, the classic example being Henry Fielding's *Shamela*. In such a case we are dealing with a "devaluating hypertext" which accomplishes "something like an *aggravation*, which may only emphasize its hypotext's secret bent" (355, in italics in the text). Case in point is Bellamy calling the air strike on King Cong's lair (as in Milius' script) in lieu of Willard leaving Kurtz's compound with Lance (as in Coppola's movie). In our case, the aggravation would consist of recentering the violence from *Apocalypse*'s all-American tragedy to the Vietnamese enemies massacred in the screenplay, thus emphasizing the "hypotext's secret bent," that is, the reactionary politics of Milius' script. Nguyen's caricature works

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because it does away with Coppola's supposed "moral side," of *Apocalypse*'s "limited ethical vision," as per which the "white man [is] both human and inhuman [only] at the expense of keeping the other simply inhuman." Put simply, in *The Hamlet* the picture is clearer: (human) Americans save (inhuman) Vietnamese by massacring (inhuman) Vietnamese, and that is all there is to it. This is precisely the point of Nguyen going back to Milius: emphasizing the hypotext's secret bent is the quickest way to prove that the message has *always* been there, hiding in plain sight. That is to say, that Coppola's artistry is but a façade for the "super John Wayne movie" that *Apocalypse Now* was once supposed to be.

This, however, provided that we take *The Hamlet outside* of the diegesis. In the case of hyperfilmicity, Genette provides us with two alternative definitions. In lieu of "hypertext" and "hypotext," when dealing with cinematic caricatures one shall use the terms *hyperfilm* and *hypofilm* (157). *Apocalypse Now*, *The Green Berets*, *Full Metal Jacket*, etc., would be the *hypofilms* on which *The Hamlet* is based. But this comes with a caveat. In the fiction, the movie is purported to be an original, unparalleled work of art that has no equivalent. In this universe, there is no Hollywood Vietnam but one single Movie-with-a-capital-M that stitch them all together. Considering that John Wayne is mentioned in the text as a source of inspiration for the Auteur, one shall surmise that in this reality either the Duke never made *The Green Berets* or that *The Hamlet* is indeed a remake of the original, since their plots, as we have seen, are virtually superimposable. As there is no textual evidence of the latter case, I would go with the first option. Therefore, in the diegesis *The Hamlet* is no "hyperfilm." It is no remake, it is no adaption, it is no second-degree narrative. It does not derive from anything other than the Auteur's war fantasies. On the other hand, if we take the movie *out* of the diegesis it will appear as a regular—if fragmented—devaluating hypertext derived from seven earlier sources. As Nguyen crams all the CIA operatives in South Vietnam into Claude, and all the military top

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brass of the Republic of Vietnam into the General, he does the same with the movie reels, actors, plots, and cliches of Hollywood's Vietnam. Thus, at the risk of overwhelming the reader with Genettian terms, let us provide this brief narratological digression with a partial conclusion. From now on, we shall define *The Hamlet* as a *devaluating hypertext with more hypofilms*; that is, a derived *text*, made of elements from several *films*, meant to refute and demystify its models.

One could ask, what is the point of all these definitions? Or again, what is the point in spending four chapters on the Hollywood subplot in a study concerned with history and first-person narratives? The point is a giant red flag waved by the narrator right at the beginning of Chapter 8. Here, the narrator recalls his first reading of *The Hamlet*'s screenplay. The chapter begins with a quote from the script reported verbatim: "We own the day, but CHARLIE owns the night" (121). Then follows a literary impression of the archetypal voiceover narration that one can find in nearly all the hypofilms informing the devaluating hypertext of *The Hamlet*. Afterwards, the narrator writes: "This, at any rate, was my interpretation of the screenplay" (*TS*, 122). This small passage can easily be missed. But if we also keep in mind that Man tortures the narrator because the latter has (deliberately?) withheld a vital piece of information from his confession, the occurrence will invite suspicion. In the Coda, we will learn that 'the captain' has failed to report the 1972 episode of the rape of the communist agent in the Special Branch headquarters when writing the I-Confession. This development casts a shadow of doubt on his credibility as a narrating self. Is 'the captain' a reliable narrator? Can the reader trust him? Come to think about it, how could a memoirist remember all the dialogues, exchanges, and—in this case—screenplay bits, to the point of reporting them word for word at a distance of years? More evidence piles up if we consider the mental state of the narrator when writing the confession(s). In the case of the I-Confession, his life and freedom are (literally) on the line, as he is pouring rivers of ink on the page under coercion to exculpate himself in the face of his

218:1102760718

superiors. Despite this, he cannot help but writing exactly as he pleases. While in the reeducation camp, he embellishes his prose as a defiant student in an MFA workshop. While outside, he is instead a deranged, mentally instable individual who speaks of himself in the second person. In writing the Coda, he is finally able to give vent to his imagination. Free of any constraint, he adopts avant-garde styles and solutions to make sense of what he had gone through. In this section, as Nguyen put it to me in Dallas, "he's trying to deal with this obviously horrifying trauma … And I think in his mind, simply writing prose would not have been enough to try to convey what is going on" (2022b→Appendix). Now, since the third installment of the saga is still unaccounted for, there is no way to draw definitive conclusions. As Nguyen told me, "When the third and final novel is written, there will be yet again another audience … that will re-contextualize how we read the first and the second book." Thus, at the moment there is a clear limit on the number of speculations one is allowed to make. However, if we decide to deal with *The Sympathizer* as with an *independent* text, leaving *The Committed* partially out of the picture and ignoring the fact that the story is unresolved and still in progress, one thing seems to be already clear. Namely, that Nguyen's narrator is slowly but inexorably morphing into an artist. Even considering only the first novel, the Coda alone with its theatrical chapters is there to prove it. In it, the narrator speaks explicitly of "my readers" (*TS* 316). If we take into account Chapter 8's admission ("This, at any rate, was my interpretation of the screenplay"), as well as the idea that the I-Confession is faulty and filled with holes, we derive a picture in which Nguyen's distortions and diversions may paradoxically find a *diegetic* justification. It is not unconceivable that, say, the narrator would recreate *The Hamlet* at his leisure, emphasizing the movie's worst aspects and weaknesses, thus piecing together a reimagination (and a revenge fantasy) entirely *of his own*. It is not impossible, in other words, that *he* is the one penning down the most "aggravating" elements of the devaluating hypertext, especially considering that he

219:1858970242

states to having written "many versions" (296) of the manuscript during his first year in the camp, with plenty chances of improving his story. This, if nothing else, would account for the anomaly of having a grade B movie made with a Renaissance, Storaro-like cinematography, as well as for the uncanny precision with which 'the captain' reports whole samples of *The Hamlet*'s screenplay. Also, the representative tasked with offering compensation to the bedbound narrator after the on-set incident speaks of the troupe as "us Italians" (*TS* 194), thus signaling another connection with *Apocalypse*'s all-Roman crew. If we consider that the Auteur is supposed to be of Greek American descent, this could be a clue that the narrator is Freudian-slipping between 'reality' and his own version of the story. Perhaps, there is no *Hamlet*, the Movie is indeed a heavily disguised *Apocalypse Now*, and the narrator is not being entirely sincere when writing the confession. But then again, why should he?

This is even more so in the larger context of the novel. In fact, the suspicion of being faced with an unreliable narrative is concrete. Such an impression forces one to rethink many elements of the story. Issues like the repressed memory of the rape compel us to reevaluate the narrator's truthfulness as well as his motivations in writing the way he writes. As Karl Ashoka Britto puts it, "we cannot take [his] authenticity at face value. The confession, after all, has been extracted through torture … [and] the narrator is still imprisoned as he writes the pages that describe his interrogation … that the man who ordered his torture will read" (2019, 375). Also, one has to consider that the diegetic manuscript we are reading is purported to be the work of an unhinged, traumatized narrating self (who is also becoming a sort of late-blooming writer). In fact, we should not forget that this is a man who talks to himself while in public—one who claims to be followed by the ghosts of the people he killed, and that in the second novel will be aptly nicknamed "Crazy Bastard." All of this drives us to asking ourselves whether Nguyen's diversions, distortions, and refractions are to be found only *outside* the confessional frame. That

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being the case, we are led to reconsider the confessional style adopted by the narrator, his conversion path from prisoner to memoirist, as well as all the most pressing question of it all, asked to the narrator by his blood brother/handler/torturer, Man, in the midst of the 'theatrical' interrogation: "Who did you think you were writing to?" (*TS*, 344). In other words, if *The Sympathizer* is a confession, who is the *confessor*?

