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De-Americanizing Viet Nam: The Representation of the “Vietnam War”

in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer*

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## Abstract

Since the end of the war in Viet Nam in 1975, we, as a society, have been exposed to an American narrative that has manipulated our view of the conflict. We have been led to believe that the Vietnamese conflict was an American tragedy rather than a devastating war with a colonial background and fought on Southeast Asian soil. The purpose of this undergraduate thesis is first, to analyze the succession of events that resulted in the war in Viet Nam and the American participation in the same, and second, to examine how, after their non-defeat, Americans began controlling the story behind the war, releasing literary and cinematographic representations that placed Americans as the rightful victims of the war. In an attempt to redress such manipulation, I will employ Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel *The Sympathizer*, published 40 years after the end of the conflict, as an example of a de-Americanized version of the war in Viet Nam, that is, a fictional version that portrays the war as, first and foremost, a Vietnamese conflict and tragedy. The aim of this analysis is to demonstrate how susceptible society is to believe the version of the story publicized by the country with more power and how influential America has been in creating misconceptions about Viet Nam and its war.

## Introduction

Vietnam or Viet Nam? That was the very first question that came to mind when I started working on this dissertation. I had never seen Viet Nam written separately, but, to be honest, neither had I read much regarding the country. To me, Viet Nam was familiar for two reasons: the war, and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. However, when I first watched the film as a teenager, I did not understand what I was watching, nor did I realize how Coppola's vision had managed to influence the conception I had of what the war in Viet Nam had been like. In fact, until I began to do research for this paper, I was not aware of all the misinformation I had been receiving over the years through films, television shows, and popular culture. Somehow, an idea in my head had been formed that the war in Viet Nam had been a tragedy for Americans: as for Vietnamese people... I had never considered them victims of the war as well. However, that changed once I began working on this paper, just as my spelling of Viet Nam did. "Vietnam" is a combination of two independent words with a different meaning each and, therefore, the name should be spelled separately, contrary to what is usually taught. For example, if no one would consider writing "North America" as one single word, then why should Viet Nam be spelled as "Vietnam"? After all, both names contain information regarding the position of its countries and the location of its inhabitants, respectively—North America denotes the countries situated in the northern part of the continent, whereas Viet Nam refers to the Viet people living in the South—and both names change their meaning if combined. However, this dissertation has allowed me to explore more than just the correct spelling of Viet Nam; it has allowed me to study the reason why, unconsciously, I had created the notion of the war in Viet Nam as a strictly American subject and had ignored Vietnamese people's point of view. In order to deconstruct this misconception, I employed a comparative approach, first by analyzing fictional representations produced by America, and then comparing those portrayals

with *The Sympathizer*, a novel written by the Vietnamese American author Viet Thanh Nguyen in 2015. My objective was not to establish which representation is the most authentic, but rather to demonstrate how America, as a more powerful nation, has used that power to manipulate war narratives and to publicize faulty versions that only suit their discourse of rightful victims of the war.

The history behind the “Vietnam War” is extensive and complex and, although this paper is not intended to be regarded as a historical account of the facts, I believe that context is still necessary before proceeding to a more in-depth analysis. Therefore, the initial chapter, “The Resistance against America,” will contain two sections: “A Country at War,” which will focus solely on historical data, and “‘Adapting’ the Truth,” centered on how both nations involved in the war, America and Viet Nam, have fictionalized that data and created representations of the war. For the American depiction of the war, I will explore cinematographic representations, as well as examine some autobiographical narratives written during the post-war period. However, for the Vietnamese portrayal, I will focus exclusively on Nguyen’s novel.

In the second chapter, titled “Authenticity vs. Creativity,” I shall focus on the literary genres typically associated with war narratives. Once again, the contrasting point will be Nguyen’s novel and I will analyze how, by using a distinctive genre and all its associated characteristics, he creates a representation of the war that, although fictionalized, seems to be more accurate than the American war narratives from the 1970s. Finally, in “True War Heroes,” the third chapter, I will discuss the characters that are at the center of those war representations, that is its protagonists. I will explore the main differences between the protagonists of the typical American stories in contrast with the protagonist of *The Sympathizer*. With this, I intend to demonstrate not only that other genres can be employed in stories about the war in Viet Nam, but also that other types of characters can be used to articulate the narrative.

In the end, I hope to illustrate how the United States has manipulated the story of what happened in Viet Nam. For years, we have been victims to a one-sided narrative that ignored Vietnamese people's voices and erased them from a tragedy that was also theirs to remember and cry. In *The Sympathizer*, we are given a story that does not relegate Vietnamese people to the background of their own history. We are given a different side of the story that had not yet been represented in American literature, and, although *The Sympathizer* cannot be considered a historical account of the war, it still should not be ignored or regarded as having less historical value than American autobiographical war narratives.

## 1. The Resistance against America

In his essay “Speak of the Dead, Speak of Viet Nam: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Minority Discourse,” Viet Thanh Nguyen describes the “Vietnam War” as a “global tragedy, billed with [a] grammatically incorrect title” (14). He later justifies these words, explaining that “Viet Nam is a noun and not an adjective, a country and not a war” and that the name is a “misnomer” because it erases and displaces the names of other Southeast Asians involved (33). As a matter of fact, when we speak of the “Vietnam War,” we are also speaking of the Second Indochina War, the Resistance War against America, or simply the American War. In total, there are four different names for one tragedy. Four names that convey different feelings and perspectives of one event. Nevertheless, the term “Vietnam War” is undoubtedly the most widely spread and commonly accepted, and it may be time that we begin to question why.

