theories and methodologies

Slips and Slides

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IT HAS ALREADY BECOME A CRITICAL COMMONPLACE TO BEGIN A DISCUSSION OF VIET THANH NGUYEN'S *THE SYMPATHIZER* (2015) BY INvoking its powerful opening declaration:

> I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds. I am not some misunderstood mutant from a comic book or a horror movie, although some have treated me as such. I am simply able to see any issue from both sides. (1)

This passage assembles an intriguingly refracted establishing shot. There are many ways of reading it: as a clear allusion to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, as well as to W. E. B. Du Bois's theory of double consciousness; as an invocation of the many genres yet to appear; as a simultaneous sign of declarative certainty and uncertainty. I want to draw particular attention to its idiosyncrasies of structure, idiosyncrasies that play out across the novel and across Nguyen's work more broadly. In short, this opening presents a basic arithmetic problem: What do you get when you add up a lot of doubles?

The answer, it seems, is a fungible, flexible, and unresolvable multiplicity. In *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (2014), C. Namwali Serpell's pithy definition of *multiplicity* in narrative (a term all too easily invoked but not always clearly elaborated) is helpful for considering this quandary: "Multiplicity is a narrative structure characterized by the presentation of conflicting views within a given community about an event, an object, or a person. Corresponding to a 'both/and' rhetoric that precludes an objective truth, multiplicity presents several acts of interpretation, but no one view is privileged as correct" (115).[1] This definition offers a lens through which to view Nguyen's expansive novel. At the book's center is a nameless, self-consciously multiplied narrator, one whose many doublings proliferate into a kaleidoscope of identities. Although the stock figure of the spy might easily be seen as the subject of vilification (the "man of two faces") or pity (the "misunderstood mutant"), Nguyen's novel endorses neither view; instead, in Serpell's terms, "no one view is privileged as correct." The

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"both/and" logic of the narrator and the story he tells is clearly enunciated in this opening and performed continuously throughout the novel. This structuring mode is never a secret from the reader—either the implied reader of the novel or the diegetic reader of the narrator's written confession (the frame narrative of the book). We can see the narrator's multiplicity play out on many levels: in his role as a Communist sleeper agent within the republican Vietnamese community; in his position as a Eurasian moving through the United States, where he was educated, and Vietnam; in his uncontrollable "talent" of sympathizing with those unlike himself; in his (self-)framing as an undeniably charming murderer. We might read the tripartite bond between the narrator and his two blood brothers, the communist Man and the republican Bon, as an externalization of this multiplied self that cannot be pinned down. The narrator slides between all these divided personae throughout the novel, until he finally splits into a different kind of multiplicity, the uncertain "we" of the novel's final pages. Is "we" simply the narrator's divided consciousness, torn asunder by the ordeal of tortuous reeducation? Or is it a bigger "we," the trio "we" of him and Man and Bon reduced to the duo "we" of him and Bon, who become refugees together once more? Or more broadly still, is it the "we" of all the so-called boat people, that expansive "we" implied by the novel's last line—"*We will live!*" (367)? This question does not matter; "we," of course, is all these things.

Formally, the novel also performs multiplicity with a showman-like flair, moving unpredictably from genre to genre, a quality a number of critics have commented on already. In his review for *The Guardian*, Randy Boyagoda identifies it as "a spy novel, a war novel, an immigrant novel, a novel of ideas, a political novel, a campus novel, a novel about the movies, and a novel, yes, about other novels," while at *Public Books*, Karl Ashoka Britto adds that it is "a political satire" and "a scathing critique of mid-20th-century Orientalism." One could throw a few more generic categories into the mix: *The Sympathizer* is also historical fiction, a confessional novel, a farce, and a tragedy, with added dashes of the epistolary novel, drama, allegory, *Künstlerroman*, metafictional Nabokovian wordsmithery, and—notably—the specific genre of creative-writing-workshop feedback. Even hints of the speculative, as well as the novel's self-conscious concern with genre, are apparent in those opening lines: "I am not some misunderstood mutant from a comic book or a horror movie. . . ." Again, no genre is privileged; at times the genres may conflict, as in the novel's jarring juxtaposition of black comedy with tragedy, but they exist alongside and amid each other.[2]

