



PERVERSE THEATERS AND REFRACTED HISTORIES

Violence and (Anti)realism
in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*

A permanent installation catches the eyes of visitors of the Asian Garden Mall (Phước Lộc Thọ), the most recognizable Vietnamese shopping center of Southern California. This two-story building, home to dozens of businesses, shops, and restaurants, is a landmark of Orange County's Little Saigon. Leaning on the wall running along the western flank, a freshly installed metal sculpture stands out as a marker of a shared past. Four giant digits loom over the crowd of shoppers making their way through the parking lot. They indicate a date—1975—that holds a painful place in the hearts of hundreds of thousands in the local community. This was the year in which the Vietnamese civil war, a fratricidal struggle that lasted decades and saw involved a variety of state and non-state actors, culminated with the defeat of the American-backed Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). In 1975, Vietnam was reunified under the red banner of the communist North. The ensuing years of poverty and repression ignited a mass refugee exodus that displaced nearly a million people. The new rulers soon imposed their own version of history through statues, museums, and school syllabuses that erased any trace of their vanquished foes. Roughly at the same time, Hollywood started to turn war trauma

Giacomo Traina
Sapienza
University of Rome, Italy
University of Silesia
in Katowice, Poland



<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2104-323X>

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, a culture was born out of nostalgia for a lost country, while scores of exiled opponents formed parties and ragtag armies bent on infiltrating the homeland and leading impossible counterrevolutions.

This crossfire of memories is the foundation upon which the plot of Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015) is built. It is no accident that the Pulitzer-winning novel's action begins in the year 1975. *The Sympathizer* does not deal with the war in Vietnam as much as with its afterlives in memory. It is not about war as much as about war narratives and the power rationales that allow for their (unequal) dissemination. *The Sympathizer* is a multi-faceted literary object—a sharp indictment of the power mechanisms underlying the industries of memory, thinly disguised as a piece of genre fiction. It is a vitriolic satire, rife with intertextual references, written with the aim of challenging the way in which the Vietnam War 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. The 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 a communist double agent, 'the captain,' whose mission is to follow abroad the defeated remnants of the South Vietnamese army on the eve of the country's collapse. Upon his arrival in California, 'the captain' finds himself entangled in refugee diaspora politics, reluctantly becoming a political assassin in order to protect his cover. Then, the story takes unexpected turns. Halfway through the novel, the narrator is hired as a consultant by an egotistical Hollywood auteur determined to craft a Vietnam War movie that "will [...] shine so brightly it will not just be about the war but it will be the war" (Nguyen 2015: 172). In the Philippines, where the movie is being shot, 'the captain' manages a group of Vietnamese extras recruited from a local refugee camp. A helpless cog in a well-oiled (war) machine, he has no choice but to watch his fellow countrymen being reduced to props, nothing more than colored stains on a lush matte painting. Then, the narrator decides to go back to Vietnam

along with the counterrevolutionaries whom he was originally tasked to spy upon, but the group is ambushed in the border jungle and he ends up being taken to a reeducation camp. Here, in the most surreal section of the novel, his best friend and handler, of all people, tortures him with CIA techniques to force him to give up on their shared political dream. The novel ends with the narrator embarking on a perilous journey through the South China Sea as a part of the huge boat exodus—the “internal hemorrhaging of modern Vietnam” (Goscha 2016: 386)—that marked the history of the country.

Nguyen’s book is nestled at the junction of various literary traditions. It begins like a war thriller, it shifts into a movie industry satire *à la Tropic Thunder*, and it ends as a sort of Vietnamese spin on Franz Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony” as penned by Samuel Beckett. The narrator himself is a distillation of all the most brazen, irreverent, and disaffected *isolatoes* living on the edges of the Western canon. To craft his voice, Nguyen threw into the kettle all kinds of literary ‘I’s he could. His list of declared sources spans decades and continents. Joseph Heller and Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s literary heroes are often brought up as a comparison. As the self-despising veteran doctor from António Lobo Antunes’ *The Land at the End of the World*, ‘the captain’ too is an unnamed witness-participant of neocolonial atrocities. As *Lolita*’s Humbert Humbert, he is writing an unreliable memoir while in imprisonment. As Ralph Ellison’s invisible man, he ends 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.