Common knowledge affirms that history is written by the victors<sup>1</sup> but, in the modern world, it does not matter so much who wins or loses as who possesses more power and resources to publicize their version of the story. That is the case of the war in Viet Nam. The United States lost the war, but history is still being produced mainly by its writers and historians. Yen Le Espiritu furthers on this faux sense of American victory, calling it “the “we-win-even-when-we-lose” syndrome” (“Syndrome” 330). She believes that this “ability to conjure triumph from defeat” is an American tactic to forget “a war that went wrong” (330). However, I could argue that it also constitutes an attempt to control the narrative of the war. It is America’s way of writing their version of the story without having to admit not only that they lost, but also that

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<sup>1</sup> The quotation has been misattributed to several people, including Napoleon, Winston Churchill or George Orwell. However, the quote may be merely an adaptation of speeches and/or articles penned by any of these authors. It is believed that Orwell wrote an article in 1944 titled “History is written by the winners,” but the title was not of his authorship and was previously added by an editor. The only documented evidence of the quote is from the book *The Discovery of India* by Jawaharlal Nehru, published in 1946, where he writes that “[h]istory is almost always written by the victors and conquerors and gives their viewpoint; or, at any rate, the victors’ version is given prominence and holds the field” (289).

their involvement was unnecessary. Therefore, it is unsurprising that everybody should know what the “Vietnam War” was, but very few are familiar with what happened in the Resistance War against America.

### **1.1. A Country at War**

All of the wars fought on Vietnamese—and Southeast Asian—soil came from a native desire for freedom and independence from colonial powers. As previously mentioned, the “Vietnam War,” when placed in a larger, postcolonial context, can also be referred to as the Second Indochina War. This war belongs to a series of conflicts that took place not only in Viet Nam but also in Laos and Cambodia, an area that was later renamed Indochina by the French—a name meant to reflect the influence that both India and China had in the region. Nevertheless, the main influence in the area remained France, which had colonized the region in the nineteenth century. Following this colonization, the French devoted themselves to Christianizing the natives, exploiting natural resources, and developing industries such as rubber, tea, or coal—all for the benefit of the Empire (Novas et al. 294). However, the colonial system generated discontent among the population, as well as uprisings against the Empire that were successfully controlled by the French and its allies up until the end of the Second World War. By then, in 1945, Ho Chi Minh—a Vietnamese communist revolutionary who had gathered a guerrilla force in North Viet Nam under the name League for the Independence of Viet Nam, or Viet Minh (Jamieson 179)—launched the August Revolution in order to free the country from the French. The Revolution was successful and Ho Chi Minh, supported by the Communists, proclaimed Viet Nam an independent country and established the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam (DRV), casting his proclamation in words of the United States Declaration of Independence (Jamieson 196; Young 11).



Despite their loss, France continued to try to impose its colonial power on Viet Nam. Initially, they attempted to create a free state that would still belong to the French Union, but negotiations failed and the French insistence on restoring its administration led to the First Indochina War. It was a war fought between the Vietnamese communist forces and the French, who then received economic support from the United States of America, whose president, Harry S. Truman, had previously refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the DRV and of Ho Chi Minh's government. Moreover, Truman agreed to finance the French troops out of fear, not wanting Viet Nam to fall to Communism (Karnow 59). However, America's financial help proved to be useless, with Viet Minh forces defeating the French. Following this loss, a cease-fire had to be negotiated. The only way to achieve it was by establishing a separation between the Vietnamese allied to the French and those who supported Ho Chi Minh and the Communists. This separation, established by the Geneva Accords in 1954, split Viet Nam into South Viet Nam and North Viet Nam, with the promise that, in two years' time, a referendum would be held in order to reunite the country. Such referendum never took place, fear of Communism once again the reason, and thus began the so-called "Vietnam War."

The involvement of America in the conflict in Viet Nam can be regarded as a demonstration of what Rudyard Kipling called "the White Man's burden" (1). The United States felt the need to help the Vietnamese, to bring "salvation to a people deemed racially, culturally, and even morally inferior" (Le Espiritu, "Ghost Stories" 1700), but they also intended to save the rest of the Asian continent from that common evil they called Communism. For that purpose, President John F. Kennedy created "a "task force" to prepare economic, social, political and military programs aimed at preventing Communist "domination" of South Vietnam" (Karnow 267). Later, he would also agree to increase America's participation in the war by sending to the region more military advisors and other supplies. It was not until 1964, when North Viet Nam attacked an American warship, that Congress authorized America's full

and direct involvement in the conflict. This supposed attack was the justification the United States needed in order to intensify their operations in Viet Nam and do more than financing the war or advising local troops. An attack against an American warship was outrageous enough to win the support of the American population and to pass a congressional resolution, which was, as Marilyn B. Young notes, “certainly preferable to a declaration of war . . . especially in an election year” (118). This resolution allowed American forces to insert themselves in a war that initially did not concern them but that they believed could not be won without their intervention. Needless to say, said attack never happened<sup>2</sup>—it was an excuse, an event that the United States fabricated in order to justify their participation. It was the first of many occasions when America manipulated the narrative about the war in Viet Nam.