Like *The Sympathizer*, Nguyen's critical book *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (2016) is multifarious in genre; it is at times a treatise on ethics; a work of literary criticism; a travelogue; a history of the specific war variously called the Vietnam War or the American War; a philosophical discussion of war in general; a memoir; an intervention in memory studies; an analysis of Vietnam and the memory of war that is also about the United States, South Korea, Laos, and Cambodia; and a fiery manifesto for the modern-day Asian American writer—or even, I posit, for (self-)conscious critical writers in other fields. Its narrative "I," like that of *The Sympathizer*, is openly unstable. This book also begins by twice announcing the multiplicity of its authorial voice: first, in the prologue ("I was born in Vietnam and raised in America" [1])—second, in the brief introductory chapter ("This is a book on war, memory, and identity" [4]). Like its novelistic sibling, the book declares in this double opening its identity's slipperiness. The two first lines ("I was born in . . ." and "This is a book on . . .") provocatively ask readers to wonder whether the book will foreground the personal "I," in the manner of the first-person

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novel, or the straightforward academic figure of the "book." As the text progresses, it becomes clear that neither the personal "I" nor the academic figure claims preeminence; individual, noncritical reactions sit cheek by jowl with analytic ones. For example, reflecting on *Apocalypse Now*, Nguyen writes, "I experienced my readerly and spectatorial emotions all over again, intense feelings of disgust, horror, shame, and rage. . . . My body trembled and my voice shook" (65). This personal intimation follows directly an analysis of Jean Baudrillard's reading of the film. Again, as Serpell's definition reminds us, the work's multiplicity invites "several acts of interpretation, but no one view is privileged as correct." Ultimately, the prominent "I" of the authorial voice swings equally between critical distance and ferocious intimacy, a constant oscillation summed up in the space between the intermingled use of "*the* war" and "*my* war" (8; italics mine).

Nguyen has commented on the multiplied identities found in *The Sympathizer* and *Nothing Ever Dies*. As he states in an interview with David Haeselin published in 2017 on the "I" in these two works:

> Both "I"s in these books are me and not me, to differing degrees. In *The Sympathizer*, the protagonist is clearly not me in any factual sense, but he is me in an emotional and intellectual sense. The pendulum veers towards the fictional because of the genre. . . . In *Nothing Ever Dies*, the persona is me in a factual sense, but he isn't me in another sense that's a bit hard to define. He is wiser than I think I actually am. He is more philosophical than I imagine myself being. The pendulum veers toward the academic because of the genre. . . . I had to create two personas and write two very different books to get at the complexity of war, memory, feeling, and storytelling. ("No Excuses")

The splitting of the larger, singular project (in which Nguyen tries to "get at the complexity of war, memory, feeling, and storytelling") into "two very different books" and "two personas" (who are themselves divided into the fractured figure of the Eurasian sleeper agent or the multiplied figure of the personal and academic writer) further invites the reader to consider Nguyen's recent oeuvre as an extended exercise in multiplicity. There is no singular identity to be found here, no stable ground for the reader to rest on while traveling through these unpredictable texts. This quality builds on Tina Chen's claim in *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture* (2005) that the figure of the persona-shifting Asian American impersonator "must forgo the illusory pleasures of identity as a singular performance in favor of enacting the messiness of such multiplicity" (12).[3] This shiftiness is markedly not untrustworthiness; rather, as Chen writes, "[W]e might read double agency not as the mark of a spy's betrayal or compromised loyalty but as a sign of the multiple allegiances that Asian Americans have maintained in order to construct themselves as agents capable of self-articulation and -determination" (xviii). The difference, it seems, between Chen's earlier depiction of the double agent and Nguyen's present-day one is that now—as Chen suggests in "multiple allegiances"—"double" is no longer enough.