A spy narrative that abruptly derails into a modernist delirium, *The Sympathizer* confidently hovers between realist conventions and antirealism strategies. It tackles the well-rooted idea of the Second Indochina War as a war that defies representation, the “first terrible postmodernist war,” as per Fredric Jameson’s definition (1991: 44)—an idea that 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. In this instance, however, aesthetic (un)representability of war 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 representation of the war in Vietnam gets passed down?”

In other words, the issue at hand is not representability but representations. All the cultural artifacts addressing the war's memory, in Nguyen's view, are fabrications that convey partial perspectives. A narrative about narratives, *The Sympathizer* is informed by a logic according to which the only way to expose this state of things is to put together a fiction at once realist and antirealist that with its own existence single-handedly redefines collective memory as "an arena of competing narratives, an uneven field dominated by the memory machines of Hollywood" (Chattarji 2019: 207). Hence an array of creative licenses and modernist solutions that go beyond the necessity of opposing hegemonic memories with suppressed histories, to embrace instead an aesthetics of distortion and infidelity that does not, however, discard black comedy and genre fiction conventions.

Nguyen's subversion of realism takes many forms. Stylistically, the book rests on a baroque prose timbre meant to enhance the story's farcical undertones. The structure is loaded with knotty subplots that dovetail one into another. Spy and war novel tropes are but screens concealing a more challenging class of narrative. *The Sympathizer* is a "thriller of ideas"—a piece of criticism written in form of a novel. By pairing it with its companion book, the essay/manifesto *Nothing Ever Dies* (2016), we derive a picture in which Nguyen's fiction and nonfiction works are part of one same "fict-critical" project that is equal parts narrative and theory (August 2021; Chihaya 2018; Xiang 2018). Every oddity within *The Sympathizer* is to be explained as an antirealism strategy meant to sew political discourses into the fabric of the story. It is as if Nguyen would smuggle ideas under the detective trench coat of genre fiction. As a monologic utterance—a confession written under duress—*The Sympathizer* is dominated by the voice of its narrator. Text and character are basically one and undistinguishable. By doing away with quotation marks, Nguyen blurs every voice and dialogue into an indistinct togetherness. One is often unable to tell apart the narrator's words from that of other characters: 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. As the narrator's voice

flattens everything to a monochord voiceprint, there is no demarcation 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, a “literary dubbed” voice (Tran 2018: 414) which contains every other—a voice that “carries everything” (Nguyen 2022). The narrator is not a reporter as much as a ventriloquist, a stand-up comedian making impressions. 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: visible embodiments of the invisible forces that shaped his life. It is as if through his writing the narrator would transmute those who own his representation into representations he can own.

In fact, many of the book’s characters—as if personified concepts in a Medieval morality play—may be said to embody structures of power in the flesh. These characters often express themselves through recognizable keywords and bear generic names-function (“the General,” “the Commandant,” “the Auteur”). They are not personae as much as cartoonish allegories, broad-brush silhouettes, stock characters. Nguyen was not interested in developing their individuality: “many people,” he affirms, “can fill [their] shoes” (Nguyen 2023). The General conflates Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, South Vietnam’s air marshal, with all the rest of Saigon’s 1960–1970s military elite. The Commandant is the orthodoxy of the Vietnamese Communist Party in human form. The Auteur merges Francis Ford Coppola with John Milius and Oliver Stone. One could even make the case that, in his quest against Hollywood stereotypes, Nguyen deliberately resorted to other stereotypes to prove his point. Suffice it in this respect to compare *The Sympathizer’s* personified entities with the rest of the novel’s cast. Even better, to juxtapose them with the full-fledged people at the center of Nguyen’s sophomore fiction effort—the long-in-the-works short story collection *The Refugees* (2017), the prose style of which, save for some incursions in magic realism territory, tends more towards life-like scenarios. In both cases, one will notice that Nguyen can write round characters well enough when he wants to.