In this second part, we have seen how Nguyen dealt with cinematic (mis)representations of war by dismantling a whole film genre in one single blow. By overtly twisting the facts, he fought fire with fire, contrasting Hollywood's fabrication with a fabrication of his own. In Nguyen's Hollywood the stereotype ratio is reversed. White auteurs, thespians, idols, and scenographers all become caricatures, while the tragedy of the refugee extras forced to play a part in their own misrepresentation is put to the forefront. The subplot exposes the logic of exploitation underlying the entire process chain of Hollywood's 'Vietnam-in-the-Philippines' by turning a timeless masterpiece into a second-rate movie, also bringing to light to the seedy backstories behind its making. By reading *The Hamlet* as a Hollywood impossibility, we have also seen how Nguyen's fantasy of revenge is patently bereft of any realism. Since we are dealing with a first-person narrative the reliability of which is oftentimes doubtful, this begs the question as to what extent that what is contained in the I-Confession is to be taken at face value. Now, let us conclude this study by focusing on this question, and by seeing all the issues we tackled so far finally coming to a head. It is time to see what lies behind the confessional frame around which *The Sympathizer* is structured.

221:5364504552

4. What Exceeds the Frame: A Conclusion

"Confession is not absolution." ("The Big Payback," *Atlanta*, 28.23).

When I approach him in the lounge of the Fairmont Hotel, in the heart of Downtown Dallas, Viet Thanh Nguyen is writing something on his laptop. It is still early, but the well-stocked bar counter is already bustling with activity. We take a seat surrounded by the humming of background music and the chatter of patrons. Soon, the lavish hall of the Fairmont also starts to echo of reeducation camps, refugees, and confessions. Carving thirty minutes out of his tight schedule, Nguyen answers all my questions about language, structure, "fiction that is fictionally memoiristic," and the like. Among the many things, he also gives me confirmation of what I already thought. Namely, that the direction in which his novel trilogy is moving envisages a narrator who is "trying to push the limits of what he can write." At this stage of the sympathizer's saga, Nguyen confirms me, 'the captain'/Vo Danh is indeed metamorphosing into a literary author of his own.

This would account for every oddity, every forgery, every detail that does not fit. At one point in the I-Confession, the narrator counts "the modernist novel" among the things he "would miss about America" (269), thus explicitly foreshadowing the stylistic solutions he will use in the Coda. One can deduce that by writing this way he is covertly turning his life into a modernist novel. The idea of the reeducation camp as a workshop, the concept of a self-narrative produced under duress, is key to understand his development as an artist. As in the sequel novel, where Vo Danh will be eventually "committed" to a psychiatric ward, the "lieu narratif" itself points out to the character's refusal to "tell a cohesive narrative" (Đinh). He is becoming a writer, a writer who writes for himself. The more he writes, the more he figures that nobody will

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understand him. This would also account for a reoccurring image one can find in *The Sympathizer*, that of the narrator as a *book*. In the novel, metaphors are never innocent. Movies become tanks, extras become zombies, and Katyusha rockets fired by NVA artillery hiss "in the distance like librarians demanding silence" (34) as to foreshadow the years of Stalinist austerity about to befall the country. Wooden clocks made in the shape of South Vietnam, eternally set to Saigon time, adorn the walls of Vietnamese California, marking the days of a displaced community who lives "in two time zones, the here and the there, the present and the past" (192). The refugee themselves become "reluctant time travelers" that do not move "forward or backward in time" (192) but only in circles, as the clock hands do. Nguyen's debut is riddled with such images. Far from providing a realistic account, the voice of his narrator reshapes the world into an impressionistic landscape full of meaning. Two of such metaphors are perhaps less noticeable than those listed above, yet perhaps equally significant. Not incidentally, both can be found in the very two sections of the novel at the center of this study, the Hollywood subplot and the reeducation camp chapters. The first one can be found in Chapter 8, the one in which the Auteur is introduced. While facing him in his office for the very first time, the narrator masks his irritation with the screenplay by "remaining as unreadable as a paper package wrapped up with string" (124). Some chapters later, we will learn that these lines are in fact written on a paper sheet that is part of a manuscript that *will* be wrapped as a package: first, in "watertight plastic" (365), and then "rubber-banded" (*TC* 340). What if the "paper package" is "unreadable" because it conceals a heap of paper sheets? What if the narrator is seeing himself as his manuscript? A more explicit comparison may be found at the end of Chapter 20, the one in which the novel's central *anagnorisis* takes place. Here, the narrator recognizes his blood brother Man as the camp commissar, the one man supervising his reeducation. In the growing delirium induced by *KUBARK*-style sleep deprivation, the narrator

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slips on his own words. In lieu of *The Sympathizer*'s opening line, the Ralph Ellison-inspired "I'm a spy, a sleeper, a spook" (1), the narrator deconstructs his own initial statement, once again resorting to rhymes to emphasize the absurdity:

> I was only mistaken to be that somebody, because I was, I told him, or thought I did, a nobody. I am a lie, a keeper, a book. No! I am a fly, a creeper, a gook. No! I am—I am—I am— (325)

Each of all words used in the two triplets deserves critical attention. Here, in essence, 'the captain' sees himself through the eyes of others. The racial slur unmistakably denotes the way Americans see him. The insect comparison, on the other hand, could hint at his (odd) place in the new communist society. As a man of two minds, a walking antithesis incapable of choosing a side, he is but a nuisance in the eyes of the Commandant, a "fly" not unlike those infesting the very bamboo gulag he is currently detained. Flies have compound eyes that view the world from a 360-degrees angle, forming multifaceted images. This would add up with the narrator's condition of seeing every issue from both sides. Indeed, by infiltrating the Special Branch, the refugee community, Hollywood, and even his own revolution, the narrator ends the novel as a fly on the wall that sees everything while remaining unseen. The dichotomy "keeper/creeper," for its part, exemplifies the cost of his double loyalties. 'The captain' is Bon's keeper yet is also the infiltrator who 'crept' behind enemy lines without his knowledge. It may also be said that as an infiltrator he 'creeped' on the refugee community as a poison ivy growing on a tree trunk. Moreover, "a creeper" denotes someone hideous, a freak, a loner keeping people off. In this sense, the description fits more Vo Danh, 'the captain''s alter ego in *The Committed*—a more traumatized, deranged version of the same character. In fact, the very moment in which 'the captain' starts morphing into Vo Danh (that is, the moment when the "keeper" becomes the

224:3335470373

"creeper") is the torture session that forms the bulk of the Coda, where this Freudian slippage can be found.

But on top of that, the narrator's "performative 'I am,'" as Sunny Xiang (420) defines it, exhibits a metaphor that is key. "I am a lie," "I am a book," he says. As with the "paper package" mentioned in Chapter 8, the narrator is telling us that he and his manuscript are become one. He is "a lie" and "a book," that is, a book full of lies. *He is become his confession*—a confession that is evidently anything but reliable. Here is appropriate to introduce the one character who first sows doubt in the reader in this regard. Facially scarred by a napalm attack during the last battle for Saigon, Man is a man with no face. In a way, he is an objective correlative for postwar Vietnam as we see it in the novel—a modernist "wasteland" scorched by bombs and defoliants. Unbeknownst to his subordinates, his faith in Party orthodoxy has been long shaken. In the long run it will be Man who will grant the narrator and Bon their release from the camp, not before having put the first through the ordeal we have seen. The narrator's slippage occurs amid the panicked realization that Man is aware of his textual omission(s). As an experienced confessor, Man knows that the narrator's confession is in fact anything but a confession. The rape of the communist agent, perpetrated with the narrator's tacit complicity, haunts the 295-pages manuscript as an absent presence. Both the diegetic reader (Man) and the actual reader may or may not decide to take the narrator's justification for the missing detail (his head injury in the Philippines) at face value. To make 'the captain' remember, Man decrees that "now is time for the final revision" (323). This is in fact a twofold process comprised of two tasks. On the one hand, Man is something like a sadistic therapist bent on bringing out a repressed memory, the memory of the rape. His secret aim, though, is to make his friend realize how their shared revolutionary dream has been shattered. What interests us here is the metaphor he uses ("revision"). The only way for the narrator to 1) confess his

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doing nothing in the face of injustice, 2) realize the failure of the revolution, is having the full scope of the *KUBARK* techniques tested on his body. In such a way, the body of the narrator and the body of his work become synonymous. The "final revision" in question is but the "new method of examination" (323) that Man derives from the CIA manual. The narrator becomes a text to be emended, a book full of lies waiting for the inflexible hand of an editor. Here, we also hear echoes of Kafka's influence. In *In the Penal Colony*, the short story who inspired the interrogation scenes (Bell), a torture machine carves sentences on the body of each offender. As words become wounds, the laws of men become flesh. In the end, the machine malfunctions and the officer in charge of it suffers the same fate of his prisoners. In the Coda, Man forces his own disenchantment on the narrator by making the latter agonize over the semantics of Hồ Chí Minh's motto. In *The Sympathizer*, moral conclusions come in the shape of wordplay. As we already mentioned, by twisting Uncle Hồ's adage on itself the narrator comes to the conclusion that Vietnam's thirty-year struggle for independence and freedom was for "nothing." As Anjali Prabhu puts it, "Nguyen bypasses any discussion of his characters' disenchantment with the reality of communism in favor of an ingenious plot that dramatizes the tragedy of that reality and incarnates the structure of thought that spawned it" (390). This dramatization, I might add, must be viewed under the grid of symbolism. If in Kafka's story words are engraved on flesh, here the *KUBARK* method 'inscribes' words on the prisoner's mind. The narrator becomes a revised draft, a book ready to be printed. As 'the captain' gains a new political mindset, his manuscript gains 72 pages. The torture becomes a proofread, a try-out meant to push the writer beyond the limits of "what he can write," that is, beyond the very limits of language. If the narrator is a book, a living text, the Coda is indeed the "final revision" hoped for by Man—the added section in which the memoirist becomes an artist and claims his representation for

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himself. At the very end of it, the narrator is confident that its final sentence will be the one "that will not be revised" (367).

