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Running into Memories in the Work of Viet Thanh Nguyen

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I set up a research group in 2017 on contemporary literature and war narratives. Christoph was one of our partners and led the first of our seminars with an inspiring lecture on borders and border theory. Unfortunately, Covid-19 and confinement determined that that first seminar would also be the last. The project's major event was a conference held in September 2021 that featured lectures from the novelist Rachel Seiffert, author of such outstanding war fiction as *The Dark Room* (2001) and *A Boy in Winter* (2017), the critic Kate McLoughlin, whose *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (2011) remains essential reading for anyone interested in the subject, and that most eminent of historians, Jay Winter. There are few more impactive publications in the enormous world of First World War studies than his *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the 20th Century* (2006). That conference was the final flourish to several years' work; however, Christoph was unable to attend but in later correspondence set out what his personal contribution would be to our renewed project.

For a new volume of essays we were planning, he wished to work on two novels centred on the near East, specifically on the Arab-Israeli conflict. The first was Elias Khoury's *The Gate of Sun*, first published in 1998, then translated from Arabic into English in 2006. The other text was Yoran Kaniuk's *Adam Resurrected* which appeared in Hebrew in 1969, to be translated into English in 1971. A brief look at the similarities and differences between the two novels not only provides a glimpse of what Christoph's contribution might have touched on, especially if we recall that his seminar focused on borders and border theory, but additionally underwrites some of the major approaches of this paper.

Neither author is English, but their translations have been well received worldwide. Both texts have been adapted into films. Khoury's took the form of a French-Egyptian venture directed by Yousry Nasrallah and was screened *out of competition* at the 2004 Cannes Festival. Adam was resurrected by Jeff Goldblum in the 2008 version directed by Paul Schrader. Both novels deal with cataclysmic events and their aftermath: the clown's madness and trauma are attributable to the Shoah. Khoury deals with the Nabka, the catastrophe of war and displacement of Palestinians brought about by what, for the lack of a better term, is referred to as the Arab-Israeli War (1948-49). If, for the Israelis, war occasioned a new state, for Palestinians, the consequences were dire, epitomised by the setting-up of refugee camps that have turned out to be more or less permanent. The physical and ideological centre of Khoury's text is Shatila and the 1982 massacre. In both cases,

horrific events are narrated unsparingly, whether death, bodily assaults, humiliation, and their aftermath, PTSD. In both instances, the madness depicted is located in places of healing where medical staff play a prominent role. And so on.

However, without going into too much detail of the events narrated in these two novels, I would be wary of the comments that surround these publications which describe them as "realistic". Nothing could be further from the truth when discussing their narrative style. To begin with, both are fragmented, both are mysterious and full of gaps. In short, they seem to combine the classical tenets of high modernism with awareness of how PTSD is played out in those damaged by conflict. The events narrated may focus on real occurrences, but the reality described is psychological or subjective. Subsequently, few if any readers would consider either of these texts an easy read. Their complex narrative style requires considerable concentration which benefits from an understanding of narratology, however basic. Their use of flashbacks, interweaving narratives, and several leading characters certainly create a wider sense of trauma as collective rather than merely individual, the more common approach in many veteran narratives where ex-combatants are exceptional, the odd-one-out, the one unable to socialise. Readers more accustomed to the filmic present tense so current in contemporary fiction must radically change their mindset if they wish to enjoy these two challenging texts.