Giacomo Traina
Sapienza
University of Rome, Italy
University of Silesia
in Katowice, Poland

The Sympathizer also turns the past into a test bench for present-day reckonings about power, memory, empire, and race. The novel's protagonist is a wartime Vietnamese spy whose political concerns strike one 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" (Chong 2018: 372). While working as a set consultant in the Philippines, the narrator helplessly watches Vietnamese refugees hired as extras becoming a faceless crowd of cinematic one-dimensional presences. Straying from his real-life counterparts—like Phạm Xuân Ẩn, a Politburo spy working undercover as a *Time* magazine journalist—Nguyen's character is seemingly unfazed with his duties as an agent of the Revolution. Instead, he comes out as one more worried about Hollywood's erasure of Asian stories. "[N]ot to own the means of representation is... a kind of death," he muses, "[f]or if we are represented by others, might they not, one day, hose our death off memory's laminated floor?" (Nguyen 2015: 187). Basically, Nguyen devised a fiction in which he could put a stand-in of himself as a scholar on the set of a cinematic misrepresentation of war in order to shed critical light on Hollywood's "simulacrum vision[s]" (Gradisek 2020: 15). By making his protagonist a movie consultant on a 1970s set, Nguyen puts his theories about 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.

The fictive movie itself, *The Hamlet*, is yet another narrative oddity. *The Hamlet* is a Hollywood impossibility—an outstandingly crafted B-Movie, a crass slugfest shot with mastery, a Frankenstein monster of a film whose limbs are taken from as many as seven cinematic retellings of the war. In devising it, Nguyen merged plots of antiwar New Hollywood classics with tropes of New Right-inspired, testosterone-filled revenge fantasy flicks. His ostensible purpose was to show how, deep down, movies like *Missing in Action* and *Apocalypse Now* are more alike than one would realize. As if satisfying a revenge fantasy of his own, Nguyen all but dismantles the "Hollywood miracle" mythos that surrounds the making of Coppola's war masterpiece, turning the epic-behind-

the-epic into a farce-behind-the-farce. In the novel, *Apocalypse Now* becomes a jingoistic mess packed with trite characters and ready-made dialogues, one that no cinephile worth their salt would ever stand to watch. Albeit filmed with a “painterly Renaissance shading” (Nguyen 2015: 275) reminiscent of the Caravaggio-like cinematography of Vittorio Storaro, *The Hamlet* is much closer to the original vision of screenwriter John Milius, who intended *Apocalypse* as a shoddy, unequivocally prowar “Super-John-Wayne-movie” oozing patriotism. In *The Hamlet* there is no warrior-poet waxing lyrical over the necessity of barbarism—only old-fashioned, steely-eyed, country-loving American heroes. *The Sympathizer* turns *Apocalypse*’s psychedelic journey into the heart of darkness into a tawdry “epic about white men saving good yellow people from bad yellow people” (129): it is as if Nguyen had Francis Ford Coppola directing *The Green Berets*.

However, *The Sympathizer* rejects the binds of historical accuracy—not history. As a ray of light changing speed because of Snell’s law of refraction, 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 often blur the boundaries of time and space, turning the late 1970s’ Vietnamese California, postwar Vietnam, and the set of *Apocalypse Now* into a warped image of our times. This *refracted history*, in which past and present (imperfectly) mirror one another, is what Nguyen’s 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 a historical source. “Many of the events of this novel did happen,” writes Nguyen in the “Acknowledgments” of *The Sympathizer*, “although *I confess* to taking some liberties with details and chronologies” (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 nonfiction, this occurrence—the only paratextual incidence of the morpheme in the whole text—is worth mentioning.

Even more significant is how the novel recontextualizes the historical tragedy of reeducation camps into an avant-garde,

Giacomo Traina
Sapienza
University of Rome, Italy
University of Silesia
in Katowice, Poland

pseudo-Modernist domain. After 1975, the communist victors confined hundreds of thousands of their defeated enemies in “harsh, disease-ridden parts of the country,” forcing them to “countless sessions of brainwashing, rectification, new hero emulation, and propaganda” (Goscha 2016: 383; see also Vo 2004 and Canh 1983). The presence (and the presentness) of these labor camps in Vietnamese American collective memory is still practically visible. 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 bump into the touring collections of the Vietnamese Heritage Museum, where the belongings of prisoners are displayed for all visitors to see. One could also take a four-hundred mile drive up north and look at the dioramas 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 survivors, hung on the walls among vintage rifles, pennants, and military uniforms. Borrowing from Pierre Nora’s definition, one may define the reeducation camps as diasporic *lieux de mémoire*, that is, as entities, “whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time [have] become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of [a] community” (Nora 1996: XVI). With *The Sympathizer*, Nguyen reclaimed the camps as a place of the imagination. He transformed Nora’s *lieu de mémoire* into a Bakhtinian *chronotope*, that is, into a “connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships [...] artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin 1981: 84). In *The Sympathizer*, the site of refugee memory becomes a symbolic space, a place “half-real, half-metaphorical” (Bakhtin 1981: 244), not different from the classic examples of the road, the castle, the parlor, and the threshold as provided by Mikhail Bakhtin. As a “means for materializing time in space” (Bakhtin 1981: 250), the reeducation chronotope makes an “epoch”—postwar Vietnam—become “graphically [...] and narratively visible” (1981: 247)