It's hard to describe the overall effect of Nguyen's movements between multiple impersonations here (of identity, of genre)—in short, what these movements afford.[4] One possibility might be something akin to what Serpell describes as "adjacency, a mode that sets disparate entities beside each other in an enclosed space, allowing them to brush up against and interrogate each other" (133). The "tenuous, momentary contiguity" (132) of Serpell's term draws on Jean-Luc Nancy's "being-singular-plural" (qtd. in Serpell 133), a specific mode of multiplicity that, by "[n]egotiating between the similitude of the join and the distantiation of dismemberment," "permits us to conceive of a communal ethics that

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preserves the integrity of both the one and the many" (Serpell 132). "Adjacency" thus speaks to the disconcerting convergence of intimacy and alienation suggested by the multiplied "I"s of both novel and critical text. A more extreme way of reading Nguyen's shifts in narrative identity is to view them as what Lauren Berlant calls a "genre flail": "In a crisis we engage in genre flailing so that we don't fall through the cracks of knowledge and noise into suicide and psychosis. In a crisis we improvise like crazy, where 'like crazy' is a little too non-metaphorical." As her formulation suggests, the "crisis" here is undeniably political, and it is unavoidably personal: "cracks in knowledge" lead to "suicide and psychosis."[5]

However, neither *adjacency* nor *genre flail* expresses the changeable range of affects summoned by the subtle, often unmarked shifts between voices and genres in *The Sympathizer* and *Nothing Ever Dies*. Rather, Nguyen's style seems to oscillate unpredictably between the softer mode of "adjacency," which lets "entities" "brush up against . . . each other," and the violent mode of the "flail." In putting these two modes together, we might read the tricky shifts between "I"s and between genres in Nguyen's recent oeuvre as a series of slips and slides, movements that are, at times, so smooth and easy that they are almost indiscernible and, at others, so sudden that they provoke the heart-in-mouth sensation of vertigo.[6] It's sometimes hard to tell when a shift from one voice to another, or one genre to the next, is a slip or a controlled slide. The quality of contingency in *The Sympathizer* and *Nothing Ever Dies* places readers on a perpetually uncertain footing.

These moves can surprise readers, with a suddenness that can feel oddly perilous at times, especially regarding Nguyen's slippage between the personal and critical modes of *Nothing Ever Dies*. The reeling effect of the possessive in "my war" is not unlike certain surprising moments of slippery self-reference in the work of one of Nguyen's clear influences, W. G. Sebald—for example, when the hitherto unnamed narrator of Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* refers to his "patron saint," "St. Sebolt," or, later, when a snapshot of Sebald shows up unexpectedly (86, 263). Again, as Chen notes, multifariousness does not equal nefariousness. The slide is not necessarily sly; instead of suggesting a betrayal of an illusory binary (Asian and American, revolutionary and republican, person and critic), the slippage between personae and between genres here suggests a constant, perhaps uncontrollable, traveling among the "multiple allegiances" that Nguyen's complex subjects contain.

The effect of the sudden slip into different ways of narrating history also recalls another of Nguyen's writerly patron saints, Toni Morrison, who writes in *Beloved* about the uncanny shock of encountering someone else's "rememory" (43). (Nguyen borrows this term, along with Morrison's "disremembering" [140], in *Nothing Ever Dies*.) She writes, "Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. . . . It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else" (43). In *Nothing Ever Dies*, which is crowded with such powerful rememories, Nguyen describes a rememory as a "memory that inflicts physical and psychic blows" (65). Some of these rememories belong to Nguyen, some to the artists whose work he describes, some even to the reader. This strategy of using rememories leads to other pressing questions: What is the effect of this strategy on the reader? How do these unpredictable chutes cause us to slip up in our usual critical reading practices, and what does this slipping up in our reading practices do to our understanding and interpretation of these distinctive narrative maneuvers?