With the American presence on Vietnamese soil, the conflict escalated. There were more American soldiers fighting, more American money being spent, and more bombings against North Viet Nam. The continuous attacks were intended to force the Communists to negotiate, but ultimately they failed. Instead, it was the North Vietnamese who, in 1968, successfully launched an attack against cities in the South, including Saigon and, more precisely, the U.S. Embassy. This attack took place during the Vietnamese New Year, known as Tet, and violated a truce that had been previously accorded between both sides. It was also the first attack broadcast by television in the United States, showing the American population what was happening in Southeast Asia, but also making them wonder whether a victory in Viet Nam was as easy as the government had previously assured. At the same time, the anti-war movement in Viet Nam was increasing. This movement was being built on the grounds that

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<sup>2</sup> In the 2003 documentary *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*, Robert McNamara, former Secretary of Defense, admits that “our judgement that we’d been attacked [on August 4] was wrong; it didn’t happen” (01:09:15 – 01:09:22). Previously, in 1998, using declassified NSA material, Robert Hanyok wrote that “no attack happened that night. . . . In truth, Hanoi’s navy was engaged in nothing that night but the salvage of two of the boats damaged on 2 August” (3). The reports used by Hanyok—parts of which had been previously used by the Johnson’s administration as proof of the August 4 attack—, as he explains, “contained severe analytic errors, unexplained translation changes, and the conjunction of two unrelated messages into one translation” (3).

America was interfering in Viet Nam's internal affairs, that their tactics showed a complete disregard for the lives and culture of the Vietnamese, and that the Americans, as previous supporters of French colonialism, were not welcome in their country (Jamieson 343; Novas et al. 300). Nevertheless, South Vietnamese forces considered Communism worse than America's involvement and, therefore, allowed them to continue participating in the war. However, the war in Viet Nam was being largely coordinated by American politicians rather than the military (Novas et al. 301). This not only led to crucial tactical errors but also to an incorrect approach: politicians preferred to attack the North gradually rather than launch one massive attack, since the latter could cause political friction with other powerful Communist countries such as China and the Soviet Union.

Without any improvements at the war front, the United States started to understand that a victory would be more difficult than expected. In order not to have to assume defeat, in 1970, President Nixon started to withdraw soldiers from Vietnamese soil, turning over control of the war to the South Vietnamese troops—this he called “Vietnamization” (Jamieson 358). However, America continued to support the South with money and military equipment, once again, not wanting to be responsible for the loss of the war. Even though most soldiers had already retired and been sent back to the United States, air attacks against the North continued, and on the Christmas of 1972, the Americans bombed North Viet Nam, forcing them to negotiate a peace agreement. The agreement, signed in Paris in 1973 between both parties, established that the cease-fire would be immediate, the US would withdraw all soldiers from the South, war prisoners would be released, the South would have the right to self-determination, and finally, that the North Vietnamese troops could remain in South Viet Nam but could not be reinforced (Novas et al. 302; Young 263). The last term of the agreement did not please South Viet Nam, but the United States, desperate to end the war with no defeat, pressured them to sign the agreement or else they would cut off all aid to the South and negotiate

only with the North (Karnow 669). Left with no other option, the South accepted the terms of the agreement, which ended the war in Viet Nam, or rather ended the American participation in the war in Viet Nam not with a defeat but with a “peace with honor” (Jamieson 354). However, the fears of the South Vietnamese troops were justified, and the North did not respect the cease-fire for long. Only months after the American withdrawal, the Communists launched another attack, causing panic in the streets of Saigon and, ultimately, forcing the President of South Viet Nam to flee. With his escape, the rest of the government surrendered to the Communists, who then captured Saigon in April 1975 and renamed it Ho Chi Minh City. This event, known as the “Fall of Saigon,” put a definite end to the “Vietnam War” or the Resistance War against America.

## **1.2. “Adapting” the Truth**

The Resistance War against America has become globally known as the “Vietnam War” because, ever since the “Fall of Saigon,” the United States has imposed its narrative on the world. American writers create stories about Viet Nam—fictional or historical—by deliberately forgetting a large percentage of those who were involved in the conflict: the Vietnamese. They produce stories based on experiences of the American veteran, but very few on the Vietnamese soldier or refugee. They produce stories from the winner’s perspective, when in fact they lost a war that did not request their presence. That is because America has never wanted to admit defeat or to acknowledge that their version of the events is not the entire truth or, at the least, not the only one. The good news for the rest of the world is that, by ignoring a large portion of history, American writers have left a gap. A gap that is now being filled with more stories about the Resistance War against America, stories that relegate to the background those whose voices do not need to be heard any longer. For years, people have heard about the “Vietnam War,”

they have read books and watched movies about it from the American point of view, many of which may have led them to believe that the war had been an American success. However, perhaps now it is time that people began hearing about the American War, that war that devastated Southeast Asian land and their people, the war that needs to stop being told solely by Americans and start being told also by other voices, some coming from Viet Nam itself.

### **1.2.1. The American Apocalypse**

Initially, the ordinary American citizen only experienced the war through the media; most of the literature on Viet Nam, especially autobiographical narratives, did not appear until the post-war period. Authors such as Robert J. Glasser claimed that “there [was] no novel in Nam, there [was] not enough for a plot, nor [was] there really any character development” (qtd. in Rollins 422), but the war narratives that followed the conflict demonstrated that biased media coverage was no longer enough to make America understand the war. Novels such as Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July* or Philip Caputo’s *A Rumor of War* prove that there has always been a story to tell in Viet Nam, the story of an impressionable youth who, influenced by American ideals and patriotism, felt compelled to go to war, only to return home physically and emotionally wounded. However, there were other types of stories to be told apart from personal narratives; the problem lay in the fact that America was not interested in them. They did not want to read stories about war that did not feature a white, male, American protagonist who initiated the tale as a savior and ended it as a victim. Any other narrative would be considered anti-American and, thus, be strongly criticized—this was the case of Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American* (Taylor 294). It was those patriotic stories that were mass-produced and consumed during the post-war period and, as a consequence, Viet Nam became a familiar place for Americans. As Peter McInerney puts it, Viet Nam became a state of mind

more than just a place or an event (191), and Michael Herr was able to explain this state of mind in his novel *Dispatches*: “Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we’ve all been there” (260). The collective “we” alludes to that divided society who had witnessed the war without needing to dislocate themselves to the battlefield and “united the writer and his American readers, . . . all of whom would have been exposed to the media spectacle that the war had become” (Heberle xiv).

