theories and methodologies

# The Ethnic Author Represents the Body Count

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SUNNY XIANG, assistant professor of English at Yale University, is completing a book that compares Asian self-representation during two eras: a Cold War American century and a post–Cold War Pacific century.

REVIEWS OF VIET THANH NGUYEN'S *THE SYMPATHIZER* (2015) REGULARLY CITE THE VIETNAMESE-FRENCH-AMERICAN PROTAGONIST'S SELF-characterization: "I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces" (1). A less-cited version of the same characterization appears later in the novel: "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). Nguyen's unnamed narrator, a Northern Vietnamese spy with Southern sympathies, has exploited, betrayed, and even murdered his own. If the above statements are any indication, this Cold War history of slippery allegiances takes an existential toll. But the second statement adds a layer of intrigue. With rhyme, anaphora, and considerable theatrical aplomb, it transmutes ethnic duplicity into literary figuration and casts the narrator as another murderer with a fancy prose style. Murder and style, though, are not Nguyen's only connection to Vladimir Nabokov, whom Mark McGurl takes as iconic of the "codification and intensification of modernist reflexivity in the form of . . . 'metafiction'" (9). Like *Lolita* and much of Nabokov's other fiction, *The Sympathizer* and many of Nguyen's writings hold up that special mirror of "modernist reflexivity." For Nguyen, however, the chance to wield this mirror comes with the added responsibility of being a Vietnamese American author writing about Vietnamese America. Hence, if Nabokov's fiction delivered "an elaborately performative 'I am'" that enabled his "programmatic self-establishment" (10), Nguyen's equally performative "I am" instantiates not only an authorial program but also a political program of ethnic representation.

The tension between the author and the larger community inflects the narrator's conflicted self-declarations in *The Sympathizer*.[1] In Nguyen's novel, duality and duplicity connect two figures that resist representational coherence: one is the overwhelming yet elusive presence of a knowing author; the other is the open-ended "body count" of Vietnam's wars against the French, the Americans, the Chinese, and the Cambodians. For Nguyen, body counts include the actually dead, the socially dead, and the representationally dead.

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Anonymous corpses, disenfranchised refugees, and cultural stereotypes are all "dead" in the sense that they cannot represent themselves. This shared fate is the central preoccupation of *The Sympathizer*'s narrator as he recalls his work on a Vietnam War film, a hyperbolic send-up of *Apocalypse Now* called *The Hamlet*: "I spent the entire trip brooding over the problem of representation. Not to own the means of production can lead to premature death, but not to own the means of representation is also a kind of death. For if we are represented by others, might they not, one day, hose our deaths off memory's laminated floor?" (187).

Neither Nguyen nor his narrator purports to speak for the dead in the conventional sense. The solution to "the problem of representation" is not, for author or narrator, a more self-determined collective voice or a more representative individual voice but a more intricate and more dispersed authorial personality. At the end of *The Sympathizer*, the narrator's irresolvable twoness yields an elaborate metafictional contrivance as the split, doubled, halved, masked, and vivisected narrator transforms from a first-person "I" into an abstract "we" of Vietnamese refugees. On the one hand, the novel's metafictional multiplex of dazzling mirrors and ironic reversals seems to do away with both narrator and author. On the other, such literary pyrotechnics produce an ethnic author "whose presence is everywhere visible . . . as a kind of watermark" (McGurl 4).

The metafictional maneuvers in *The Sympathizer* tell us something about how ethnic representation operates outside the novel. At issue, again, is disaggregation. Salvaging the unrepresentable—the dead—requires distributing the authorial persona across many genres, texts, and professional dispositions. This distributed persona is distinctive to someone like Nguyen, whose trajectory from field-specific scholar to literary celebrity is unusual, to say the least. A thorough account of this scholar-novelist's persona requires treating his recent publications—*The Sympathizer*, *Nothing Ever Dies* (2016), and *The Refugees* (2017)—as a single coherent project. This project, I wager, strives for maximal criticality and maximal inclusiveness: it seeks to be both more critically present than the typical "program" novel (to adopt McGurl's formulation) and more numerically representative than the typical autoethnography (to invoke the pejorative characterization of ethnic literature). In some sense, these two dimensions of Nguyen's work, the critical presence and the broad-based representativeness, appear most forcefully in *Nothing Ever Dies*, where the extraordinarily well-read scholar urges us to remember not only our own but also our adversaries, not only the human but also the inhuman, not only the Vietnamese but also the Cambodians and the Hmong, not only the living but also the dead. This essay, however, will focus on *The Sympathizer* in order to wrestle with the literariness of this double aim.