What has this got to do with the subject of this paper, the contemporary author Viet Thanh Nguyen, best known for his 2016 Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Sympathizer*? That question will be most succinctly addressed in the conclusions. I would therefore like to set out a series of questions that Nguyen tackles, the first being nomenclature. *Nabka* indicates disaster and defeat for Palestinians whereas for Israel it is nothing less than the War of Independence, a victory to be celebrated. Considering that this instance of radical disagreement has clearly demarcated borders, Nguyen, I will argue, is aware not only of the tendentious nature of nomenclature and all it implies, but also provides a strong case for articulating why and how these conflicts are narrated, celebrated, or lamented. This paper therefore analyses the nature of remembrance and explains its consolidation. The subjects covered include emigration, language, film, audiences, and violence. Nguyen's approach, and therefore my own appraisal, is not theoretical in the sense of being abstract, rather it is material both in exposition and the location of sources. To begin with, Nguyen opens his essay *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory War* (2016) with some basic but far-reaching reflections. After establishing his own personal feeling of ambivalence as an immigrant, he proposes that Vietnam marked the end of victory culture, to use Thomas Engelhardt's term. He argues that imperial powers suffer defeat, sometimes ignominious defeat, but

these are seen as temporary setbacks, in his words, "mobilizing preludes to victory" (Engelhardt 4). Vietnam changes all this, so Nguyen proposes, as for many Americans, in everyday language, to talk of "Vietnam" means really to talk about the Vietnam War (*Nothing Ever Dies* 1), so melded have the two items become in the American psyche. For a Vietnamese immigrant this causes mental anguish if not confusion, as the same conflict in Vietnam is known as the American War (4). Even our most basic terms of reference are infused with political and cultural assumptions.

In terms of structure, the simplest of Nguyen's fictions of place and displacement is his short story "Fatherland" (2017). In the light of the remarks above, we expect the story to develop all the many meanings and implications of that powerful term, and so it does. The story is a variation on the Mark Twain *Pudd'nhead Wilson* dilemma. What happens to two children genetically linked but brought up in widely different social circles? In Nguyen's story, the fatherland is literally the fatherland of Mr Ly, in short, Vietnam. The first Mrs Ly went to live in the USA with their three children while Mr Ly married his ex-mistress who thus became the second Mrs Ly and gave birth to three children, so, as the opening sentence reads, "[it] was a most peculiar thing to do, or so everyone said on hearing the story of how Phuong's father had named his second set of children after his first" ("Fatherland" 181). In a fable to this sort, there is nothing mysterious in fabricating a distorted mirror in which the two sides of the family will look at each other, though what they actually see, in the sense of understanding themselves or their trans-Pacific counterparts, appears to be very little. In this particular instance, the story is simplified by concentrating on the two eldest children, the two half-sisters named Phuong. The American Phoung will visit the fatherland and become familiar with her counterpart. Partly to avoid confusing readers, American Phoung goes by the name of Vivien. Her half-sister knows she took that name from Vivien Leigh, and, pondering on *Gone with the Wind*, the narrative voice, let us note, not Phoung, inquires whether it would be "too much to suppose that the ruined Confederacy, with its tragic sense of itself, bore more than a passing similarity to her father's defeated southern Republic and its resentful remnants?" (183). A more open invitation to amplify the implications of a short fable into multiple meanings would be harder to find.

Vivien is "seven years older, fifteen centimeters taller, twenty kilos heavier" ("The Fatherland" 181) than Phuong. Vivien's parents are wealthy, perhaps her mother was a genuine tiger mum, because her daughter received a private education and became that figure that stamps immigrants' success in their new fatherland, a qualified doctor. The Vietnamese family is thinner, poorer, quieter, having less aspirations. Indeed, within the new Vietnam they are essentially the remnants of the old southern regime, outcasts within their own country. However, in the end,

the successful immigrant myth is popped: Vivien, it turns out, is not a doctor but merely a receptionist; her "wealth" comes from a redundancy payment. Phoung burns the photographs she sends and detests her half-sister's false memories of her good time in Vietnam. Again, we see that the pillars of identity are shaky. The successful immigrant story falls flat; there is no new Vietnam depicted here, just the sad plight of the defeated, adjusting, as best they might, to new times after prison camp.