Allow me to slide for a moment into my experience reading *Nothing Ever Dies*. This early passage tripped me up:

> Having carried ourselves over, or been brought over, from the other side—we Gooks,

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> we goo-goos, we slopes, we dinks, we zipperheads, we slant-eyes, we yellow ones, we brown ones, we Japs, we Chinks, we ragheads, we sand niggers, we Orientals, we who cannot be distinguished between ourselves because we all look alike—we know that the condition of our being and our self-representation is that we are both ourselves and others. We are never without identity and never without ideology, whether we like it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not. (63)

Reading this litany made me lightheaded; I had to put down the book and go outside. The address was too direct, the language too real. I felt as though Nguyen, who'd been keeping a low profile under the brim of his critical hat for a while, unexpectedly looked up and fixed me with his eyes. The suddenness of the shift in pronoun—from "I" to "we"—is what tripped me up; the passage felt like a chute that opened beneath my feet and sent me plummeting to another level of readerly identity—certainly not the part of me reading Nguyen's work for *PMLA*, nor any analytically reading part at all, but a personal and vulnerable part. Nguyen goes on to say that he has never been called out loud by any of the names he lists, but I, the reader he startlingly interpellates, have been. The enumeration of these names here, with the aggressively inclusive "we," shoved me suddenly into rememories of my own and provoked a surprise attack of that Fanonian "nervous condition untreatable by any type of medicine or surgery" that is the nonwhite subject's perpetual malady, even if we think we have it under the cool and asymptomatic control of our critical faculties (63).

Reflecting on this jarring moment, I think Nguyen's sliding "I" (in this case "we"), with its unannounced dips down the slippery slope between personal and critical, primed me for this slippage in my readerly experience. The vertiginous and unsettling slippage between text and life thus became all the more treacherous—and irresistible. This slippage changed the way I read the rest of the book: as a reader, I'd become more vulnerable (which is not to say susceptible). The way I read it became not more or less critical but less surefooted. This question of readerly uncertainty might also extend to the slipperiness of the book's intended audience: although it can be read by nonacademic fans of Nguyen's fiction and by his fellow critics in the academy, its internal maneuvers ask these potential audiences to slide between readerly personae. The critical reader in particular must negotiate further slippages; the book is at once determinedly specific in its cultural, political, and historical coordinates and determinedly broad in its claims about ethics and critical practice. We might even close-read its title and subtitle as subtly enacting adjacency: "Nothing ever dies"—a quotation from *Beloved*—sketches widening intertextual circles of Asian American, ethnic American, and broadly "American" literatures, while "Vietnam and the memory of war" specifies place and period. This simultaneous occupation of multiple disciplinary locations stakes out another of the book's productive challenges to the conventional definitions of field imposed by critical discourse and academic publishing: How, Nguyen asks, can critics at once situate themselves responsibly in a field (in this case, Asian American studies) and demand that the field's discourse be recognized as relevant or, better, necessary to other critical discussions? As Nguyen asserts in his interview with Haeselin, "I am an Asian American writer and my books are Asian American books, but the Asian American category is only one of many I fit in" ("No Excuses").

Disciplinary claims aside, what might this multiplicity that slips and slides afford to the writer? The slippage of the academic persona, which initially seems as though it could destabilize the critic's intellectual authority, offers potential for evaluating the critical project. Perversely, might there be something critically generative about the authorial voice

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that refuses singular authority? This refusal does not arrest the slide into a more intimate voice and acknowledges that when dealing with volatile, recent historical materials (personal, familial, national, global), we are all on unsteady ground and may not always be able to maintain critical distance.[7] After all, as Nguyen baldly states in *Nothing Ever Dies*, "Those critics who do not admit to their biases, to the way their tastes have been shaped by their worlds and their aesthetic industries, *are being unethical*" (238; italics mine). The unannounced and frequent slides from self to critic and back in this book end up in a temporarily static midway point at the end, in a position of self-critique. As Nguyen declares:

> I am not immune, either as the one who curses and who is cursed, or as the one who takes on the authority of calling for ethical behavior. I am among that group of "committed writers," as the critic Trinh T. Minh-ha calls us, "the ones who write both to awaken to the consciousness of their guilt and to give their readers a guilty conscience. . . . [S]uch a definition naturally places the committed writer on the side of Power." And power, even when carried out with the elevated intention of justice, incites rebellion from those below and suppression from those above. (253)