## The Ethnic Author

In McGurl's account, metafiction—a narratological device for which an expression is "turned inside out and around and folded thrice" (19)—both obscures an author's relation to a quasi-autobiographical character and reaffirms the author's wit and vision. This ubiquitous if indeterminate author, McGurl argues, evidences the increasing intimacy between literary creation and academic knowledge production. Nguyen's work synthesizes two key strains of program writing. One is "high cultural pluralism," which combines "modernist autopoetics" with "rhetorical performance," stylistic flourish with ethnic presence (56). Another is war writing. Although McGurl does not single out the Vietnam War, he flags the significance of Vietnam-themed fiction, especially among (white male) "Veteran-American" writers such as Tim O'Brien and Robert Olen Butler, for whom the

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"psychic wounds of combat" are "foundational to a career" in the same way that the psychic wounds of race and ethnicity found high cultural pluralism (61). Perhaps the most trenchant account of how refugee writing fuses culture with violence is the Vietnamese Australian writer Nam Le's short story "Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice," written in and about the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Le elucidates the special form that self-reflexivity takes for the ethnic writer gone "program": betrayal. That is, Le's story, like many ethnic bestsellers, is infused with an acute self-consciousness about selling culture and therefore selling out.

What distinguishes Nguyen from Iowa-trained personalities such as Nam Le, Aimee Phan, and Vu Tran is that he is both a "self-taught writer" (Nguyen, qtd. in Dishner) and an established literary scholar. Nguyen is also a species apart from theorist-practitioners such as Trinh T. Minh-ha, for he has found so broad a readership that even the category of public intellectual may be too narrow. Although Trinh's experimental documentary *Forgetting Vietnam* was released the same year as Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*, one work registers as primarily "academic" and the other as widely "acclaimed." Perhaps the strangest aspect of Nguyen's newfound status as the best-known Vietnamese diasporic author is that he has spent the better part of his career critiquing the identity politics of both the academy and the literary marketplace. This, after all, is a literary scholar who first made his mark (if on graduate reading lists rather than on national bestseller lists) through an examination of Asian American intellectuals who reap the "awards of the academy by using the symbolic capital of race and resistance" (*Race* 5). His case studies illustrate the institutionally contrived conflict between accommodationist "model minorities" and resistant "bad subjects." In recent years, Asian American studies' long-standing concerns about the mainstream marketability of programmatic ethnic literature have developed alongside an increasing ambivalence, often veering into outright dismay, about the perils of the field's professionalization. The most recent evidence of this trend is a raft of state-of-the-field critical compendiums, several of which include contributions from Nguyen.[2] Here, as elsewhere, Nguyen touts unsparing political critique as a nonnegotiable benchmark: "Minorities must dissent from the terms that a regime of whiteness offers. They must call forth anger and rage, demand solidarity and revolution, critique whiteness, domination, power, and all the faces of the war machine" (*Nothing* 221). He challenges both the marketable cultural ephemera of ethnic writers, summed up as "digestible metaphors of food and hybrid cuisine" (216), and the "technical manual" writing produced by academic scholars ("Becoming" 303). In recent years, Nguyen's critique of representational politics has given special consideration to the Vietnamese diaspora. He shows how the collusion between the war machine and the memory industry has manufactured as stock figures the (model) refugee victim and the (bad) communist enemy. No longer a war that was actually fought, "Vietnam" is now a ready-made blockbuster. The refugee, meanwhile, has become a subaltern-like figure: "for the refugee who speaks in a language that her adopted national audience can hear, her dilemma is that she has ceased being a refugee even as she speaks in the refugee's name" ("Refugee Memories" 934).

How, then, ought a writer to proceed amid such intractable dilemmas? Nguyen writes, "[T]he ideal that I held before myself was that perhaps it would be possible to write fiction like criticism and criticism like fiction. It is not an ideal that I have achieved, even if the novel I eventually wrote seems to me to approximate criticism" ("Becoming" 305). This ideal of writing fiction like criticism and criticism like fiction accounts for the particular form that metafiction takes for Nguyen.