A playful fable is one thing, but a bitter, confessional novel of almost four hundred pages is a completely different enterprise. However, one trait that runs continually through Nguyen's work, as we have seen in this fable, is the importance we attach to names and identities, partly due to their unreliable nature. This can be seen in the overt intertextuality of *The Sympathizer's* 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 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). These words recall Ralph Ellison's prologue to *The Invisible Man* (1952): "I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (Ellison 3). Ellison's words promote affirmation that the African-American has flesh and blood, and, perhaps recalling Shylock, should be considered as a citizen who should be included in the first-person plural as an integral part of "We, the People". Perhaps the most striking word is "simply", as it suggests that diagnosis, if not prognosis, is straightforward enough for any of his readers to understand. Just stop refusing to see us! Nguyen's narrator's "simply" is more slippery. His opening pronouncement makes sense for someone who is a spy, a communist infiltrator working closely with a high-ranking officer in the decaying South Vietnamese military. After exile, he will follow his boss to California where he will now have more than two faces, as in Orange County he is potentially both Vietnamese and American. Two "minds" evoke Stevenson's fable *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde,* but it is easy to gloss over the words that follow Jekyll's famous pronouncement at the beginning of his full statement: "that man is not truly one, but truly two. I say two, because the state of my own knowledge does not pass beyond that point. Others will follow, others will outstrip me on the same lines; and I hazard the guess that man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens" (Stevenson 55-56). Whether they reside in Vietnam or the United States, The Sympathizer and the South Vietnamese exiles are essentially incongruous.

Humankind may be multifarious, as The Sympathizer most certainly is, but the multifariousness in Nguyen's world does not stem from psychological order or disorder at play. Instead, it results from a continuous process of displacement. On returning to Vietnam, Nguyen ironically remarks that "veterans of the revolution are remembered by their country . . . those who fought for the losing side are disremembered" (*Nothing Ever Dies* 33), surely a suggestive pun on "dismember". Just as limbs can be severed, memory can be wounded, mutilated, or even amputated. Nguyen visits what was formally the National Cemetery of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, in other words, that short-lived state that collapsed in 1975. "Someone has vandalized the photographs of the dead on these desecrated tombs, scratching out the eyes and faces. I do not have time to count the numbers of the defaced dead" (37). Nguyen provides a photo of one which, in addition to being defaced, has been adorned by a swastika. On a subsequent visit, the military cemetery has been renamed the "People's Cemetery", as if the former state had had no regular army at all or never deserved to have one. Nguyen narrates the culmination of *disrememberment* when citing a refugee looking for his brother's grave only to discover the cemetery for Southern soldiers has been replaced by a new military training camp. Some dead are indeed a lot more equal than others.

For Nguyen, whatever the outcome of conflict, the principal player in war memory is easy to pinpoint. "I always run into American memories" (16). And this, despite the fact that there are excellent novels that describe the American War from the viewpoint of those whose dead companions are buried in the heroes' rather than in people's cemeteries. One such example Nguyen highlights is Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*, which was first published in 1991, translated and published in the West in 1994. What's in a name becomes an interesting question. Its title in its original tongue, *Thân phận của tình yêu*, translates literally as "the destiny of love". What might explain such a radical change? Many reasons present themselves. First, the destiny of love suggests something more akin to Mills and Boon than screaming souls, mountains of decaying bodies, rape, and other forms of extreme violence. Second, I propose that it taps into that tradition of World War One, the "pity of war". In Ninh's novel, the hero certainly walks into the war as a Rupert Brooke and emerges as a Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, or Robert Graves. In common with First World War narrative, the novel additionally includes a summer-before, innocent, idealistic romance that war literally rapes. Mud and bones appear with as much intensity here as in the Somme.

The novel is presumably deeply autobiographical in its description of horror, as Ninh himself was one of the ten survivors of the 500-person strong Glorious 27th Youth Brigade. Such depletion of youth, by sheer weight of numbers, would only with difficulty become the basis for a glorious patriotic novel. In fact, it shares a similar fate to Vasily Grossman's *Stalingrad* (1953): a totalitarian state persecutes

it for its graphic depiction of violence that challenges the party line. However, Ninh's work eventually saw the light of day, becoming a bestseller in Vietnam while receiving excellent reviews in its English translation. The novel deals at length with precisely the problems of writing, in both the sense of the difficulty in describing the indescribable before considering the obstacles to publication and distribution.