This position of simultaneous self-assertion and wariness is only one example of Nguyen's acceptance of his insistent challenge to the Asian American thinker, posed in the introduction to his first critical book, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (2002). There, Nguyen declares that "for Asian American intellectual work to grow in vitality not only must it continue the vital task of criticizing American society's methods of racial and class domination, but it must also engage in a self-critique that results in an understanding of Asian America's limits" (11). Thus, we see that, instead of revealing treacherous authorial manipulation or weakening the critical thrust of an argument, these slippages can afford a self-interrogating and productive authorial vulnerability. This vulnerability speaks to Nguyen's overriding concern with empathy and what Nguyen terms, in *Nothing Ever Dies*, "an ethics of recognition" in narrativization and historicization, remembering and forgetting. 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" (100). This ethics demands a specific kind of empathy, the one that I think Nguyen means when he uses that term (one too often falsely sugared and sentimentalized, like nostalgia)—an empathy that is fierce, uncomfortable, "multiplicitous," and slippery.

Notes

1. *Multiplicity* also felicitously aligns with Lowe's now-canonical critique of identity politics. Nguyen's particular and peculiar formal multiplicity within the single text or, further, within the seemingly singular narrative "I" takes Lowe's earlier claim about the heterogeneity of Asian American cultures to an extreme level, marking in shorthand the range of critical discourse between 1991 and 2017 in what Lee calls the "post-identity turn" in Asian American studies (3). Lowe and Nguyen have both been key contributors to this discourse.

2. In this sense, we might view *The Sympathizer* in an extended family of recent works built on shifting genre identities, like Hari Kunzru's *White Tears* and Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, with their interplay of satire and horror, or Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, and Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*, in which historical and speculative fictions interact. Though rarer, this kind of generic malleability also appears in recent critical work: Nguyen's *Nothing Ever Dies* finds a fellow traveler in Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being.*

3. Despite Chen's use of the term "double agency," the multiplicity that she sees as "messiness" is notably not simply about binaries—two books, doubled figures—but also about a more nuanced play of identities. Thus Chen's vocabulary of impersonation offers another helpful lens

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through which to read Nguyen's project: "By thinking about impersonation and the options it offers for resisting the binary logics of loyalty/disloyalty, real/fake, and Asian/American . . . [,] *Double Agency* attends to such acts as ones of *im-personation*, a performance by which Asian Americans are constituted and constitute themselves as speaking and acting subjects" (xvii).

4. I am thinking here of Serpell's borrowing of *affordance* from cognitive psychology, as well as of Levine's adaptation of the same word from design theory. Serpell quotes James J. Gibson, who writes that "[t]he affordances of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill. . . . [A]ctually, an affordance is neither an objective property nor a subjective property; it is both, if you like. An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither." Affordance thus, she writes, "has a fluidity that allows us to talk about the relations between subjects and objects in pragmatic terms. It is less a general theory than a flexible way of talking about how we experience the world and its objects" (21). Levine's use of the term emphasizes the range of possibilities latent in a given form. As she argues, "*Affordance* is a term used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and design. Glass affords transparency and brittleness. Steel affords strength, smoothness, hardness, and durability. . . . Specific designs, which organize these materials, then lay claim to their own range of affordances" (6). Seen together, these complementary definitions get at the experiential and the formal—the aspects of Nguyen's multiplicity that I interrogate here.

5. In Berlant's essay, the crisis is the election of Donald Trump.

6. In using the language of slipperiness, I gesture obliquely to Browder's use of it regarding ethnicity and to Browder's and Chen's invocation of authorial impersonation.

7. To this end, the implied demand for readerly self-consciousness makes me consider further my anxious position reading and writing about *Nothing Ever Dies* as an Asian American scholar of contemporary fiction who is not by training an Asian Americanist. In considering Nguyen's work, I am at once interpellated by the field and definitively outside it. As such, I am a reader whose "multiple allegiances" are in constant flux, often in tension with each other. But perhaps we might extrapolate from Nguyen's formal interventions here and argue that the positions of the critical reader and writer are always unstable and—one hopes—generatively precarious.

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