In the novel, Nguyen toyed with this chronotope. He clothed it in modernist garbs and reshaped it into a barren, T. S. Eliot-ish landscape of horror and bleakness. The unnamed camp seen in *The Sympathizer* is the terminus, the one place where all the nov-

el's threads converge: the "organizing center" of the narrative, "the place where [its] knots are tied and untied." Here is where ends the parable of 'the captain,' where his dream of revolution comes to a (momentary) stop—in the same fly-infested barracks where the cause he served showed its more awful face. In the "reeducation section" of the novel, Nguyen's intent was not to refer to specific "geography," but to keep the place "very mythical and not get bogged down in reality" (Nguyen 2022). The camp depicted in the novel is an unreal place—a bamboo gulag concealing white bright rooms replete with thousands of lightbulbs, surrounded by "a forest of toothpicks over which gusts of crows and torrent of bats soared in ominous black formations" (Nguyen 2015: 299). Nguyen designed it as a meld of a CIA black site, the mythical landscapes of *The Waste Land*, and the underground cellar where the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* lives.

He also filled it with examiners dressed in mad-scientist attires resorting to sophisticated methods of interrogation. In Chapter 21, the 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 1990: 110ff). The episode 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 2021: 210). *The Sympathizer* reframes history by outlining unseen continuities, reimagining the war in Vietnam as a Petri dish for America's forever war by putting the emphasis on a common genealogy of interrogation methods that recur from Saigon to Guantánamo, as if yesterday's wars and today's were one the mirror of the other. Sleep denial, sensory deprivation, and all such ways of obtaining intel without leaving marks on the body of the prisoner all stem from the KUBARK handbook, a 1963 CIA manual that promoted a kind of torture "that relied on [...] self-inflicted pain for an effect [...] more psychological than physical" (McCoy 2006: 50). As Alfred McCoy details in his *A Question of Torture* (2006)—one of Nguyen's sources for the novel—the KUBARK techniques rely on white bright, shadowless, and soundproof rooms to induce derealization and delirium. When inflicting "white torture," the interrogators

Giacomo Traina
Sapienza
University of Rome, Italy
University of Silesia
in Katowice, Poland

attack “the victim’s sense of time, by scrambling the biorhythms fundamental to every human’s daily life” (McCoy 2006: 51) thus jumbling one’s perception of reality. This interrogation method involves a “perverse theater” in which the subject is “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 *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 then ongoing War on Terror. In those years, even superhero flicks like Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* 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 American people clean. The question raised by these movies in the wake of the Patriot Act and mass surveillance was what the nation was ready to become in order to stop its enemies. In a way, Nguyen’s novel 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); 2) the fictional torture of Binh and the fictional rape of Mai in the movie *The Hamlet* (‘perpetrated’ by South Vietnamese refugee extras dressed as Vietnamese communists); 3) the actual rape of the communist agent in the “movie theater” room (committed by South Vietnamese policemen with the complicity of the narrator); 4) the torture of the narrator in the camp (performed by Vietnamese communists using American techniques tested in South Vietnam). The narrator’s “multiple roles,” Hayley C. Stefan points out, “offer prismatic views on torture which inform the novel’s multivalent critique” (2021: 215). In *The Sympathizer*, all kinds of victims and perpetra-

tors take turns on and around the torture table.¹ The Americans, the South Vietnamese, the Vietnamese communists, and even Hollywood, Nguyen seems to suggest, are all part of one same circus of atrocities in which the oppressed and the oppressors keep trading places. In Chapter 22, this “dialectics of victim and victimizer” (Liu 2019: 545) comes full circle. Here, the “perverse theater” of the *KUBARK* method is made literal, with the entire chapter structured as a Beckett piece, an absurdist play complete with stage names and stage directions.