One sees how the metaphor of the narrator-as-a-book works at a variety of layers. In addition of the one seen above, it could also be seen as a reference to the communist thought reform program and its efforts to "remake" people anew. As we have seen, in postwar Vietnam there was no shortage of zealous cadres believing that by forcing people into revising self-criticism reports the state could contextually revise *them*. After the war, South Vietnam itself became a book to be rewritten. Overnight, the whole southern half of the country became a blank page on which to impress the rules of a new creed. In reeducation camps, people and books were indeed considered synonymous: one *had* to pour all of himself onto the page under penalty of abuse or starvation. Interestingly, the torture/revision of *The Sympathizer*'s narrator goes two ways: while the Commandant and the Doctor try to "make over" the narrator, Man's secret bent is to steer him in the opposite direction. Seen under this light, the metaphor inevitably leads us back to the metafiction of the reeducation camp as a fine arts workshop. If the Commandant is a dull-witted, unimaginative literary agent, or an obtuse MFA writer-teacher, Man, the true narratee/confessor, becomes a stand-in for a more enlightened class of reader/editor. In fact, we learn that Man was the narrator's confessor already during wartime. In a passage that spells out the Nguyenian idea of Church and Party as equivalent institutions 'the captain' recalls the days in Saigon when him and Man, both former Catholics, met in the Notre-Dame Cathedral, and his friend would "play [his] confessor, whispering to me absolutions in the shape of assignments rather than prayers" (25), thus unawarely reminding Man (that is secretly reading these lines) his present role in the camp. The fact that Nguyen makes Man a commissar is not to be seen as accidental. Political commissars, historian Douglas Pike summarizes, were an expression of the "dual command-control system" (150), underlying

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the structure of the People's Army of Vietnam. As a "thin pyramid inside a broad-based pyramid" (164), the Party *apparat* controlled the army from within. Commissars were "the single most important Party figure[s] in the entire armed forces structure" (151). They were pastors of conscience, quasi-religious figures, men of faith. In noncommunist armies, Pike maintains, the tasks of a commissar are divided among "the chaplain, the troop information and education officer, and the special services officer" (164). However, none of them retains the kind of power a commissar held in wartime/postwar Vietnam. As their Soviet and Chinese counterparts before them, these cadres oversaw political indoctrination at every level. A commissar was someone to hold onto *and* an inquisitor ready to ferret out those lacking in faith. On the front, conforming to the Maoist People's war precept that ideology and motivation may compensate for lack of military materiel, commissars were deemed of primary importance. As Pike puts it, the "Political Commissar personalizes the impersonal Party, is living breathing proof that the distant Politburo truly cares about each individual" (165). However, its prominence in the chain of command did not fail to cause frictions with the military. To make the arrangement work, a "dual-command system" (166), according to which "a military commander and a Political Commissar could share power," was introduced.[101]

Oddly, *The Sympathizer* recontextualizes this dual dynamic in a metafiction about the American publishing market. Nguyen's Commandant embodies all the superficial traits of a cultural industry insider who reasons according to categories. Nevertheless, for all his orthodoxy he is nowhere near Man when it comes to "ideological consciousness" (309). He admittedly knows little of Marxist-Leninist theory compared to the commissar whom he so much admires. Yet, in the end we will learn that Man has in turn become disillusioned with the

[101] Eventually, the dual-command system lapsed to make way to the idea of a single commander retaining all the functions. However, in the years in which *The Sympathizer* is set, the dual institution was still in place as one can see in the novel.

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revolution and is in turn imprisoned in a role. This places a distance between the implied narratee (the Commandant) and the actual narratee (the Commissar) to which 'the captain' is writing to. I agree with Anjali Prabhu when she says that the narrator's is a "coming to consciousness through telling and, especially, writing [that makes] the entire enterprise thoroughly literary" (390). However, she speaks of a single "internal reader" (Man), when we know for a fact that the narrator's initial audience is made of at least *two* people. In fact, it is as if Nguyen had picked up two distinct personalities as the "confessors," one too shallow, and another more demanding. The commandant is a rigid bureaucrat who will never let the memoirist off the hook until he delivers him what he wants. His approach is dogmatic—his only apparent concern is style. "Confessions are as much about style as content, as the Red Guards have shown us" (300), he declares—"All we ask for is a certain way with words." If one replaces the Red Guards with the tutelary deities of the Western Canon, one will get the gist. Nguyen's is a "little joke" based on the fact that reeducation camps and MFA workshops "both developed at roughly the same time with the rise of communism in East Asia and the rise of the writing workshop in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s" ("Watch Viet Thanh Nguyen at the 2016 Wisconsin Book Festival on C-SPAN"). Paradoxically, Nguyen projects his impatience with MFA standards, a byproduct of a "Cold War agenda that attempted to depoliticize literature and to restructure the canon," according to which "transcendental style and craft are irreducible expressions of individualism" (Tran 2018, 417), on an NVA commandant imbued with Marxist-Leninist doctrine (!), perhaps to suggest that dogmatism has no single political color. During our interview, Nguyen briefly mentions an "interested editor" who "strongly suggested" him to insert a "relationship in the novel" when he was trying to "auction off the book," thus dismantling the whole premise of a novel centered around a character that is "engaging with himself." One could speculate that Nguyen's Commandant

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may be based on such a kind of character. It is against him that the narrator directs his opposition: as Ben Tran puts it, in *The Sympathizer* "[i]ndividualistic defiance against authoritarian dictates is manifested in the autonomy of style" (2018, 417).

On the opposite side we have Man, a disenchanted idealist set to torture his childhood friend, ostensibly for his own good. The first confessor (the one the narrator is aware of) does not really care for the text; the second (the hidden one) is willing to sacrifice the writer's sanity in the name of it. When asking about the communist agent, Man is peremptory: "You must tell us what you did to her. We demand to know!" (324). Man speaking in the plural form is unusual to say the least; when he says, "Was there any fate for her that could differ from what a reader might imagine?" (324), the equivalence is made manifest. This does not sound like a political commissar interrogating a suspected double-cross; this is a beta reader cornering a budding author. Man forces the narrator to face his inadequacies through the text's flaws, again, as to suggest that writer and text are one the mirror of the other. It is as if Man was a projection of *The Sympathizer*'s implied reader, the voice that every writer hears in his/her head at the time of writing, the one s/he needs yet also desperately seeks to expel from it. The way he puts it, the communist agent is a character in the narrator's story and not a real person. The fact that both author and narrator spent two years and two months into a room revising their manuscript, Nguyen confirms me, was "very deliberate." It is no accident that Man's torture of choice is sleep deprivation. If the camp is an MFA program, a creative cage from whence one can escape only by settling for the market's "horizon of expectations," Man's voice coming out of the darkness is that of an internalized reader gnawing on an author's sleep. If we remember that *The Sympathizer* was rejected by thirteen out of fourteen editors, and if we consider that Nguyen honed his craft by writing *The Refugees*, thus spending *twenty years* toiling on *eight* short stories, we can picture him having this kind of problem. Indeed, *The Sympathizer* at large can

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be seen as a monstrous allegory of one writer's misery. The message is that craft is a byproduct of pain: to write is to suffer, to confine oneself into an isolation cell, to entrust one's representation to faceless confessors. Man is both the narrator's best friend and his examiner, the one who is trying to save him *and* the one who is responsible for his ordeal. If the narrator is a book, and the commandant is a short-sighted editor, Man is the fair-but-strict beta reader cutting off chapters and passages.[102]

The book metaphor also rests on the idea of not owning one's representation. A revealing passage in the Hollywood subplot shows how, in the mind of the narrator, there is no great difference between Vietnam-in-the-Philippines and a communist reeducation camp. "Still smarting from my wounds even now," says 'the captain,' "I cannot help but wonder, writing this confession, whether I own my own representation or whether you, my confessor, do" (187). Both the Auteur and the Commandant, the narrator suggests, are people in charge of other people's stories. If the Auteur treats Asian lives as building blocks for his movie monument, the Commandant holds power over hundreds of self-narratives. No one will leave the camp before having publicly disavowed one's past life under the Republic. In the eyes of senior officials, camp inmates are but recycled paper to be written over. Depending on the gravity of the offence, all the camp prisoners are "decadent" books to be censored, banned, or even burned in a square. Their stories must be erased in order to make way for a new narrative of national harmony in which a bloody civil war between Vietnamese simply becomes "the American War." Hidden connections between the reeducation chapters and the Hollywood subplot foreground this concept. For one, one will not fail to note how the interrogation dialogue in the Coda is presented in script form, echoing the excerpts from *The Hamlet* quoted in the I-

[102] The metaphor is even plainer in *The Committed*, where the narrator's new beta reader, the Parisian Aunt—an editor by profession—will sing the praise of her nephew Man as a skilled proofreader.