Currently, the feeling that “we’ve all been there” remains, and it is a far more global “we” than in 1977, when Herr first published his novel. Since its end in 1975, the war has become a genre of its own and once it began being featured in Hollywood films, it started reaching an even wider audience who, like Americans, were only being given one perspective of the conflict. Undoubtedly, the most popular and widely acclaimed motion picture about Vietnam is Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*. Inspired by a novella from the English literary canon, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Coppola attempts to validate his representation of the conflict to his national and international audience. This is confirmed by a 1991 article titled “Whose Point Is It Anyway?,” where Susan Jeffords reflects on what at the time was a “growing number of academic studies of representations of the Vietnam War” and “the stamp of legitimation that [had] been impressed upon Vietnam War representation in the US” (162-163). By analyzing Thomas Myers’ *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam*, she suggests four characteristics for this legitimation: (1) the main goal of these representations was “to legitimate Vietnam War literature or, relatedly, “popular culture” within the academy,” (2) the method used to achieve this was by “linking Vietnam War literature to the canonized masters of American literature,” (3) this linkage would, therefore, cause “a successful regeneration of “American” culture through insights offered by writers of the Vietnam War;” (4) however, “a tacit policy of exclusion” was needed in order to achieve this legitimation; women and men from racial or ethnic minorities, especially the Vietnamese, had to be excluded from those

representations (163). Although Jeffords' scope of study comprised literary texts from the 1990s, all four characteristics can now be extrapolated to Coppola's film. Through an English rather than American canonized literary work, the film director transformed the conflict in Southeast Asia into an integral part of American popular culture, using the experiences of soldiers and writers and excluding all ethnic minorities from significant roles. When the film was included in the National Film Registry, in 2000, it officially became part of America's cultural heritage and confirmed the legitimation of the conflict as a genuinely American subject.

### **1.2.2. Filling the Gap**

Films such as *Apocalypse Now* were created with an American audience in mind and following certain patterns established by the first autobiographical narratives. Those representations in film and literature have contributed to the creation of what Steffen H. Hantke considers a "discursive field where the dominant conventions are are [*sic*] still those of direct combat experience, frontier rhetoric, exoticism, etc." (65). However, new approaches are now being brought to the public, introduced by authors of Vietnamese descent such as Aimee Phan, Kien Nguyen, Andrew Lam, Le Thi Diem Thuy, Monique Truong and Le Ly Hayslip. Together, through their works of fiction and non-fiction, they have given the public a new version of the war with Vietnamese people as the center of their narratives. Included in this generation of war refugees turned writers is Viet Thanh Nguyen, author of *The Sympathizer*. Prior to the publication of his debut novel, Nguyen had already obtained recognition both as a literary critic and as a short fiction writer. Nevertheless, it was with the publication of *The Sympathizer* in 2015, forty years after the "Fall of Saigon," that he achieved national and international recognition. The novel was critically acclaimed, praised in American newspapers, listed as one of the best books of the year, and ultimately won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2016.

This award-winning novel follows the Captain, a Communist agent infiltrated in the South Vietnamese Army who, after the “Fall of Saigon”, escapes to the United States with other Army officials, including his superior, the General, and his family. Once in America, the Captain attempts to balance his new life with his undercover activities, a task that proves to be difficult when the General begins to suspect that there might be a Communist “sympathizer” hidden among them. In order to keep suspicion away from himself, the Captain accuses a crapulent major of being the possible spy and, as a consequence, he is forced to assassinate him with the help of his friend, Bon, a murder that begins to haunt and torment the Captain. At the General’s suggestion, the Captain decides to work as a film advisor for a director who is creating a film about the war in Viet Nam. The Captain then travels to the Philippines, where the shooting of the film takes place, but it does not go as expected. His relationship with the film director is tense and he ends up returning home after being caught in an explosion apparently engineered by the director himself.

Back in Los Angeles, the General has assembled a secret task force with other Vietnamese refugees to attempt to regain control over Viet Nam. However, when the Captain returns, he is once again forced by the General to kill someone; this time, it is his former college classmate, Sonny, who had begun writing about the secret mission. After proving his loyalty to the General, the Captain is allowed to participate in the mission as well. He does so against his handler’s orders, Man, who instructs that he remain in America since the mission could be a risk for the Captain. Wanting to protect his best friend, the Captain ignores Man’s recommendation and leaves for Thailand with Bon and the rest of the group. Eventually, the mission fails and most of the group is killed by the Communist forces. The survivors are sent to a reeducation camp, but the Captain is placed in solitary confinement and, there, he begins writing his confession: *The Sympathizer*. His confession is not enough, though, for the Commandant and the Commissar still believe he is not telling the truth. In order to force him



to speak the truth, the Commissar, who is later revealed to be Man, orders the Captain to be tortured as the last phase of his reeducation. The torture, which consists of extreme sleep deprivation, finally allows the Captain to remember moments he had suppressed from his memory, as well as to answer a final riddle that will conclude his reeducation. In the end, both the Captain and Bon are set free and join the “boat people”<sup>3</sup> as they try to return to America.

*The Sympathizer* is a response to the continuous misrepresentations of Viet Nam and Vietnamese people in popular culture and media. It provides a different approach to the conflict in Southeast Asia, demonstrating that it is possible to write about the war focusing on non-stereotypical characters and exploring other plots. As will be shown in the following chapters, Nguyen successfully constructs a new fictionalized version of the war in Viet Nam by, first, employing an original and distinctive literary genre, and second, narrating the story through the eyes of a Vietnamese character.