It would be safe to say that *The Sorrow of War* retains a quasi-iconic status as a novel unafraid to describe barbarity perpetrated by whoever is responsible. In the case of Nguyen, it becomes essential to his analysis of rape in wartime, as we shall see. Thus, we arrive at a paradoxical situation where we encounter a significant novel on the American War, written by a veteran, challenging both the official, glorious line of his own country and that narrated in those multifarious places where Nguyen runs into American memories. To put it simply, why is such a great novel not impactive at all? Roger Stahl, for example, provides a thought-provoking suggestion that a "striking feature of these nominally 'anti-war' films, however, is the lack of a critique of war policy . . . Instead these films are defined by the ghastly purposelessness of war" (Stahl 79). Owen yet again!

For Nguyen, the answer lies in the many pages that *The Sympathizer* dedicates to the film industry. In a novel of twenty-three chapters, four, eight to eleven, are dedicated to the shooting, and chapter seventeen deals at great length with how the film is viewed. In addition, the text resorts to identifying the main cinematic characters by labels only, as if they were part of a *commedia dell'arte*. The most outrageous is the director, referred to as "the Auteur", that is someone who sees himself primarily as a great artist, the Michelangelo of his age. The two leading actors are referred to as "the Thespian" and "the Idol", as if they had no names, no identity beyond that. Only their screen identity, the created, fake one, exists or matters.

That said, the questions of authenticity and political orientation are fairly easy to unravel. Nguyen states that he would love to hate *Apocalypse Now* (1979), but the ingenuity of the gunsmith – Nguyen's label for its director – has produced a fine film, a prime example of "the war machine's industrial memory" (*Nothing Ever Dies* 116). Nguyen takes exception to these remarks Francis Ford Coppola made at the 1979 Cannes Film Festival:

> My film is not a movie. My film is not about Vietnam. It is Vietnam. It's what it was really like. It was crazy. We made it very much like the way the Americans were in Vietnam. We were in the jungle. There were too many of us. We had had access to too much money, too much equipment, and little by little we, we went insane. (*Nothing Ever Dies* 116)

Arguably, Nguyen has used the term Auteur for its similarity in look, sound and meaning to "hauteur". Coppola's claim that authenticity lies primarily in his film

borders on the hubristic. The concluding sentences modify the initial view through highlighting that what the movie authenticates is primarily the experience of American youth in a terrible war. However, we may not equate Coppola's film with such masterpieces as Eric Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) for at least one simple reason. Earlier, Nguyen remarked that for many Americans "Vietnam" means essentially the war, but now it becomes exclusively the war from the point of view of those who went mad in the jungle. No one else seems to exist in this worldview, turning perpetrators into victims while their enemy is nowhere to be seen, in the Ellison sense of the word. Only one subject is worth our attention, the tragedy of American youth. *The Sympathizer* suggests that Coppola's movie creates wilful amnesia. For example, when referring to their withdrawal from Saigon, we are informed, in a ghastly sexual pun, that "Americans are the only people who don't know they're pulling out" (*The Sympathizer* 7).