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Confession. Both sides of the confession point the finger at power institutions exerting a hold over other people's stories. As Karl Ashoka Britto puts it, "What is at stake here is not so much the objective truth of the scene[s] described by the narrator but rather the novel's insistence upon staging his narrative as a confession, produced under constraint and compelled to exist in the service of a structure of power that sets the terms of representation itself" (2019, 375). The novel's suggestion is that Hollywood and the Party are not so different from one another, as both firmly wield control over "means of representation." Seen from this angle, the disproportion between a multibillion-dollar movie industry and an impoverished Stalinist regime of Southeast Asia matters little. At the theoretical level, both *Apocalypse Now* and the thought reform program are hegemonic narratives hosing lives "off memory's laminated floor." In fact, the idea of (not) owning one's representation highlights how there is no single "floor." While the American movie industry turned Vietnam and his peoples into a backdrop, the Lao Động made them fit a national myth according to which the country stood united against foreign invaders from the get-go. According to this narrative, the victors expurgated South Vietnam from a handful of lackeys and traitors, to then grant these latter the opportunity of redeeming themselves by rejoining society as men "made over." In Party-mandated historiography, the thought reform program is still depicted as a policy of clemency.[103] As Nguyen argues throughout *Nothing Ever Dies*, both of these narratives (Hollywood's and the Party's), as well as the anticommunist rhetoric of the diaspora, are founded on the erasure of other narratives. At the basis of the novel lies this unspoken connection between power and stories.[104] Indeed,

[103] I quote from an English-written textbook targeted at international readers: "These reasonable measures did contribute to the restoration and strengthening of political security in South Vietnam, and its rapid return to normal conditions" (Quảng 645).

[104] Of course, the idea of owning one's representation is also susceptible to be read as part of the metafictional reeducation camp/publishing industry allegory. "When you publish a book," Nguyen tells me, "Do you own it, or does someone else own it? … Once the manuscript is not something that you have for yourself, but other people have it, and they have the authority to do things to it, then you don't, truly, completely own that manuscript, yeah?" Given all this, the "confessor" may very well be an editor, an agent, a publishing house, or a reader.

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the foundation of Nguyen's twofold project is the idea that 1) stories are mightier than history; 2) not every story has the same weight because of geopolitics and power (un)balances. As a self-narrative that with its own existence stubbornly resists being hosed off "memory's laminated floor[s]," *The Sympathizer* complements *Nothing Ever Dies* as a fiction/non-fiction diptych grounded in the same soil. "The person who has the confession," Nguyen tells me, "is the one with the ownership of it, in the sense that they can force him to rewrite it if they want to, they can destroy it if they want to… because [he does not] have any power … in that situation." In such a scenario, what is one's confession, one's story, if not one's entire self, one's identity? What would be the difference between writer and manuscript? The narrator makes this very clear in the last pages of the Coda, when he maintains that written words are the "best attempt to represent ourselves against all those who sought to represent us" (364). Even in this case the narrator-as-a-we embodies multiple allegiances. Here, "we" could refer to the split-personality of the narrator and/or the Vietnamese refugee community, but it can also be extended to a great deal of minority experiences, class struggles, and forgotten war stories. In a way, it could be very well co-opted by anyone that feels like not owning his/her representation, whatever the case and the reason may be. Nguyen would probably disagree, but to an extent not to own one's representation may very well be a *universal* condition.

The narrator-as-a-book metaphor also leads us back to the idea of the confessional frame. All first-person narratives are enclosures, opaque containers in which readers are trapped. In such narratives, there is no distinction between voice and text: in a way, the text is the voice, and the voice is the text. In reading *The Sympathizer*, one finds oneself imprisoned in the frame as the narrator is held captive in the cell. What exceeds the frame, one can only surmise. This especially true when it comes to dialogues and characters. As in every retrospective self-narrative—including reeducation memoirs—is very natural to ask oneself how a narrator could

233:3611273068

remember so accurately exchanges that are so far back in time. The inescapable conclusion is that s/he cannot. In the fiction of *The Sympathizer*, self-report becomes self-invention. To enforce this, Nguyen employs a unique narrative ruse—he does away with quotation marks. Every dialogue (or monologue) in the novel is basically undistinguishable from the whole of the textual body. According to Ben Tran, the ruse allows Nguyen to avoid "naturalizing translated speech into accepted English-language syntax and idioms" (2018, 416). "Literary dubbing" turns the narrator's implied Vietnamese into literary English, thus blurring "the discrepancies between the implied language and the language of representation" (416) into an indistinct togetherness. As Nguyen told Karl Ashoka Britto,

> We worry about the realism of depicting what people are going through. I wanted, first, to dispatch that right away, and second, to find formal methods to deal with it anyway. So that's why there's so much free indirect discourse in *The Sympathizer*, no use of quotation marks. That technique means that often you don't know whether the language reflects what the character is thinking in his mind or what people are actually saying. (2018)

Indirect discourse is therefore another strategy of implausibility put at the service of Nguyen's counter-representational project. As Timothy K. August claims, the narrator's self-appointed role as a processer of "multiple points of view," one able to mediate "the flow of otherness" is contextually put into question by his effective incapability to "represent others in a manner that gives voice to the plurality of actors he encounters" (2021, 117). Notwithstanding the enduring misconception of *The Sympathizer* as the ultimate 'Vietnamese side of the story,' Nguyen's rejection of realism makes clear how readers are *not* supposed to see the novel as "the balanced account of the Vietnam War missing from previous iterations of the war story" (117). The twofold confession is in fact anything but "balanced." No soliloquy could be it, let alone the inner monologue of a deranged "man of two minds" remembering his life from an isolation

234:3088993499

cell. When I ask Nguyen how the narrator's voice sounds in his head, he turns my question around by answering that "the voice of the character is who he is… it's inseparable from his character, his personality, his politics, everything about him." The voice, he implies, is not a voice. It is no *sound*; voice and story, ideas and characters, narrator and book, are all one. Not knowing whether the narrator says one thing aloud because of the 'no-quotation-marks' ruse is to constantly put his reliability into question. Occasional slippages of his ("I told him, or thought I did") make this very clear. Moreover, one is often unable to tell apart the narrator's voice from that of other characters. The fact that there are no significant variations of linguistic register when it comes to the way these characters speak does not make it easier. In the novel, Hollywood directors, university professors, and first-generation refugees fresh off the tarmac all express themselves in a comparable manner. Period accuracy, language patterns, inflections, mannerisms, are virtually nonexistent. Again, this was done on purpose. As Nguyen told Britto,

> In *The Sympathizer*, I also don't let the grammatical flaws of people who are speaking English as a second language appear, for very deliberate reasons. Finally, inasmuch as I don't want to stigmatize Vietnamese people in the imaginations of non-Vietnamese readers who will automatically judge characters who speak "broken" English, I do the complete opposite as a narrator by writing in an English so extremely literary that no one can ever dare question my authenticity as a writer, or the fluency of my narrator. They can be taken aback, and they can say this is not realistic, but they will not be able to question my competence as a writer. That was a very deliberate choice for me. (2018)

This could also find justification in the diegesis. Had Nguyen written a multi-voice, polyphonic novel centered on multiple perspectives, the challenge could have been harder. A fictional reeducation memoir, on the other hand, proves ideal. Literary dubbing flattens everything and everyone to a monochord voiceprint, a monologic utterance in which there is no demarcation

235:2020270691

line between the self and the world he inhabits. The narrator becomes the speakers, and the speakers become the narrator: this is a *single* voice which contains every other—a voice that, as Nguyen puts it to me, "carries everything." The narrator is not a reporter as much as a ventriloquist, a stand-up comedian making impressions. Not incidentally, one will find little to no physical description of any character in the text—narrator included. In the theater of his mind, the characters become *his* characters, recurring actors playing multiple roles, each taking turns on the stage. They are not real individuals, but dream-projections with vague shapes and interchangeable traits.[105] They have names-function because he frames them this way, as characters-function, visible embodiments of the invisible forces that shaped his life. They come out as heightened, more extreme versions of people who (supposedly) exist outside the confessional frame. We do not see the "real" Auteur, or the "real" Commandant: we see how *he* sees them, how he reimagines them, either in his folly or in his artistry, or both. In short, through the confession-as-a-frame, the narrator transmutes those who own(ed) his representations into representations *he* can own.