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<sup>3</sup> After the “Fall of Saigon,” South Vietnamese people wanted to flee, fearing retaliation from the communist government. Many escaped to the United States in what is now called “waves of migration” (Thuy Pelaud 9). The first wave of migration ranged from 1975 to 1978, the second from 1978 to 1980, and the third from 1978 and 1980. “Boat people” were associated with the second wave of migration, which happened during a “time of strong anti-Chinese sentiment in Viet Nam” (10) due to the “border clash with China in 1979” (11). Tensions arose between the Vietnamese government and ethnic Chinese, forcing the latter to escape the country by boat, a practice that was illegal and dangerous. However, it was not only ethnic Chinese that fled Viet Nam at that time; as Isabelle Thuy Pelaud notes, “the non-ethnic Chinese who also left during that time” remain “invisible within this second wave” (10-11).

## 2. Authenticity vs. Creativity

Viet Nam literature started to distinguish itself within the American canon after the 1970s, when novels about the war started to appear. This type of literature needed to be separated from other war narratives—especially from all the literature produced about World War II—because what had been written about previous conflicts could not be applied to the one in Southeast Asia. Authors believed there was something new to tell about the war and conventional models and rhetoric were no longer suitable for the experiences they wanted to describe. Postmodernism, however, seemed a more fitting model when trying to represent the new war and its fragmented and illogical world, a world where “the distinctions between past and present, fact and fiction, true and false, reality and hallucination collapse[d]” (Neilson 53). The aforementioned *Dispatches* was considered the best representation of a postmodernist approach to the war in Viet Nam. The novel was critically acclaimed after its publication: its author, Herr, had managed to construct a narrative that was similar to the war itself<sup>4</sup>.

Novels and memoirs were typically presented as history, with first-person narrators who described events they had witnessed in the battlefield. This central position occupied by male American “witnesses” in literary works displaced all of the remaining tragedies of the war, most notably the Vietnamese suffering and the political causes and consequences of the conflict. Furthermore, it is also important to link this dominant American narration of the war to the concepts of experience and authenticity, as Renny Christopher does, explaining that the “overriding faith in the validity of individual experience causes us to read Viet Nam narratives as historical documents rather than as literature. . . . “Vietnam” the war becomes a personal experience, devoid of political content and devoid of sense” (6). Consequently, for Christopher,

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<sup>4</sup> In 1977, C.D.B. Bryan, writing for the *The New York Times*, declared that “an entirely new language, imagery and style were needed so that we could understand and feel [Vietnam],” which, for him and other contemporary critics, was achieved by Herr in *Dispatches* with his use of postmodernist techniques.

only those who were “there” can really understand the experience. This qualification gives the participant writer greater “authority” and sets him . . . at the center of the discussion. Viet Nam War narratives tend to be judged first on the basis of their “authenticity,” rather than their literary merit, popularity, moral value, or political vision; in a circular argument, “authenticity” is construed as authenticity of *experience*. (9-10)

Whenever this “seal of authenticity” is stamped on a Viet Nam narrative—such as Philip Caputo’s *A Rumor of War*, Tim O’Brien’s *Going after Cacciato*, Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*, John Del Vecchio’s *The Thirteenth Valley*, or Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July*—, readers do not question that story. The public consumes these fictionalized versions of the war without considering that, although experience can be a determining factor when elaborating these narratives, much of what American veteran-writers build comes from a process of remembering. As Neilson explains when referring to Tim O’Brien: “He can tell no truth that is not already contaminated by its imaginative reconstruction” (194). This “imaginative reconstruction” affects all the authors previously mentioned as well as their narratives; they have attempted to forge a canon based on historical accuracy, but, instead, they have created a distorted and contaminated series of events that has gained more popularity over the years than the actual truth.

The need to tell their “true” war stories led the aforementioned authors to neglect other literary genres. Stories—generally autobiographical in nature—involving direct combat experience seemed to be the only suitable form to describe the war in Viet Nam: “authenticity” came before creativity. However, other genres have long been associated with wars and international conflicts, for example, spy fiction. On one hand, this type of fiction began to be employed by British authors after World War I to explore issues related to the empire. The social and political situation at the time “fuelled a volatile mood of jingoism and xenophobia receptive to novels of espionage, intrigue, and violence” (“Spy fiction”). On the other hand,

American spy fiction first focused on matters related to the War of Independence, with spies characterized by their strong patriotic beliefs, and later, on Cold War tensions, with protagonists explicitly associated with national intelligence agencies like the CIA (Seed). Since then, spy fiction in America has not undergone many changes; most authors still employ the undercover secret agent character infiltrated either in a former Soviet Union territory or, following 9/11, in the Middle East. In other words, American spy narratives have evolved from portraying spies moved by patriotic feelings to portraying espionage as a duty to the rest of the world. Interestingly enough, American novelists did not write about undercover agents in Viet Nam. There might be several reasons for this, for example, the low popularity of spy novels during that time, but it may also have been because Americans did not consider Vietnamese people sophisticated enough to develop an intelligence system—as Mark Bradley explains, American observers often used adjectives such as “primitive,” “lazy,” “cowardly,” “vain,” “dishonest,” “unclean” and “somnolent” to describe the Vietnamese (46). Another possible reason would be the “unlikelihood” of an American communist spy infiltrating the anti-communist force; the strong anti-communist feelings that predominated in American society at the time would not make such a story appealing to many readers. Considering all these possible reasons, it is not surprising that the two main novels in the English language involving espionage and Viet Nam were penned by a British novelist and a Vietnamese American writer. With over sixty years between the publication of each book, Graham Greene and Viet Thanh Nguyen, respectively, have created novels about the war in Viet Nam that give the reader a new perspective on the conflict.