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In *The Sympathizer* Nguyen's long-standing awareness of literary and political representation is rendered most manifest in its metafictional turns, notably in the riff on *Apocalypse Now* at the novel's middle and the experimental multivocality at its end. The self-reflexivity also generates an extra level of critical expertise—quite literally so, in that the outermost metafictional layer of *The Sympathizer* is a critical companion, *Nothing Ever Dies*. Even the short story collection *The Refugees*, a dramatic tonal departure from *The Sympathizer*'s literary gymnastics, can be viewed as an exhibition of authorial impersonality, in case there was any doubt that the novel's silver-tongued womanizer is a carefully crafted persona and not an autobiographical proxy.

If, as McGurl suggests, creative writing is an especially American endeavor because of its continuity with the creative economy, we might view Nguyen's authorial program as an especially Asian American phenomenon in that his claim to literariness is informed by a hyperawareness about the political betrayals that both academic institutionalization and mainstream fame can entail. A dynamic yet self-obfuscating critical personality, as distinguished from a forthrightly personal one, is part and parcel of the maximal forms of inclusiveness that Nguyen champions. As we will see, by prioritizing both the critical and the inclusive, Nguyen turns the domain of representation into a trick mirror, one that reflects the multitude only by halving or doubling the authorial persona.

## The Body Count

Body counts are integral to two seemingly distinct dimensions of America's war in Vietnam, one involving the dead and another the living. In the first, body counts were central to General William Westmoreland's "war of attrition," which infamously assumed the Oriental's relative disregard for life. As Nguyen explains it, "Killing is the weapon of the strong. Dying is the weapon of the weak. It is not that the weak cannot kill; it is only that their greatest strength lies in their capacity to die in greater numbers than the strong" (*Nothing* 156). Body counts, however, are also integral to narratives of rescue. Vietnamese refugees are, as Yến Lê Espiritu puts it, "overdocumented" (5). Their numbers evidence the ruthlessness of their communist compatriots and the magnanimity of their American rescuers. By reformulating "body counts" as an insistence "that bodies—Vietnamese bodies—should *count*" (2), Espiritu reveals how the very notion of numerical countability constitutes a form of nationalist self-reckoning that is more ontological than quantitative: it is more about *who* is counted than *what* the count is. What's more, the ontological quandary of body counts was exacerbated by the racialized indistinction between civilian and combatant, north and south, and enemy and friend. In the contexts of both strategic warfare and humanitarian rescue, the body and its count were manipulated to serve the United States' nationalist ends. The result is what Sylvia Chong terms the "Oriental obscene," a distinctive component of America's Vietnam that relied on "representations of explicit violence in a quantity . . . lacking in previous newsreel coverage" (19).

Oriental body counts, the obscenity of bulk, offer one way of engaging mass death and mass life as related representational cruxes. Mass death, as Nguyen and other critics show, is a specific form of unrepresentability when most of the dead are unheroic Vietnamese civilians whose missing, unclaimed, and dismembered bodies are literally unidentifiable. In the United States, two strategies have surfaced within Vietnam War discourse for grappling with this unrepresentability. One, the more common, is to transform a quantitative body count (the bureaucratic documentation of identity) into an individual narrative account (the humanistic act of self-representation). Ken Burns and

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Lynn Novick's documentary *The Vietnam War* adheres to this ethos: the war was "immeasurable and irredeemable. But meaning can be found in the individual stories of those who lived through it, stories of courage and comradeship and perseverance and understanding and forgiveness and ultimately reconciliation." The less common strategy aims for precision in quantifiable facts rather than individual stories. Take, for example, Chris Burden's 1991 sculpture *The Other Vietnam Memorial*. Burden visualizes the war's Vietnamese body count by etching three million names in six-point font on ninety-six copper sheets, which are attached to a thirteen-foot steel pole. The sculpture's alleged likeness to a Rolodex is fitting (Knight). Its list of commemorated dead had been algorithmically generated by taking four thousand Vietnamese names from phone books and feeding them into a computer (Laqueur 430–31).