In conclusion, history and confession are the one tools used by Viet Thanh Nguyen to expose narratives as structures of power. Borrowing from the title of a 1992 collection of scripts and interviews by filmmaker/theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha, one could say that his narrator does nothing but *frame* his *framers*. As Hollywood did with the memory of the war, or the Party with the stories of its enemies, the narrator too operates a distortion. All the fabrications, inconsistencies, and poor characterizations reported in the two-pronged confession are to be seen as part of a reimagination. If the I-Confession turns tragedy into farce, the Coda imbues it with avant-garde solutions. In both cases, the narrator's is an artistic enterprise: in the first part

[105] In this respect, it is interesting to note that the upcoming HBO adaptation of the novel is reported to feature actor Robert Downey Jr. playing *all* the white characters, as to emphasize their interchangeability in the story.

236:3399653193

of the manuscript, he is mending facts to dupe the Commandant; in the second, he is mimicking Samuel Beckett to make sense of what had happened. In the first case, he has an audience; in the second, he is writing for himself. Looking closely, however, in both cases there is also an *absentee confessor* that the narrator is unaware of. In the I-Confession, we have Man, the beta reader who sees past the narrator's (self)deceptions and forces him to adjust his story accordingly. In the Coda, the absentee confessor is *anyone* who is reading: namely, the reader him/herself, in turn a faceless confessor shrouded in darkness. Note well, we are not talking about Nguyen's readers, but the narrator's. In the second novel, we will learn the identity of the first three of them: Man's aunt, the Maoist PhD, and the humorless lawyer. None of them will be gentle with the manuscript: the lawyer is a nitpicker, the aunt "reads for style and story, character and theme," while the Maoist PhD "pores over … anal and erotic fixations" (*TC* 325). A fourth confessor is revealed in the persona of an old French patient affected with dementia whom the narrator can tell anything, "knowing he will listen with utter concentration and forget with absolute precision" (325). Thus, the narrator's audience continues to increase. Whatever will become of the diegetic codex in the third installment of the saga, we can already surmise that someone else, somewhere else, will read it. As Nguyen tells me, "When the third and final novel is written, there will be yet again another audience … that will re-contextualize how we read the first and the second book." Therefore, internalized audiences are key to the full understanding of Nguyen's "fict-critical" project. As a narrative device, the absentee confessor makes one thing very clear. In Nguyen's trilogy, the key concept is not the age-old question, "who is speaking?" as much as "who is *reading*?" Industries of memory, the author/scholar argues in *Nothing Ever Dies*, make so that the impact of narratives varies depending on power rationales. Not all representations are created equal. Not even sales success and a Pulitzer Prize will change overnight the Hollywood-induced idea of the war in Vietnam as an all-American

237:6545285320

matter. Thus, the (im)possibility of reception informs the novel as a latent theme. We see a prisoner becoming a memoirist. We see a poetic spy turning his life into a modernist novel. We see him writing despite knowing that at some point his representation will not be his anymore. Yet write he must and write he does. Best case scenario, there will be carping from the critics—he will not please everybody. Maybe he will be misunderstood, maybe his works will be misconstrued. At worse, he will be ignored. But then again, is not this the destiny of every artist?

However, this is all conjecture. As stated before, this research stops short of a third, unpublished novel, which might or might not be named *The Unfinished*. Throughout this study, we have seen how Nguyen weaponized history into a counter-representational project equally made of fiction and critique. We have seen how he resisted market expectations by embracing an aesthetics of distortion that allows him to turn impersonal forces into characters. We have seen how he opposed hegemonic memories by devising an anti-realist narrative that by virtue of its being openly unbelievable calls into question all those other "second-hand memories" all too often mistaken for chronicles of war. We have seen how he turned the war(s) in Vietnam into a cracked mirror of those of today by referencing a common genealogy of atrocities that spans decades and continents. We have seen how he used forgotten stories as raw material and exacted revenge on Hollywood. Finally, we have seen how he managed to tuck all of this inside a frame, that of the confession, that references as much as five connotations of the term, each one equally significant: self-criticism, religion, conversion, American and "ethnic American" autobiography. All that remains now is to wait for the trilogy to stick the landing. Once that the third novel will be out, we will see what will become of the manuscript, who will be the confessors, how large the narrator's audience will become, and how many more things his voice will carry.

238:9008166691

APPENDIX

An Interview with Viet Thanh Nguyen (Dallas, TX; March 10, 2022)

Giacomo Traina OK, I'm here with none other than Viet Thanh Nguyen.

Viet Thanh Nguyen Yeah, OK, got it. (smiles)

GT I have ten questions for you. My project research is about the use of the confessional mode in *The Sympathizer* and of course in *The Committed*, [but] especially in *The* S*ympathizer* because *The Sympathizer* came up when I was enrolling and *The Committed* came out the last year of my PhD. So, you know, I read it just once. Whereas I read *The Sympathizer* four times. (chuckles)

VTN Wow! That's a lot.

GT Yeah, ok, so the first question that I wanted to ask you is actually pretty specific. Who is the confessor in *The Committed*?

VTN The confessor is the person who you are confessing to? OK, so, who's the confessor in *The Committed*...

GT I have a theory of mine, of course, but I wanted to see if that's correct.

VTN Uhm, you know I think that, you know, in *The Sympathizer*... Obviously it's conceived as a confession in a reeducation camp. In *The Committed*, he's not under that duress, so he

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voluntarily writes a confession in the asylum—if that is what you want to call it. But his intended audience for that confession it's mentioned in the book, is all those people who know him, from his aunt to the Maoist PhD right? Yeah, I mean, that's the immediate context for him to write that. When the third and final novel is written, there will be yet again another audience that I can't tell you what it's going to be, but that will re-contextualize how we read the first and the second book.

GT Because the only time that I saw the narrator addressing someone here, when he says "you," is talking to himself actually, right?

VTN Yeah.

GT So my impression was that, in a way, he was like [in] Rosseau ['s *Confessions*]—that you mention, of course, in the novel—confessing to himself.

VTN He always talks to himself. Because he's a man of two faces and two minds, so he is always talking to himself, even if the confession is addressed to somebody else, it's also addressed to himself. And in fact, that was one of the central, I think, challenges of the novel for its early readers. I had an interested editor, when we were trying to auction off the book...

GT When it was rejected by thirteen out of fourteen editors?

VTN Yeah, he's one of those who rejected it. And he asked me... strongly suggested, I think, that I have a relationship in the novel, for our sympathizer, to have one. That he's talking, he's engaging with someone. And my response was, well, he's engaging with himself. Which is not the right answer. (smiles)

GT (chuckles)

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VTN And to the extent that there's any kind of metafictional elements in these novels, his two-facedness, his talking to himself, is in fact an expression of my own writing strategy, where I'm writing to myself. That's what drives... part of the energy that drives these two books, is that I'm glad if other people read it, but primarily I'm writing for myself.

GT You're writing it for yourself.

VTN Yeah.

GT Actually, that's exactly the point of my dissertation. It's about the fact that [in *The Sympathizer*] he is in fact writing for the Commandant, but the Commandant is of course not responding to what he is writing.

VTN Hmm hmm.

GT So I have a very specific, oddly specific question for you, because I spent like three years listening to every interview that you gave, every article, every podcast...

VTN Why?? (chuckles)

GT So I know many of the... you know, the usual questions that everybody asked you. So, I don't want to waste your time with those. I have a very specific question about a passage in *The Sympathizer*, here it is... Here, you wrote:

"I cannot help but wonder, writing this confession, whether I own my own representation, or whether you, my confessor, do." [*TS*, Chap.12; 187]

Do you remember what did you mean by [writing] that?

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VTN Can I have that? [pointing at the book] (chuckles)

GT (chuckles) Yeah. As you can see, it is pretty much destroyed! [pointing at the dog-eared and heavily marked pages of the book]

VTN Ok. Well, I mean, he is writing this confession and it's ending up in someone else's hands, who has the final—at this moment, as he's writing the confession, the person who has the confession is the one with the ownership of it, in the sense that they can force him to rewrite it if they want to, they can destroy it if they want to… So, that's the immediate context of what happens in a reeducation camp, that even if one writes the confession, they do own it, of course, in one sense, but they don't own it in another sense, because they don't have any power—very limited power, very limited power in that situation.

GT [The confession] it's not yours.

VTN So there is a way in which this is—there's one element of the novel which is metafictional, about the nature of the writing process, and publication…

GT It's like an allegory.