The central section of the novel, a parodic picture of Coppola and *Apocalypse Now*, should be seen as just that, the centre of the whole perplexing question of the memory industry. Hired as an expert, but really because he is the nearest available Vietnamese speaker, The Sympathizer becomes an aid to the Auteur. In a replica of general West-East relationships, the latter talks all the time without letting the other get a word in edgeways. In a blustery monologue, the Auteur informs him, without waiting for a reply, "You're the first Vietnamese I've ever met. Not too many of you in Hollywood. Hell, none of you in Hollywood. And authenticity's important" (*The Sympathizer* 129). Whether there have been any or not is rendered irrelevant as the whole of Asia is simply othered to form an anonymous mass with no real sense of specificity. This situation is exemplified by the actor, James Yoon, who actually has a name and thus a personality. He plays many roles. "Yoon was the Asian Everyman . . . Yoon was, in fact, a Korean-American in his mid-thirties who could play a decade older or a decade younger and assume the mask of any Asian ethnicity, so malleable were his generically handsome features" (158). Not only does he appear in film but is also responsible for uttering one of the most popular slogans in advertising, "*Confucius say, Clean With Sheen*" (159). The wise oriental has been reduced to promoting cleaning fluids. In the spoof *Apocalypse Now*, he plays the role of a martyred heroic resistance fighter. In order not to supply information to the Viet Cong, he bites "off his own tongue and drown[s] under a faucet of fake blood" (170-71). He can no longer speak.

This might sound ironical, amusing, macabre, or an example of over-deliberate symbolism, but let us not forget that the Auteur has insisted on authenticity while Yoon's life and death would appear to indicate that that is not the case. Yoon's demise, whatever figurative value we attach to it, merges the inability to speak with death. Throughout the novel, this particular motif of speech is played and

replayed, most pointedly, I would argue, in the exchange between Auteur and the expert. The Sympathizer becomes increasingly irritated when the script paints the Viet Cong as consistently dastardly, cruel, and born rapists. In an exchange of views, The Sympathizer points out the significance of screams. He states that when a little girl sacrifices her life by warning the Green Berets that the Viet Cong are nearby, she yells "*AIIIEEEEE!!!*" (*The Sympathizer* 131), whereas, if the film were authentic, that scream would be rendered, "*IAAHHH!!!*" (131), as that utterance corresponds more closely to how Vietnamese scream.

At the risk of repetition, this incident shows authenticity matters little. But there is more to be said. The language motif requires us to think more deeply, as it is further developed and displayed. The Sympathizer asks whether in the film the Vietnamese could at least "speak a heavily accented English—you know what I mean—ching-chong English—just to pretend they are speaking an Asian language" (132). Such a suggestion is dismissed. The Vietnamese audience are unlikely to watch the film, and in the end, the Auteur reneges on his previous comment by stating that in such cases authenticity matters very little if at all because "No one gives a shit" (133). The Sympathizer, rather dumbfounded by such a brutal reply, remains "wordless", as have the heroic Vietnamese girl, James Yoon, and now The Sympathizer himself. Clearly, to ponder Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question *Can the Subaltern Speak*? (2008), the answer would be that speech requires articulation, and that in American war movies the subaltern either has that power removed – witness Yoong's tongue – or else the voice is registered so erroneously that even the most elemental sounds are widely inaccurate in their transliteration. The subaltern is not even allowed to grunt properly.

This radical proposition puts the emphasis on how a message is conveyed as much as if not more than on its content. Nguyen's subjects do not speak because they are silenced or humiliated but because they have no tongue. Thus, they cannot communicate either in their own language or in English. As it stands, this sounds thoroughly convincing and persuasive yet does not square entirely with the recognition given to such outstanding fiction as Ninh's. Of course, the immediate response would be that the American militainment industry (see Stahl) steamrolls any attempt to question the orthodoxy imposed by American memories. That might read as a persuasive answer, but only so far as it goes. For, if Ninh's novel speaks despite all the obstacles put in its way, that guarantees that tongues utter meaningful discourse both within Vietnam and outside through the auspices of such a powerful publishing house as Vintage. The analogy does not make total sense.