However, Nguyen’s choice of offering a “pathogenic reading of torture as transnational and crossing temporal periods” (Stefan 2021: 22) 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 narrator’s ordeal clearly oozes Cold War symbolism. We see American lightbulbs, powered by a Soviet generator, used by the Vietnamese communists, whereas sensory deprivation methods were historically used by the South Vietnamese during wartime as a CIA-sponsored alternative to the brutal techniques inherited by the French colonialists (Valentine 1990: 84). 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 2004: 81). However, one would not find any mention of “white torture” in any of the reeducation memoirs that Nguyen cites in the novel’s “Acknowledgments.” According to researcher Nghia M. Vo, 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” (Vo 2022). A high-ranking communist defector, Colonel Bui Tin, confirmed in his memoir that similar techniques were employed by the communists during the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia on suspected double agents:

1. One will find a similar dynamic at play in the last section of *The Sympathizer*’s 2021 sequel, *The Committed*, with Vo Danh and the French Algerian gangster Mona Lisa equally taking turns on the chair of torture.

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. (Pribbenow 2023)

However, no source I am aware of mentions 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:

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. (2016b)

Nguyen's license thus gives way to a nesting doll-like narrative that, while discussing the war in Vietnam, “gestures [effectively] toward an otherwise” (Liu 2019: 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 insinuates, 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, in *The Sympathizer*, is not the reality of American decline as much as the myth of American innocence. In the novel, Nguyen puts these words in the mouth of another communist spy, the Watchman:

[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. (Nguyen 2015: 182–183)

American innocence, the Watchman seems to imply, is akin to that of a pit-bull puppy: young America, like all young creatures, does not know how hard is biting. Through the artifice of refracted history, Nguyen proves how this myth still (dangerously) reverberates in the industries of memory. An example of this is Hollywood's Vietnam, whose reimaginings depoliticized “the struggle [by] turn-

ing it into a test of manhood, a rite of passage, or a personal trial” (Tomasulo 1990: 147). The one moral crisis underlying the whole Vietnam War movie genre can be summed up with the final words of Charlie Sheen’s character, private Chris Taylor, in Oliver Stone’s *Platoon*: “we didn’t fight the enemy, we fought ourselves, and the enemy was in us.” Hollywood’s Vietnam, says *The Sympathizer*, is not a real place as much as a repository of American fantasies, a celluloid exorcism made only possible by 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. Its icons still tower 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. No NLF officer ever used Russian roulette as a punishment, no Air Cav division ever attacked a village blaring out Wagner—yet these are the Vietnam War images worldwide audiences are thoroughly familiar with. Even a movie screen, the novel suggests, is nothing but a “perverse theater” in which scores of Vietnamese extras freshly recruited from refugee camps are forced to play a part in their own misrepresentation.

By pointing out how the US lost the war on the battlefield but won it “in memory,” Nguyen shows how America heard only the first part of the Vietnam lesson. If we see it in this sense, *The Sympathizer* is indeed more a novel about war than a novel about a war, insofar as Nguyen 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). Throughout the book, Nguyen could make the additional step that many Vietnam War narratives never dared (or cared) to take: to pan all over history like a camera dolly, from the blazing huts of the American war to the rubber plantations of the French colonial era, to arrive at the War on Terror and at the other battlefields of America’s forever war. In the novel, as is clear from a passage taken from the final scene of torture, history is described as a chain of causalities and casualties, a Droste effect of original sins. In this climatic scene, in a vortex of nightmarish images secondary to sleep deprivation, ‘the captain’

Giacomo Traina
Sapienza
University of Rome, Italy
University of Silesia
in Katowice, Poland

sees history unraveling before his bloodshot eyes as a panoply of missed opportunities. His train of thought covers all the bloody past of Vietnam, intersecting ancient legends and recent events “not as a series of chronologically unfolding events, but as a single utterance cast somewhere between supplication and yearning” (Britto 2019: 378): “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...” (Nguyen 2015: 340).