VTN Right, and in my mind, this experience of reeducation, and having to write a book that's being read by someone else, who's going to criticize it, is the worst writing workshop ever, you know, and that's some kind of a joke. I don't know if I mentioned that at one point…

GT Yeah, yeah. You've mentioned that [in other interviews]. The MFA program, right?

VTN Yeah, the MFA program. The worst kind of MFA program you can have. And of course, when you publish a book, do you own it, or does someone else own it? I mean,

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there's… Once the manuscript is not something that you have for yourself, but other people have it, and they have the authority to do things to it, then you don't, truly, completely own that manuscript, yeah?

GT So… third, very oddly specific question. (smiles) Ok, this is a passage that has always struck me, because maybe it's a reference to something that I don't know, whereas I tracked basically all the other references that you have here. And it is [a part of] my favorite passage of the book. A passage that, by the way, I have always found very "Melvillian"—the end of chapter 21. The "Ifs" passage. [*TS*, 339-340]

VTN Ok.

GT It mentions "the serpent of the language." "What if the serpent of language had never bitten me" [*TS*, 340]. What is the serpent of the language?

VTN OK. So, you know, the whole sequence of "Ifs," eventually led us back to Genesis.

GT Yeah.

VTN Light and Word, and Earth…

GT Adam and Eve…

VTN Right. And so, the serpent is a reference to, obviously, Adam and Eve, and the serpent is tempting Eve with knowledge, the fruit of the tree. And so, for me the serpent of language is like that. I mean language is knowledge, so it's a reference to Genesis, there's a lot of biblical references and all that kind of stuff. But getting bitten by the serpent of language is

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obviously—it's meant to be, as most things in the books are meant to be, dualistic. You know, it's dangerous to have language, but it's necessary to have language too.

GT Yeah, of course.

VTN So the serpent is, as in Adam and Eve[‘s story]…

GT Satan.

VTN Is Satan, but is necessary. We would not be human without the serpent, and the fruit, and have been fallen. And likewise, for him language is the same. It has led him down to this path of writing these confessions, which is powerful in one sense and also very dangerous in another.

GT Yeah, definitely. OK, this is my last oddly specific question, I swear. (chuckles) At the end of Chapter 13, there is a mention of a dream [that involves] severed ears. It’s more a curiosity than a question. What is this supposed to—I don't want to say supposed to mean, that’s not how these things work, but I am just curious… where did this come from?

VTN Well, you know in the Vietnam War there was a lot of lore about American soldiers cutting off ears, right?

GT Yeah, of course.

VTN I think that was probably referenced in *Apocalypse Now* too, but it appears in other soldiers accounts and fiction and things like that. But then I think he's dreaming about a tree with [severed ears] right?

GT Yeah.

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VTN And actually I saw a tree like that. I can't remember, it was probably in Cambodia. As I'm referencing a specific kind of tree and it's very gnarled, there's all these outgrowths on the tree. And I think it's a banyan tree. But anyway, when you look at them—I looked at them, and I thought they looked like body parts. They looked like ears.

GT Interesting. Thank you, that was just a curiosity of mine. Ok, so this is a very direct question. Did you ever see a real reeducation camp 'confession' paper?

VTN No, I've never seen one. Wow, very good question. I have no idea where they would be.

GT I've tried to find one of those, but—exactly! They are impossible to find. I asked anyone, every military archive…

VTN Ask the Columbia Professor Lien-Hang Nguyen, she wrote *Hanoi's War*, which is a really, really good book.

GT Oh yeah, I've read that, right.

VTN So, anyway, if anyone knows, she might know, yeah. But I haven't been to the archives, and she's been to various archives.

GT Yeah but if you—I mean, I'm not researching the reeducation camps, I'm researching your novels, so it's probably pointless, I guess. It was just a curiosity, you know.

VTN But it's a good question, I wonder. Let me write a note to myself because actually, it's a very good question, and I have to block the third and final novel, so…

GT Oh my God, thank you!

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VTN [Typing on his phone] “Where are the confessions”? I’ll ask Lien myself, to see if she knows. OK, so what was the question?

GT The camp. Did you have a particular reeducation camp in mind when you devised the fictional camp?

VTN You know, I mean—I've never visited a reeducation camp. I've read about their locations and what they're like, and all that kind of thing, but I wanted to keep it nonspecific, as I did not want to reference specific geography—because I was thinking of *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot's poem. So, the reeducation camp is supposed to evoke *The Waste Land*, both the actual wasteland of the Vietnamese landscape that's been destroyed by war and Agent Orange, but also the waste land of Eliot as well, yeah.

GT Yes, “Cruel April.” [With reference to the Eliotian quote contained in the opening paragraphs of *The Sympathizer*.]

VTN So I wanted to keep it very mythical and not get bogged down in reality and all that kind of thing, yeah.

GT That's actually part of another question I was going to ask you. So, I reckon that you based the structure of the confession narrative frame on the descriptions that one can find in the memoirs that you mention in the “Postface,” right? *Lost Years, To Be Made Over, South Wind Changing*…

VTN Yeah. You’ve read those?

GT Yeah. By the way, I have discovered that *South Wind Changing* mentions the uncle of my fiancée, and no one in the family did know that.

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VTN Oh! Wow.

GT So I have made, like, 15 people buy that book. (smiles)

VTN How does he know that uncle though?

GT I was reading the book, and there is this guy named Hạnh, he's from Sa Đéc – and that figures, even if, you know, Sa Đéc is a big city – but [eventually the memoirist says that] this guy went to Rome. Ok, that's [statistically] impossible. [Because there were very few Vietnamese refugees in Rome in the late 1970s.] So I asked them, and eventually got it confirmed that this was her uncle.

VTN But what was their connection? Between Jade and the uncle?

GT He was his best friend. The family that is mentioned in the last part of the book, it's Linda's grandmother's family.

VTN So I just got an email from a student at USC who is of partly Vietnamese descent, who says her grandfather was the mayor of Sa Đéc. Is your in-laws' family a part of that?

GT Yeah, I don't know. Mayor, I don't think so. But I am going to ask them.

VTN And senator.

GT Oh really?

VTN I don't know the name of the person—I could ask, but you know, given this 'small-world' kind of thing here, especially the nature of the politics that we're dealing with, maybe they do know each other.

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GT Yeah. So, anyway, you based the narrative frame of the confession on those memoirs, on how they describe the confessions—like 30 pages confessions, roughly—and what they say…

VTN Yeah, well, *Lost Years* was probably the most important one. Because it is supposedly very close to whatever the—I think the name was Tran Vu—whatever he had actually written in the [confessions].

GT Yeah, I think it was a pseudonym.

VTN A pseudonym, yeah. It would be great to find out who he actually was. So yeah, I mean that was the closest model, not Jade's book.

GT OK, so *Lost Years* was the model for the confessions.

VTN Yeah.

GT So, let's say that, obviously, these [pointing at the copies of *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* on the table] are not pieces of realistic fiction, right? So, in a way one can say that you used history—that these are not historical novels, factual novels, as much as novels that consciously *use* history, right? That's the point.

VTN Yeah.

GT So, how did you use the stories of Phạm Xuân Ẩn, for instance, or Nguyễn Văn Tài, the real 'sympathizers,' the real spies? Did you approach those stories like sources of inspiration or like starting points for doing something different?

VTN You know, I heard about Phạm Xuân Ẩn a long time ago. He had appeared in—I think—probably Stanley Karnow's book on Vietnam, and so that's stuck in my mind, and

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then, I don't know the exact sequence, but I'm pretty sure I think I might have read the two biographies of Phạm Xuân Ẩn…

GT Larry Berman's?

VTN …Larry Berman's, and the other one by Thomas [A. Bass]. I know him, we hung out together and his book is actually the less popular one—I think because Larry Berman's book is a state-endorsed book. You can find it in gift shops in Vietnam, yeah?

GT Yeah, I bought that in Hanoi!

VTN It sounds like they're making it a movie or a TV series out of it in Vietnam, yeah.

GT Yeah, like right now, yeah.

VTN And it's probably because it gives a much more positive version of Phạm Xuân Ẩn than Thomas' book does, and I think I read them both before, or during the writing of *The Sympathizer*, I can't remember which. And so, the idea of Phạm Xuân Ẩn in general was in my mind and also that had been in the United States in the '50s. But I don't think I drew that many specific things out of what he was doing, because the kind of work he was doing was obviously different than the kind of work that my spy was doing.

GT But if I'm not mistaken, like, his courier, the lady who helped him, is very similar to [the one in *The Sympathizer*]… but I got to double check this, I'm not sure. So right now, you are writing a memoir, right? That if I'm not mistaken is tentatively titled *A Man of Two Faces*, so this is the second time that—in a way—we have a non-fiction essay of yours with a title that roughly connects to the novels. Like with "nothing" in *Nothing Ever Dies* [with reference to the overarching theme of 'nothing' in both *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*], right?

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VTN Hmm hmm.