As previously mentioned, Viet Nam authors in the post-war period valued historical accuracy over creativity, which limited the genres associated with the war narrative they created. Nguyen’s novel is the exception to the norm, not because the author does not value authenticity, but rather because he chooses a literary genre that had been typically associated

with wars against more technologically advanced countries, and because the spy genre allows him to incorporate perspectives from the two sides involved in the war. Therefore, through the eyes of a spy, Nguyen presents one side that the reading public had not yet been exposed to—Vietnamese communism—, and then one that they might be more familiar with—anti-communism. However, he does not do so from the characteristic American point of view, one that would only present communism as a menace to society and never offer the public an unbiased portrayal. Furthermore, the use of a spy in a work of fiction favors Nguyen’s use of artistic license; as he admits in *The Sympathizer*’s Acknowledgments: “Many of the events in this novel did happen, although I confess to taking some liberties with details and chronology” (496). With this final “confession,” it may seem that the author is not concerned about telling the historical truth, but the choice of a genre characterized by both the omission and manipulation of the truth foregrounds its importance in the story.

*The Sympathizer* is the confession of a spy. The story told by the Captain is an analysis of his own actions as he attempts to achieve clarity. “My hope is that the sun of truth will shine on you,” (407) the Commandant tells him after reading his confession, one that he considers incomplete because the Captain has failed to see the truth. In fact, it is at his lowest—when the Captain is physically and emotionally tortured—that he is “at last, enlightened” (477), therefore understanding the ultimate truth about the revolution he had been fighting for, that “while nothing is more precious than independence and freedom, *nothing is also more precious than independence and freedom!*” (486). He considers the two slogans similar, but “every truth [means] at least two things” (480):

The first inspiring slogan was Ho Chi Minh’s empty suit, which he no longer wore. How could he? He was dead. The second slogan was the tricky one, the joke. It was Uncle Ho’s empty suit turned inside out, a sartorial sensation that only a man of two minds, or a man with no face, dared to wear. This odd suit suited me, for it was of a cutting-edge cut. Wearing this inside-out

suit, my seams exposed in an unseemly way, I understood, at last, how our revolution had gone from being the vanguard of political change to the rearguard hoarding power. . . . Having liberated ourselves in the name of independence and freedom—I was so tired of saying these words!—we then deprived our defeated brethren of the same. Besides a man with no face, only a man of two minds could get this joke, about how a revolution fought for independence and freedom could make those things *worth less than nothing*. (486-487)

The Captain's enlightenment about the true meaning of war is the moment that is commonly missing in American stories about the war in Viet Nam. By introducing such a complex character, Nguyen proves that war narratives do not need combat experiences to be valid or to make readers understand and feel Viet Nam. The truth is that in a war both sides are fighting for freedom and independence, except each one uses the methods that best fit their perspectives. That is what happened in Viet Nam and that is what past American novelists failed to capture when writing their stories. The war was fought for independence and freedom, because nothing was more important than that; however, France, America, North Viet Nam, they all started their wars with the intention to free Viet Nam, but once they seized power, they began to rob those who thought differently from the two things they claimed to protect. On the other hand, "*nothing is also more precious than independence and freedom*" alludes to the nothingness of those values. The revolution the Captain and the Commissar initially joined, now, has no real meaning. Ho Chi Minh's slogan has become a truism derived from the futility of the war. That is the duality—and irony—of the war in Viet Nam, and that is why only a spy, a man of two minds, would be able to understand said duality. For this reason, I would argue that Nguyen's use of the spy novel is both more accurate and precise in the telling of a "true" war story than any of the genres previously employed by American writers.

### 3. True War Heroes

The American representation of the conflict in Viet Nam was characterized by more than the repetitive use of the same literary genre or mode. In fact, a superficial analysis of several texts and motion pictures would be enough to prove the lack of diversity present in them. However, this lack of diversity pertains not only to how their stories are told, but also to which characters are used to transmit those stories to the general public. The absence of diversity in genre has already been analyzed; therefore, it is now important to focus on the role that characters, especially protagonists, play in the making of Viet Nam stories. These protagonists are closely related to the genre each author or filmmaker chooses, for each story is more or less suitable for a certain type of character.

In the United States, two main figures stand out in the literature about the war in Viet Nam: the young soldier and the crazy veteran. In both cases, however, these characters are white and male, and sometimes even educated or from a privileged family. Speeches such as the one pronounced by President Kennedy on Inauguration Day in 1961 were seen as a call to patriotism and encouraged American citizens to do something for their country. Young people, idealistic and patriotic, were more likely to respond actively to this type of political speech and engage in public service activities such as volunteering programs or the military. Young men, especially, chose the latter and it was those idealistic beliefs that led them into a war for which they were not psychologically equipped. *Platoon*, directed by Oliver Stone, narrates the story of Chris Taylor, a young soldier who decides to join the U.S. Army because, according to his own words, “why should just the poor kids go off to war and the rich kids always get away with it?” (00:29:14 – 00:29:17). Even though his reason seems less political and more social, Chris Taylor still represents the typical character present in war narratives, which Viet Thanh Nguyen has described as “another version of the American bildungsroman,” for these representations,

the identity of the American soldier represents American youth, the struggles with adulthood and society (*Race and Resistance* 93).