Nguyen's contribution to our understanding of the power of American memories is, first, to acknowledge the skill of Auteurs while simultaneously asking us to consider other scenarios. The Auteur, we are informed, should be admired for

"the technical genius of a master gunsmith. He had hammered into existence a thing of beauty and horror, exhilarating for some, and deal for others" (*The Sympathizer* 287-88). Let us note that "hammer" might recall the godlike figures of Vulcan and Thor, but as a description of a film, it suggests that film directors are not artists at all, as the Auteur would like us all to think, but that they produce through brute force, by insistent hammering, by brawn rather than brain. *Apocalypse Now* certainly possesses an almost Walter Benjamin-like aura, with several special editions for its many fans. Yet rather than get involved in rather fruitless arguments about the quality and ideology of the film, in other words, what Coppola did or intended to do, achieved or failed, Nguyen takes a different tack by leaving Coppola to one side by shifting our attention to the audience, from author to viewer in order to see whether anyone, in the audience, gives a shit.

The Sympathizer, while in Bangkok, unwilling to visit a brothel featuring minors, goes to the cinema to watch the film in which he had played an advisory role. It is a very disquieting experience. The Bangkok audience, unaware "that cinema was a hallowed art form, that one did not, during the performance, blow one's nose without a tissue" (*The Sympathizer* 285), respond rapturously to the biggest blowup: "They [the fictional Viet Cong] certainly looked exactly like my fellow spectators, who whooped and laughed as a variety of American-made weaponry vaporized, pulverized, lacerated, and splattered their not-so-distant neighbors" (286). Incidentally, as questions of authenticity recur in both novel and essay, the real Coppola film and *The Sympathizer*'s spoof version were both filmed in the Philippines, so they will never be Vietnam in that literal sense that Coppola promoted in 1979. My objection might seem nit-picking to some, but that should not divert our attention from the fact that we are not talking about Vietnam and the USA but two further countries, the Philippines and Thailand. Yet to the Asian audience authenticity does not matter at all, and all Asian races have fused into one. James Yoon was the Asian everyman, a condition that might have its own twisted logic thousands of miles away in the USA, but that this bland othering is replicated and accepted in a diverse continent remains puzzling, yet is living proof of the gunsmith's skill.

To address this problem, I would like to focus briefly on three somewhat interrelated topics Nguyen tackles in his account of cinema: helicopters, sounds and music, and finally rape.

Just as tanks epitomize the First World War, helicopters perform the same function in the Vietnam/American War. The last scene of the movie, which has arguably the worst pun imaginable – it is titled *The Hamlet*, royal prince and village – shows "innocent Danny Boy sitting in the open doorway of a Huey helicopter ascending slowly in the clear blue heavens, weeping as he gazed over his war-ravaged homeland" (*The Sympathizer* 287). Essential to the film's effectiveness in

the climactic battle scene are "the hissing helicopter blades, reduced to slow motion sound" (287). In the next sentence, they are referred to as "airborne steeds" (286). Coppola used helicopters in arguably the most famous scene of *Apocalypse Now*, renowned for its musical accompaniment. In his essay, Nguyen comments:

> The same industrial society that produces the American movie and the American helicopter, spectacular machines that hover over alien lands, slaughtering to a haunting soundtrack, elicit the reaction of pure sex from admirers. In the end, both movie and the helicopter are more memorable to most of the world than the savages lined up in their sight. (121)

Stacey Peebles expresses a similar idea, though in rather more brutal language, when analysing Antony Swofford's *Jarhead* (2005): "Swofford sees watching, fighting, and fucking as roughly equivalent" (Peebles 28). *The Sympathizer*'s portrayal of Yoon and account of Bangkok audience would confirm this phenomenon. The subaltern neither speaks nor is visible as a human being. Again, Nguyen's contribution to the debate is to point out that this perception pervades in the subaltern's own land. Gunsmith-art reduces if not eliminates the ideological content to a mere struggle between good and evil. In short, not very different from a fairy story.