GT So how these two things influence each other? Writing a [real] memoir and a fictional memoir? Because I see these as very–very!–fictional memoirs, of course, but memoirs, nonetheless. This is an autobiography–a confession, right?

VTN Yeah, those are memoirs, those are confessions. But you know, I think that they're not autobiographical in any literal sense, but they're autobiographical in an emotional and analytical sense, in that, you know, I feel myself to have been to give voice to myself through that character, so creating a fictional character allowed me to speak and say all kinds of things that I could not —didn't have the freedom to say in my personal, or professorial guise, in writing these two books. As you probably have read, I didn't have footnotes, I could say whatever I wanted and I didn't have to prove anything, and it was very liberating to write these two books, especially *The Sympathizer*, and I think in liberating myself to write these two books I could also liberate myself to write about myself. And so, ironically, through writing fiction that was fictionally memoiristic, I gave myself the freedom to write an actual memoir about myself. But that's why it's titled *A Man With Two Faces*, because it owes a big debt to the novel, and to the sympathizer, who is my alter ego.

GT A more extreme version of some part of yourself, maybe?

VTN Yes, absolutely.

GT To make a comparison, I always thought about the narrator, the Captain/Vo Danh, and you as Ishmael and Melville. [With reference to the scholarly debates around identifying or not Herman Melville with *Moby Dick*'s narrator/protagonist]

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VTN OK, so, well—I mean the opening lines of *Moby-Dick*, "Call me Ishmael," were very much on my mind as I tried to craft the opening lines of *The Sympathizer*, yeah, because you know it's obviously an awesome opening line, that is imprinted on anybody who's read — most people have not read the book, but they will know. (smiles)

GT (chuckles) I've read *Moby-Dick* twelve times, I guess that I'm one of those. So, why 22/23 chapters in both novels? I read that when you were writing *The Refugees* you had, like, an Excel file, and that is an idea that if I'm not mistaken, you got from …? The idea of having a structure, a precise structure [to rely on while writing]…

VTN No, I mean, I think the Excel thing was just a database, literally a database, trying to keep track of everything. The first writer who I heard of who deployed that, was Karen Tei Yamashita, in *The Tropic of Orange*, that literally uses like, a lotus structure… But I think initially *The Sympathizer*, I'm trying to remember – *The Sympathizer,* initially was probably structured A through Z, in terms of chapters, 26, and that was because I was reading Antonio Lobo Antunes' *The Land at The End of The World*, which is A through Z, I think—if I remember right.

GT Yeah, yeah. I have just read it!

VTN I think originally there were 26 chapters, but in the revision process my editor wanted to condense—or cut out—a couple of the chapters, which were the chapters on the Philippines. So actually, there are like two missing chapters, maybe a chapter and half, missing from the Philippines sequence where I did all kinds of things that I thought were fun, but my editor thought [they] were not necessary, so those were removed.

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GT And those were inspired by the diary of Eleanor Coppola, from the sources you mention about Coppola here [pointing at the "Postface" of *The Sympathizer*]?

VTN Yeah, I mean part of it — I mean, there was one moment where 'Coppola' says, oh, you know the helicopters are supplied by the Philippine Air Force, and then they have to fight an actual insurgency, that's actually in the chapters that didn't make it. I had a lot of fun writing that, they actually go, and, you know, the sympathizer is caught in the helicopter that's going to assault a rebel base, and they kill rebels, and all that kind of thing.

GT (chuckles) I would definitely love to read those. Especially because the [Filipino] helicopters story from [the making of] *Apocalypse Now* has always struck me as something so crazy…

VTN Yeah, I was going to publish them someday, if anybody wanted to publish them, you know. Because I like them.

GT A director's cut of *The Sympathizer*? I would be the first in line to buy it! (chuckles)

VTN (laughs) No, no. I don't think the director's cut of *Apocalypse Now*, for example, is a better movie.

GT I think it's worse.

VTN Yeah, so I don't want a director's cut, a writer's cut of the novel, but—I mean—just to have the extra chapters somewhere… Maybe I could persuade my editor to include the chapters in some future edition of *The Sympathizer*!

252:8821640545

GT (laughs) Do that just for me, please! OK, so, do you see a sort of internal architecture in these novels, you had like… sections in mind or something? Because here [pointing at *The Committed*] we have a lot of sections, right? But here [pointing at *The Sympathizer*] there aren't, even if—more or less—you can sketch out some sections of *The Sympathizer*.

VTN Yeah, I mean there are sections. The underlying structure of both books, I think is a classic Hollywood three act structure. So that's definitely there. And so that's why, for example, the Philippines section is a clear demarcation of the section. I didn't feel the need to put in section markers in this one because, again, my model was Lobo Antunes…

GT A, B, C, D, et cetera.

VTN Yeah. In the second book, *The Committed*, I think that—my thinking there for the different sections was that, number one, he's still going through these struggles with his identity, and he's fractured and in my mind he's actually more than dualistic, so the first one is very clearly, a man of two faces, and the second one I felt he was still undergoing the effects of trauma. Even worse than in the first book. So, one of the themes in the second book is that, you know, where's the bottom? He thinks—he thought he hit bottom at the end of the trip, but he …

GT He keeps falling.

VTN He keeps falling. And so, every successive bottom he crashes through is another element of—part of his personality and identity.

253:5357068847

GT This right here… [pointing at *The Sympathizer*'s Chapter 21] The first chapter of the torture scene, is when he speaks of himself in the third person [for the first time], right? "The prisoner."

VTN Yeah, yeah, there's all kinds of dissociation happening. How he looks at himself, talking to himself, or looking at himself from the outside. And then in *The Committed*, because he's engaging with a new language, or a renewed interest with French, I wanted to play with that as well with the different kinds of pronouns. And so, you know, that would end in English, so that allowed the use of the different sections. But you know, the different pronouns would also indicate different shifts in his understanding of himself.

GT Ok. More on language later! So, let's get to the real big questions.

(Both chuckle)

OK, so, what about the theatrical chapters? Here [pointing at *The Sympathizer*] we have Chapter 22… Is the one right after the 295 pages [of the fictive manuscript], so that's where the confession ends.

VTN Yeah, OK, the interrogation dialogue.

GT Yeah, I call that "the coda." The coda of the confession.

VTN Yeah.

GT So this is the stuff that he's writing in Saigon, in hiding before leaving, right. So, he's free, right? He has no confessor here.

VTN And then the 'Beckett' sequence at the end of *The Committed*.

254:8723663938

GT Exactly. So, which was the inspiration for the theatrical chapters? Of course, we [also] have a script structure, that is a nod to Hollywood, right? We have a white room, with of course, you know—that's a nod to the other white room [that of the flashback interrogation scenes in which the South Vietnamese policemen rape the communist agent], with an audience… You know, all of that is pretty clear, but I was thinking about Beckett—or Ionesco, that is mentioned in *The Committed* as well. And, of course, you mentioned that these scenes were also influenced by Kafka and the Grand Inquisitor in the Karamazov Brothers, right? But you were thinking also about Beckett or Ionesco?

VTN Yeah. I mean, Beckett very explicitly, because in fact—number one, he's writing a confession, but he's also becoming a writer. As it will become even more clear in the third novel, and… Part of what that means is that he's also trying to push the limits of what he can write, so he's got all these constraints in *The Sympathizer*… and then, as you said, in "the coda," he's free to do whatever he wants to do, so he allows himself to…

GT The Q&A section, yeah?

VTN Right. And it's not a novel in the sense that he's not bound by conventional novelistic… I think that you have to write a novel in a certain way. So, if I feel like writing something, I'm going to write something. And so, for me as an author, in *The Committed* I'm always looking for different influences, different inspirations, 'cause I'm trying to have fun too, against the generic constraints of the novel, and whatever I think the conventions of American fiction are. And so, in fact, I went to see *Happy Days* by Beckett in Los Angeles when I was writing the novel, because I thought it might be inspirational. I'd seen *Happy Days* many years ago, during a fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center. And I fell asleep!

255:8811034651

(Both laugh)

I was really tired, but I fell asleep, OK? But it was actually much more interesting the second time around. I thought was really good, and I thought it fitted sort of perfectly into the mood of *The Commited*. Yeah, and so I just wanted to incorporate that. So, that's *my* motivation. Now, *his* motivation for writing that sequence, I don't know. I mean he's nuts, right?

(Both laugh)

And he's trying to deal with this obviously horrifying trauma. And I think in his mind, simply writing prose would not have been enough to try to convey what is going on.

GT I also was thinking about Chapter 36 of *Moby-Dick*, "The Quarter-Deck." You know the one in which Melville starts using theatrical stage directions. Did you have that in mind as well?

VTN The last time I have read that I was actually in grad school, so, I don't remember. Yeah, maybe – like, you know… Like I said, things for me, at least when I read… I absorb stuff.

GT Subconsciously.