*The Sympathizer* troubles both these strategies. In the first case, its narrator-spy can provide an individual perspective from both sides of the war, yet this first-person voice also obscures the distinction between truthful testimony and coerced confession. In the second, the novel pays possible homage to Burden: the construction of a fake cemetery for the film *The Hamlet* is based on names "copied from the Los Angeles phone book and attached to people presumably still alive" (174). This small-scale metafiction—the cemetery that reproduces the phone book—encapsulates the larger lesson of the literary novel that repurposes the Hollywood film. Both the cemetery–phone book and the novel's film suggest that weapons of mass destruction and technologies of mass representation share a logic of indiscrimination when the name, body, and person in question is Oriental. Hence, although Nguyen's narrator initially views artistic representation as potentially beneficial for political recognition—he offers his cultural consultation in good faith to the Coppola-like Auteur, and he lobbies for speaking roles for the Vietnamese "extras"—it eventually becomes clear that increased representation may not be a viable political tactic when mass death and mass life are racialized in the same terms. That is, the racialization of body counts in America's war of attrition—which boosted kill ratios by counting civilians, Southern combatants, and anonymous appendages as enemy bodies—similarly underwrites America's postwar docudramas, which not only cast Filipinos and Koreans as Vietnamese but also cast former South Vietnamese soldiers as the Viet Cong. As Nguyen shows, the Vietnamese refugee asked to play the role of the civilian was "already familiar" with being "Possibly Innocent but Also Possibly Viet Cong and Therefore Possibly Going to Be Killed for Either Being Innocent or Being Viet Cong." Such a figure needed no guidance on adopting "the right psychology for possibly being blown up, dismembered, or just plain shot" (156). The shared assumptions of wartime kill strategies and postwar representational strategies make the dismembered (Northern) Vietnamese little different from the disremembered (Southern) Vietnamese. Filmed in the Philippines, the "temporary" processing site where some evacuees from Vietnam remained until 2009, *The Hamlet* illustrates how refugee life is always liminal. Stuck in passage literally and representationally, the film's refugee extras had to die "more than once, many four or five times" in order to simulate "the deaths of several hundred Viet Cong and Laotians" (169).

On the one hand, Nguyen's biracial narrator seems caught in the same conundrum of being disremembered/dismembered. As he wittily intones, being half a Vietnamese corpse ("a corpse whose remains included only his head, chest, and arms") is little different from being half Vietnamese, for in both scenarios "half a gook is still a gook" (328). On the other hand, the narrator's Du Boisian orientation also leads him to view himself as "not half of anything" but "twice

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of everything" (134). In an experimental turn, the first-person narrator's condition of "double-consciousness"—of "looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (Du Bois 5)—is literalized when the narrator becomes a third-person "patient" who receives treatment "until he can observe himself as someone else" (Nguyen, *Sympathizer* 329). This split self, presented as a "divided, tormented body below" and a "placid consciousness floating high above," forks into a range of narrative techniques that simultaneously evidence double-consciousness and self-consciousness (341). One technique has the narrator view his past on a cinematic screen, which, like the Hollywood screen, fetishizes the rape of Vietnamese women. Another stages a dialogic prisoner interrogation between THE COMMISSAR and MYSELF as a screenplay. Most significant, the divided "I" begets multitudes and millions as the narrator imagines himself in his mother's womb:

> My cell divided, and divided, and divided again, until I was a million cells and more, until I was multitudes and multitudes, my own country, my own nation, the emperor and dictator of the masses of myself, commanding my mother's undivided attention. . . . I was a doll within a doll, hypnotized by a metronome ticking with perfect regularity, my mother's strong and steady heartbeat. (352–53)

The divided and doubled narrator is also a metanarrator; his serial division is visualized both laterally and concentrically. His bizarre rebirth in the above passage introduces an allegorical Mother Vietnam whose multitudes are both within and without, the nation and the diaspora. In the last pages of the novel, the narrator divides and divides again until the egotistical "I" transforms into the elastic "we." Stretching to encompass a specific set of heterogeneous others who cannot represent themselves, the "we" voice declares, "Tomorrow we will join those tens of thousands who have taken to the sea, refugees from a revolution" (364). The voice then elaborates on the exact composition of this refugee cohort:

> Among us will be infants and children, as well as adults and parents, but no elderly, for none dare the voyage. Among us will be men and women, as well as the thin and lean, but not one among us will be fat, the entire nation having undergone a forced diet. Among us will be the light skinned, dark skinned, and every shade in between, some speaking in refined accents and some in rough ones. Many will be Chinese, persecuted for being Chinese, with many others the recipients of degrees in reeducation. Collectively we will be called the boat people. (366)

If in the earlier passage the "I" narrator multiplies through division, the "we" narrator here operates through inclusion by listing all who "we" could be—a tactic that rhetorically includes even the nominally excluded (the elderly and the fat). A similar sort of prodigious enumeration appears throughout the novel when the pronoun "we" is invoked, for example, in a page-long sentence that "could go on and on and on" about what "we could never forget" (229–39). This compulsion to enumerate and thereby include the constituents of "we" not only offers an emphatic challenge to the foreordained death of those who cannot represent themselves, it also reminds us that "we like lists because we do not want to die" (Umberto Eco, qtd. in Laqueur 374). In what Thomas Laqueur terms "the age of necronominalism," we rely on "the precise counting and marking of the dead" in order to live with the disorder that death wreaks on a world of mortals (414). Only two percent of the Americans who died in Vietnam, about 1,200, are unaccounted for (426). In contrast to this relatively precise count, "the number of Vietnamese dead is difficult to specify, their names are even harder to come by" (430). According to Heonik Kwon, this uncertainty hovers over mass civilian deaths in particular, which are

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difficult to reconcile with either Vietnam's "dominant traditional culture" or its "hegemonic revolutionary politics" (137).

What then are we to make of this mass of Vietnamese dead whose bodies cannot be located, identified, or remembered? What of that other body count, those Southern Vietnamese whose lives are disremembered by both Vietnam and the United States? Whereas a single dead civilian may be named, grieved, and honored in order for the nation to move on, mass death "change[s] the social order" (Kwon 25). It throws doubt on the value of precision and challenges the living to remember without names or bodies. It also exposes the inadequacy of our sensory capacities for comprehending impossibly large magnitudes and checks our gravitation to the individual face as the locus of memory and empathy. How would one take in three million faces, names, bodies, or persons when "as much . . . is lost at one end as is gained at the other" (Kant 82)? Kant describes this mathematical sublime as in part a matter of distance: "in order to get the full emotional effect of the size of the [Egyptian] pyramids we must avoid coming too near just as much as remaining too far away." This calibration of distance toward the comprehension of an immeasurable count is what *The Sympathizer* relentlessly tries to accomplish. It plays with critical distance in both the metafictional setup of a narrative within a narrative and the extravagant perspectival shifts between "I," "he," and "we." The result is a kind of parallax vision, a peculiar distortion that allows us to perceive the author and the dead at the same time, to understand literary artifice as coextensive with social inclusivity.

As recent special issues on Southeast Asian American studies in various journals have observed, the contemporary moment has calcified the Vietnamese refugee into a geopolitical instrument in an escalating international refugee crisis. Yet this moment has also seen the emergence of a robustly interdisciplinary critical refugee studies, which, instead of determinately defining the refugee, has cast "the refugee figure as a strategy to open, rearticulate, and enable new lines of questioning" (Ngô et al. 677). As a popular writer and a respected academic, Nguyen has the rare ability to communicate with both a general audience and a scholarly community. His work has made refugee experiences newly legible as a genre of war writing, one that reminds us that for individuals, if not for nations, war never ends with the signing of treaties. The hope is that this legibility is not the endgame, which would further delimit the refugee seen on bookshelves and syllabi. Rather, the hope is that Nguyen's authorial persona, in putting the refugee on the proverbial map, will not only help clear the space for both new and old accounts but also allow them to count in more expansive ways.

## Notes

1. Nguyen's narrator also calls himself "a man of two minds" (1), though in this context the phrase is distinct from its more explicit connotations: W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of "double-consciousness" (5) and the "dual personality" diagnosis that incensed the Asian American editors of *Aiiieeeee!* (Chin et al. xxiv–xxv).

2. Nguyen has contributed to *The Routledge Companion to Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature* (2014), *Keywords for Asian American Studies* (2015), *The Cambridge History of Asian American Literature* (2015), and *Flashpoints for Asian American Studies* (2017).

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