The movie's soundtrack relies on Beethoven whereas Coppola's preference lay in linking the helicopters with Wagner's *Die Walküre*. Nguyen observes that D.W. Griffiths (another fine gunsmith?) also used the Ride of the Valkyries "in his Civil War and Reconstruction era epic *The Birth of a Nation*, the score accompanying the heroic Ku Klux Klan as they ride to rescue whites besieged by lascivious blacks" (*Nothing Ever Dies* 117). The Klan do not have helicopters but horses, so one would presume that Nguyen's use of "steeds" in *The Sympathizer*, cited in the previous paragraph, must be intentional. In addition, the use of such language in Vietnam was current, thus reinforcing the belief that the conflict was essentially between civilisation and the wilderness. He dismisses the possibility that Coppola had any intention of being critical, of comparing the US forces to the Klan. Quite the opposite, as we have seen: the Bangkok audience loved the scenes of horror and blanket obliteration. This would initially seem peculiar if we accept such ideas as those proposed by Adrian Cavarero, who argues for a distinction between terror and horror, the latter characterized by a particular form of violence that exceeds death itself (Cavarero 32). This pertinent distinction additionally facilitates our understanding of rape, to which we will shortly turn.

The Hamlet narrates the events that surround an assault by the Viet Cong on a hamlet that culminates in the rape of Mai. The Auteur does something unusual here; he dispenses with music completely. In this silence, the blood, violence, and cries take on greater prominence. Mai can only utter a long scream, and in reference to The Sympathizer's earlier remarks on their correct transliteration,

"Mama…." is extended over almost a whole line. The Auteur reverses the camera so that the "red-skinned demons are seen from Mai's eye, faces flushed from home-brewed rice wine, bared teeth crusty with lichen, squinty eyes squeezed shut in ecstasy, the only possible feeling burning one's gut was the desire for their utter extinction" (*The Sympathizer* 287). As in a fairy story, nothing exists outside the struggle between good and evil. In fact, however ironic it seems, the Bangkok audience, and even The Sympathizer himself, desire self-extinction. At least temporarily. Against his own expectations, the communist agent no longer sees the world through Marxist eyes but through those of the propaganda he opposes. Highlighting the Auteur's "technical genius of a master gunsmith" (287) becomes both a genuine and back-handed compliment that recognizes its global impact and toxic nature. For fighting America in memory, in the memory industry, has become a lost cause. Perhaps this realization underwrites his anger: "By the time the soundtrack and film stock credits had passed, my grudging acknowledgment of the Auteur had evaporated, replaced by boiling murderous rage" (289). In other words, he acknowledges that in film, might is right.

Why does rape loom so large in Nguyen's narrative? James Hillman provides us with a simple explanation, "Rape is *pars pro toto* for war's transgression of human limits" (Hillman 54). Similarly, in Ninh's novel, rape is also central. The hero, Kien, volunteer and later chronicler, witnesses rape carried out by American soldiers, "black and white" (*Nothing Ever Dies* 31). The victim, Hoa, has acted as a decoy and will suffer the terrible consequences. Similarly, Kien cannot prevent his idolised girlfriend from being raped by his fellow soldiers. In short, the female body is not safe either from friend or foe. Witnessing rape contributes to Kien becoming a killer, in other words, he channels his hostility down the same avenues taken by the brutal soldiers he has despised.

The rape of Mai, in similar terms, brings together these two representative acts of violence. In the case of murder, civil life condemns – whereas war legitimises – killing in certain circumstances. If we apply the same formula to rape, the picture becomes more complicated. Does war legitimise its practice? The immediate response might be no, but if wartime does not condone rape, that in no way contradicts the fact that it is a widespread practice. Nguyen constantly, both in his prose and fiction, brings together the erotic and the violent. Although the true extent of this particular overlap lies outside the scope of this paper, I would like to focus on two points that he succinctly makes in this respect. First, rape destroys "the masculine fiction that war is a soldier's adventure and a man's experience, or that war . . . can be separated from the domestic world" (*Nothing Ever Dies* 32). This ties in with the general tendency of modern warfare that foregrounds the civilian as victim.