VTN So I have no idea, whether… Like, I'm giving this keynote tomorrow. And in doing it, I went back, and I looked at a novel called *Blue Dragon White Tiger*, by Tran Van Dinh. And on the Wikipedia page of this author there's a line where he says, "I was born in Vietnam, but I'm an American by choice." And I have read *Blue Dragon White Tiger* probably when I was in high school, found it in the in the library. I don't know if he says that in that novel. But the point is, I think that it's stuck in my mind, because eventually I would write at the beginning of *Nothing Ever Dies*…

256:8420249654

GT "I was born in Vietnam but made in America."

VTN So all kinds of information get sucked in through the reading system, and so who knows what's there and what's not.

GT OK, so, this is the one-million-dollar question.

(Both chuckle)

The motto, the epiphany, in both novels, in fact—but particularly in *The Sympathizer* is, of course, the overturning of Hồ Chí Minh's motto, "Nothing is more," etc etc. ["Nothing is more important than freedom and independence."] I know that you got that from an actual joke in Vietnam, that you heard from someone. But I was wondering—and this is why I'm looking for the [bootlegged] Vietnamese translation of *The Sympathizer*, because I would like to see how they translated that. Because the original version is of course "Không có gì quý hơn độc lập, tự do," so the word for "nothing," in Vietnamese means also other things. "Zero," "no"—and once you have said in an interview that "no" is your favorite word—so I was wondering… of course you have said that you are not a nihilist, and he is not a nihilist. But I was thinking about the idea that both in Buddhism and in Catholicism "nothing" is an important concept—and that of course is an important concept also in the Western philosophical tradition. And I was also thinking about the other 'epiphany' in *The Sympathizer*, the one about the clock of history. The loop of the clock of history—and what is number zero but a loop? So, when he's screaming "nothing, nothing, nothing" [at the end of Chapter 22] he's screaming "không, không, không," and that means "zero," "nothing," and "no" at the same time. And I also have—please, stop me if I'm overreaching—but I always thought about these two novels, and of course the [upcoming] third novel, since Hegel is also

257:5405051403

mentioned [in Chapter 6], as a dialectical process, right? So, thesis [pointing at *The Sympathizer*], antithesis [pointing at *The Committed*], synthesis [pointing at an empty spot next to *The Committed*]. And the antithesis is the negation, right? And also, in *The Committed* there is a mention of Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*. And also, that the other way in which you say "nothing" in Vietnamese is "hư vô," and "vô" is the same as in "Vô Danh" [the alias that the narrator takes up in *The Committed*, meaning "nameless"]. So, I'm seeing something here, or I'm just like you know, one of those crazy students that sees connections everywhere? (chuckles)

VTN Oh no, it's all in there, I think. And then, you know, part of the challenge of writing these novels is to try to think through different cultures, and languages, and histories at the same time so it is annoying when people say well, 'you must be a nihilist,' after reading the first novel. And that was never the intention. And in fact, in the dialectical process, I think every word, every concept is imbued with multiplicities of meaning, and so that's why "nothing" can have multiplicities of meaning. And why every historical contradiction could have multiple meanings all at the same time. So, negation is, you know, simply a part of the historical process. You have to negate the negation, to move forward in history. And of course, it makes all tied together, the connections we're making, because to be anonymous or to be nameless is to be negated in one way or another, either through death or through the erasure of one's name, or through the erasure through the state. So, negation, as modes of power, as modes of forgetting, I mean, they're all tied together. And so, the dialectic is not simply for me, a dialectic of Marxism and class struggle. And in fact, the dialectic, if we go from the first to second book, is not—what I did not want to do is to write a reductively Marxist trilogy, or dialectic, where the only thing that mattered was class, and class struggle, and economics, right? That is certainly important, but part of the negation that happens in the

258:7365538231

second book, the antithesis [pointing at *The Committed*], is the destruction of his masculinity and his notions of masculinity and sexuality. So, the synthesis in the third book is about politics, it's about economics, and class. It's also about race, and gender, and sexuality. All that it's happening or going to happen. It's going to be difficult to write. So, for me, when I think about revolution, I think about revolution as being systemic in a way that it has to tie everything together, in the same way that colonization tied everything together. And so, the connections that you're making are not simply the analytical efforts of a critic, but in fact I think they're accurate in trying to point—to have all these different strands are there, simultaneously. And I have to figure out a way to pull them together in the last book.

GT In the last book, *The Unfinished*.

VTN So it will be finished but unfinished all at the same time, I mean … In other words, the synthesis is simply the stage for another dialectical process, yeah.

GT Another thesis, yeah. It's like a spiral, yeah, that's the Hegelian model. So, my last question is actually connected to this thing that we're discussing right now. I think that the voice of this character is, so far, your greatest invention, and I was wondering… How do you feel his voice in your head? I read a very interesting essay that calls what you did here, "literary dubbing" right?

VTN Ah, Ben Tran, right?

GT Yeah, Ben Tran, exactly. Because this is supposed to be a Vietnamese person writing to another Vietnamese person, right? But this is literary English, at its finest. So, first question, did you ever read the Vietnamese translation of *The Sympathizer*?

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VTN I have the Vietnamese translation, but you know, my Vietnamese is nowhere near good enough to read it. So, it's been read by Nguyễn Phạn Quế Mai.

GT Oh yeah, I've met her.

VTN Yeah, she was in Italy, right? And you know, she thinks that the version we have now is a pretty good version. So, I just trust her on that issue. There are other versions that are unpermitted that are circulating online, that are of less reputable quality, I guess.

GT Bootlegged versions?

VTN Yeah. I mean, it's very inspiring, I guess, that these people decided to just translate the novel on their own, and that's a lot of time and effort to do that. So, they're out there. And so, I mean, there are huge challenges with translation, for all the obvious reasons, and I just have to trust that Nguyễn Phạn Quế Mai is telling me that it's good! (chuckles) You know, I literally would have a much easier time reading the French than the Vietnamese, for example. So, I have to let that go, 'cause I just don't have the time between now and whenever, hopefully—and if they don't publish in another 20 years, OK, fine, I might be able to get my Vietnamese to an appropriate level, but if they publish it, hopefully in the next two, three, five years then it is what it's going to be.

GT So how do you hear his voice in your head?

VTN I mean, first of all, let me say that I'm an American writer, a Vietnamese American writer, a writer, but I'm not a Vietnamese writer. You know, Vietnamese writers are in Vietnam writing in Vietnamese, so I would have to exist in translation in relationship to Vietnamese, that's to me just a part of the diasporic refugee condition that I find myself in.

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And then everything else that Ben Tran says is true. For the complexities of what it means to pretend to write in Vietnamese when I'm writing in English. As for the voice of the character, you're right, I think the most important thing in writing these books was to find the voice of the character, because the voice of the character is who he is. I mean he will die—eventually, in the long run, I don't know about the third novel, but he would die. And so, what we have left in the end, is his voice. And that's a very powerful concept for me, that nothing ever dies. Well, even if the body dies, the voice survives. In the case of the writer, or the Confessor. You know, Thích Nhất Hạnh died recently, and he said, "I would be dead, but I still be with all of you," right? And that's the same concept. So, the voice—his voice—survives. So, I don't know how to answer your question. I mean, his voice is his voice, and that's who he is, so that's why it's inseparable from his character, his personality, his politics, everything about him. So, the voice carries everything, and that's why it was important to craft his voice because readers either would love his voice or not love his voice. That's all there is to it. And if they did, then they could read all the books. And part of his voice is who he is, his history, his beliefs and all that. But part of his voice is the way he uses language. So, the rhythm and the word choice are absolutely crucial to how he speaks, which is why, you know, when I came up with the opening line, I knew that was the DNA for the novel.

GT You spent a whole summer crafting that line, right? Summer 2011?

VTN Probably.

(Both laugh)

I've forgotten by now, but I think that was the case, yeah.

GT And this [pointing at *The Sympathizer*] required like 2 years [to be written], right?

VTN Yes, two years and two months, something like that.

261:4795883235

GT Two years, so it's roughly the same time that he spends writing the confession, right? That was on purpose?

VTN Yeah, very deliberate.

GT That was on purpose, that was deliberate. I get the impression that right now you are writing very fast, right? Compared to before.

VTN Well, writing this [pointing at *The Sympathizer*] in two years is pretty fast, you know.

GT No, no, I was referring to *The Refugees*. The twenty years [it took to write it].

VTN Oh, yeah, compared to that, is pretty fast.

GT Yeah, you can tell that there are revisions and excisions, of course. So, uh, you know, speaking of confessions, I got to confess that I took your own rule of writing "1000 words, or writing for four hours, whichever comes first" daily rule as a rule of life. (smiles)

VTN Has it worked?

GT It's working now, it's working. (chuckles)

VTN Good perfect, I'm glad. Anyway, I have to get ready.

GT Yeah, don't worry. Thank you!!

262:3489694216

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