However, the struggles of American soldiers remain after their return home and reincorporation into society. As adult men, they enter a community that has never witnessed war the way they have and, therefore, people do not understand the psychological trauma that they have to endure. This figure, “the crazy veteran, who [has] brought the war home with him” (Christopher 4), is the other recurrent protagonist in American depictions of the war. The veteran begins his new life as a hero to his community and country: initially, he is seen as the embodiment of America’s patriotism, but once this American hero starts to show signs of trauma, society begins to see him as “a victim of the war’s madness” (qtd. in Neilson 139) and excludes him from their community. This exclusion may be because of a lack of empathy and impossibility to understand the horrors veterans have witnessed during the war, but also because of what the figure of the veteran has begun to represent since the end of the war. Veterans are the ever-present reminder of the tragic mistake, and even political embarrassment, that the conflict in Viet Nam was for the United States, which is why society prefers to ignore them rather than to understand them. It is this mistreatment and misunderstanding of veterans that war narratives want to denounce, and they do so in the same stories where young soldiers retell their combat experiences. After all, those tales are Bildungsromane, narrating the journey of white male Americans from young soldiers who felt compelled to go to war, to veterans who are not fully accepted back into their community after the war<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, the tellers of these journeys are those same ostracized veterans who, aside from attempting to tell “true” war stories, present their protagonists as the only victims of the war.

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<sup>5</sup> If Stone’s *Platoon* focused on the life and struggles of a young soldier in Viet Nam, his second motion picture regarding the conflict, *Born on the Fourth of July*, explores the figure of the crazy veteran. The film, based on Ron Kovic’s autobiography, thoroughly illustrates the transformation of the veteran from national hero to national burden.



The exclusion of Vietnamese people in American representations constitutes the main problem in portrayals of the war in literature and film. As Neilson claims, “the fact that white male victimization has been used to [thwart social justice and obscure exploitative practices] does not mean that white males have not been victims” (160), and yet, the erasure of Vietnamese suffering from American representations is another example of how distorted their “true” war stories are. In fact, even contemporary critics fail to mention anything regarding the lack of Vietnamese people in narratives, who were only included “to inflate the suffering of Americans” (Neilson 143), therefore emphasizing the view of the war in Viet Nam as an American tragedy. This exaggeration of white American suffering would even degenerate into a “moral equivalence between North Vietnam and the Americans” (143), with “the North Vietnamese demonstrat[ing] far greater cruelty than the Americans did” (Neilson 144). This “equivalence” between Vietnamese and American suffering employed to emphasize the role of the latter as the rightful victim of the war proves the ethnocentrism that has always characterized typical American portrayals of the war in Viet Nam (Christopher 11).

Nguyen’s award-winning novel, *The Sympathizer*, appears as a response to the American ethnocentrism present in “Vietnam literature,” and an attempt to “portray a de-Americanised perspective of the Vietnamese war in contrast to the unrealistic America centric [*sic*] picture presented by Hollywood as the misleading image of the war” (Das 91). In order to do so, Nguyen introduces a Vietnamese protagonist surrounded by other Vietnamese characters and very few Americans—in fact, their inclusion is restricted to specific situations. The simple fact of including several Vietnamese voices in his work is already distinctive enough, but Nguyen further develops his protagonist in a way that had not yet been present anywhere in American culture. The closest an American audience had come to understanding the war through a Vietnamese character was in Oliver Stone’s film *Heaven and Earth*, which was based on two autobiographies by Vietnamese author and refugee, Le Ly Hayslip. However, Hayslip

acquires the image of a victim to the American society, she becomes the “representative of those anonymous millions of Vietnamese in whose name the Vietnam War was fought by both sides” (Nguyen, *Race and Resistance* 108). In contrast, Nguyen’s anonymous protagonist, the Captain, does not intend to be viewed as a victim of the war, nor is he portrayed as such.

The beginning of Nguyen’s novel is meant to be a confession written in first-person by the Captain, but it also immediately sets the tone of the rest of the story, as well as the narrator’s dilemma, with its opening lines:

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 simply able to see any issue from both sides. . . . I wonder if what I have should even be called talent. After all, a talent is something you use, not something that uses you. The talent you cannot not use, the talent that possesses you—that is a hazard, I must confess. (1)

This ability to see any issue from both sides turns the Captain into a man with a profound sympathy for those he surrounds himself with. It is a “hazard” as he admits, for he is intended to spy on people who are by definition “the enemy” but, at the same time, they are the people with whom he shares his life. During the first crucial moment of the novel, the “Fall of Saigon” in 1975, the Captain identifies himself with the rest of Southern Vietnamese soldiers and people trying to escape Saigon. While preparing their flight to the United States, his narration turns towards a collective “we,” which includes the enemy and himself. Later, he blames this gift for sympathy on his condition as a “bastard,”<sup>6</sup> crediting his mother “with teaching me the idea that blurring the lines between us and them can be a worthy behavior” (48). Blurring the lines is

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<sup>6</sup> The Captain considers himself, and is considered by others, a “bastard” due to his mixed race. Son of a French missionary and a Vietnamese woman, he is regarded as inferior to the rest of the Vietnamese society, something that “strangers and acquaintances had enjoyed reminding [him] of . . . ever since [his] childhood” (25). This duality is paralleled with the remaining ones in the novel, namely his condition as a double agent and his life in two different countries, America and Viet Nam.