The line “if history had never happened” makes the principle behind Nguyen’s refracted history finally manifest. Individual choices, the character realizes, cannot break the chains of larger causalities. Nguyen’s narrator traces the causes of his suffering further and further back in history, steadily following a straight line that pierces through his life to get lost in the mists of time. With ever-increasing speed, he climbs down a ladder of causes and effects: the war, the Americans, the Soviets, the Japanese, French colonialism, the Chinese, the beginning of time, Adam and Eve. History becomes a circus of atrocities—Nguyen’s game of refractions implies that everyone, whether or not s/he knows it, is forced to play a part in it. In such a scenario, no true innocence is possible. Even running a refrigerator in suburban America 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’” (2018: 369).

According to Nguyen’s view of history, tales of displaced people, raped women, and elderly refugees with dementia become war stories in their own right, as nothing but war made them possible. 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 US as an ideal end” (2019: 202). Wars, says Nguyen, do not end when history books say they do. Modern

Vietnam, a Southeast Asian emerging economy power favored by international trade and tourism, now walks at a brisk pace away from the uncomfortable legacies of its past. Hanoi's boulevards, however, are still surmounted by red billboards promoting the same rhetoric that prompted a struggle for national reunification that is now half a century old. Even more so in the overseas communities, where symbols from a distant past still mark the face of diasporic "memoryscapes" (Tran 2023), and the ghost of South Vietnam still lingers over countless "strategic memory projects" (Aguilar-San Juan 2009: 8) dotted across the American diaspora. Dozens of parking lanes, walks of fame, and commemorative plaques take the names of obscure military martyrs dead since decades. Bronze soldiers charging invisible enemies tower over the strip malls of Bellaire Boulevard, in the western outskirts of Houston, Texas. Eden Center, the beating heart of Falls Church's Vietnamese community, is a scale replica of Saigon's iconic Bến Thành Market as rebuilt in the suburbs of Washington, DC. In the peaceful gardens of Bảo Quang Temple, in Orange County, simulacra of the rickety boats that carried hundreds of thousands on Western shores are forever anchored into small ponds as a reminder of the crossing from oppression to the siren songs of the American Dream. Fluttering between cream stucco pagodas and ranks of smiling statues, the ever-present *cờ vàng*, the three-striped flag of the Republic, long banished in the homeland, casts its flickering shadow over the fences. And even if many in the local community—especially among the young—have long started to rethink 1975 as a beginning rather than an end, a rise rather than a fall—not the twilight of South Vietnam but the dawn of Vietnamese America—the year 1975, as in *The Sympathizer*, still marks the collective unconscious of a generation of exiles who lives "in two time zones, the here and the there, the present and the past" (Nguyen 2015: 192), as if history had stopped and the Vietnam War still rages, doomed to endlessly refract itself again in the wars of the future.

Giacomo Traina
Sapienza
University of Rome, Italy
University of Silesia
in Katowice, Poland

Abstract: This paper explores the way in which Viet Thanh Nguyen's Pulitzer-prize-winning debut novel, *The Sympathizer* (2015) reframes history by outlining unseen continuities, reimagining the war in Vietnam as a Petri dish for America's Forever War, as if yesterday's wars and today's were one the mirror of the other. *The Sympathizer* is not about war as much as about war narratives and the power rationales

that allow for their unequal dissemination. It tackles the well-rooted idea of the Second Indochina War as a war that defies representation. In this instance, however, aesthetic (un)representability of war 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 representation of the war in Vietnam gets passed down?” In other words, the issue at hand is not representability but representations. All the cultural artifacts addressing the war’s memory, in Nguyen’s view, are fabrications that convey partial perspectives. A narrative about narratives, *The Sympathizer* is informed by a logic according to which the only way to expose this state of things is to put together a fiction at once realist and antirealist that with its own existence single-handedly redefines collective memory as “an arena of competing narratives, an uneven field dominated by the memory machines of Hollywood” (Chattarji 2019: 207). By bending the facts, Nguyen brings into question the power circumstances that make misrepresentation possible.

Keywords: Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, Vietnamese American literature, Vietnam War

Bio: Giacomo Traina holds a PhD in English literatures, cultures, language and translation from Sapienza University of Rome (Italy) and the University of Silesia in Katowice (Poland). His research interests include the memory of the Vietnam War through the works of contemporary Vietnamese American authors and the narrative works of Herman Melville. He is currently working on his first monograph on the fiction of Viet Thanh Nguyen.

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Giacomo Traina
Sapienza
University of Rome, Italy
University of Silesia
in Katowice, Poland

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