dangerous but also necessary for the Captain. As a spy, he is meant to hide in plain sight, where he can obtain information, and the only way to do so is by pretending to be an anti-communist in America and continuously prove his dedication to the cause, especially to the General whom he was sent to spy. It is this need to prove himself that places the Captain in uncomfortable situations where he questions his own views of right and wrong: he is forced to assassinate an innocent man to protect his cover, and then again to kill a college friend for his Communist views. The two murdered men later reappear in the story in the form of ghosts, meant to represent the past that haunts and burdens the Captain. The ghosts are present during the Captain's torture at the reeducation camp, where he is ultimately confined to after being caught, back in Viet Nam, and it is unclear whether they remain with the Captain after his "reeducation" is complete. Therefore, it is not known if the Captain manages to liberate himself from his past, but the figure of the ghost, common in both literature and academic studies about the war in Viet Nam, is used by Nguyen possibly to represent two aspects. First, the Americans who remain "haunted by the question of what to do with all those dead and missing people, the millions in whose name the war was ostensibly fought for" (Nguyen, "Speak of the Dead" 23), and second, a response to the historical portrayal of Vietnamese and other minorities as victims. Nguyen considers important to "rais[e] the issue of how a minority can inflict harm," since it is "a tribute to that minority's existence in the world as an agent, and not merely a victim, a romanticized hero, or a passive subject in history" ("Speak of the Dead" 10). This use of the ghost as representative of minorities is another attempt of Nguyen to de-Americanize the various representations of the war by American authors and the literary figures typically used in their narratives. Although he still incorporates Vietnamese suffering in his story, Nguyen portrays his minorities as both passive and active agents of the narration. He does not depict Vietnamese people as defenseless victims at the hands of the powerful American soldiers, or

Communist forces as cold-blooded torturers. Instead, he represents minorities as neither good nor bad, but rather as capable of good and bad actions just as any other human being.

The Captain's involvement in the shooting of a Hollywood film is an example of the narrator himself trying to "de-Americanize the portrayal of the war," as Philip Caputo writes in his *The New York Times* review of *The Sympathizer*. The episode features a famous American director, the Auteur, somewhat reminiscent of Coppola, who requests the Captain's help to review his script<sup>7</sup>. The Captain travels to the Philippines where the movie will be shot and, there, he encounters the "boat people." Once again, the Captain's powers of empathy compel him to help those refugees, and he works as a liaison between them and the Auteur who has hired them as extras in his film. Ultimately, the Captain's continuous attempts to improve the Vietnamese actors' payment for their roles in the movie, as well as the meddling with the Auteur's vision of the war—including the constant pressure to introduce more Vietnamese people with relevant roles and speech—lead the Captain to be involved in an explosion, which he believes was caused by the Auteur. The introduction of this event in the novel can be interpreted as a critique of the distorted image of the war that Hollywood continues to project not only in America but also all over the world, a version of the war fundamentally based on the stories told by white American veteran-authors. Moreover, the Captain's contact with "boat people" is another scenario that is rarely included in portrayals of the war but that Nguyen introduces in order to further remind readers of the tragic effects that the war had on Vietnamese people<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Jessica Hagedorn's *Dream Jungle*, published in 2003, already incorporated the shooting of a film similar to *Apocalypse Now* in the Philippines. The novel, meant to explore the impact of the American presence in the country, also illustrates the madness associated with both the war and its Hollywood representations.

<sup>8</sup> Contemporary Vietnamese American authors, such as Andrew Lam and Aimee Phan, often have used their literary works to explore the figure of the Vietnamese as a refugee, sometimes even resorting to their own personal experience, as in Lam's case.

Although, ultimately, the narrator fails to de-Americanize the war, the author does not. *The Sympathizer* is not only a novel about the war in Viet Nam; it is also a novel about how the Vietnamese have been portrayed in Anglo-American literature and film. Nguyen manages to create a complex narrative regarding the consequences of the war through the eyes of an unlikely character, a spy. However, it is the use of a character who must hide his true self that emphasizes the American myths about the war that the author tries to dispel; myths that were introduced in our society by war narratives that disregarded Vietnamese perspectives and effectively turned the war into an American tragedy.

## Conclusion

To tell a “true war story” is to lie, and to portray the war in Viet Nam as an American tragedy is to cheat. However, America has employed all its power and influence in publicizing the war as an American subject. First, through the war narratives written by traumatized soldiers who swore by every word they wrote, and then, through Hollywood motion pictures which reached an even wider audience. This audience had no reason not to believe America’s discourse about wanting to “help” Vietnamese people, or even the final “peace with honor,” which still granted them praise and respect from the rest of nations. This version, so consistent and solid, with no deviations from the “official” script, was also dangerously subjective and ethnocentric. The American story of the war in Viet Nam has led audiences around the world to believe that soldiers who died in combat were the true heroes and victims of the war, and that to talk about Viet Nam, the country, was to talk about the war and nothing more.

However, as seen through my analysis of *The Sympathizer*, to talk about Viet Nam is to talk about more than just that tragedy, or at least, it is to talk about it from a different perspective. Viet Thanh Nguyen has shown us a perspective of the war in Viet Nam that had barely received any visibility until now, especially in American literature. His use of the spy genre, in combination with an ensemble of Vietnamese voices, is what was needed to de-Americanize the portrayal of the war in literature and film. And, as demonstrated in this paper, Nguyen is successful in his mission. *The Sympathizer* proves that the narrative surrounding the war in America was monotonous, repetitive and, most of all, inadequate. Contemporary American authors did not know how to imagine the war as more than what had been written in the past and, therefore, never dared to resuscitate the subject and introduce different points of view. Nguyen, however, revived the conflict, converted the war into a current subject in literary

circles and, more importantly, reclaimed the war in Viet Nam as a Vietnamese tragedy that should be written by an author of Vietnamese descent for a global audience.

All in all, what Nguyen has achieved with *The Sympathizer* is to place Vietnamese people back at the center of their own history. He has given them a story with which they can regain control of the narratives surrounding the Resistance War against America. As for the rest of his reading public, he has taught us that nothing must be taken at face value. As readers, we must always challenge and question the information we are given by those in power, and attempt to build our own opinion about the events once we are in possession of the two sides of the story.

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