Later in the essay, which serves as a running commentary on *The Sympathizer*, Nguyen comments that "while not all soldiers are rapists every army rapes" (*The Sympathizer* 227). We should note the use of "not all" and "every". Hence, the inevitable conclusion is that rape is a universal wartime phenomenon prevalent among friends and enemies. This surely explains why Ninh insists that Hoa is violated by both white and black. Nguyen thus asks a question, both explicitly and implicitly, which really has no answer at all. How does this affect collective memory if the practice is "endemic" (*Nothing Ever Dies* 227)? He argues that "memorials to rape victims are 'rare'" (227). In broad terms, the issue is swept under the carpet for its highly tendentious nature. One thing is to talk about victims, but what about the perpetrators? "Rape is one of war's unspeakable consequences, denied in the heartwarming images of solders being sent to war or greeted on their return by faithful wives and adorable children" (228). One does not need much imagination to glimmer how an in-depth inquiry into the subject would potentially disable any ethical justification for war and impair any construction of heroism. It is curious how Homer dispatches with this issue right at the beginning of the *Iliad*, in the struggle between Agamemnon and Achilles over the body of Briseis. Once that issue has been settled, and only when it has been settled, can battle commence.

My first conclusion proposes that like the texts Christoph had chosen, Nguyen's are keenly aware of how important nomenclature is when defining our memory and views of conflict. This might seem obvious, as illustrated by such clichés as one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. Yet Nguyen's contribution surely rests on proposing how profound and extensive the power of nomenclature has become. We could argue that *The Sympathizer* goes to extraordinary lengths to develop the subject: exiled families move from North to South Vietnam, across the Atlantic to live in Orange County where the internal division is further complicated by both conquered and defeated Vietnamese being immigrants in a new home. That immigrants bring their divisive identities with them becomes a recurrent theme in his latest novel, *The Committed* (2021), set in the former capital of Empire, Paris. The constant process of splitting identities confounds at least, and at most creates collective schizophrenia. For this reason, and in line with concerns about borders, in a critical essay Nguyen writes, "So far as we believe the category of a Pacific Rim literature is useful, it is because it allows us to address how people and culture are not easily contained in national categories like American or its subsidiary Asian American" ("Pacific Rim and Asian American Literature" 192). As the basis of affiliation resides in specificity, it is difficult to gauge whether this approach would attract more enemies than Sympathizers.

Hence my second conclusion follows. One might begin to wonder whether this ties in with the effects of contemporary globalisation. Yet, this might not be a

novelty at all. In Olivia Manning's *Levant Trilogy* (1982), more precisely in the first volume, published previously as a separate novel, *The Danger Tree* (1977), one character states that "We're all displaced people these days" (Manning 167). In both cases, it would seem that wartime has brought about this state of affairs, yet the nagging question might be another one, both in the case of Manning's character's views and Nguyen's explicit remarks on Pacific Rim literature. Is this displacement, with the accompanying fragmentation of identity, when reliant on borders, becoming a truly universal trait, whether in the Near East or Vietnam, whether in peacetime or at war? In other words, however valid a challenge it is to concentrate and analyse a specific theatre of conflict, we run the risk of losing sight of the universal implications of local issues. If we combine this word of warning with Nguyen's remarks about the Pacific Rim, we are surely heading towards the belief that displacement and globalisation may lead to fewer borders and greater cooperation. Or, to put it another way, what joins is greater than what separates us.

My third and final conclusion would be that Nguyen provides us two warnings against such optimism. The Sympathizer is deeply attracted to the daughter of the general he serves and spies on. Yet, the General warns him against any attempt to try and approach her. "You are a fine young man, but you are also, in case you have not noticed, a bastard" (*The Sympathizer* 291). (The Sympathizer is the son of a French priest and his Vietnamese servant.) What lies beyond bastardy? The remark is somewhat ironic, as the condescending general is himself little more than a nobody, a general of a corrupt, defeated regime, exiled permanently to the USA where he struts about as a generalissimo. In terms of identity politics, it would be difficult to tell who is more of a "bastard" than the other. In a similar fashion, American war memories, as illustrated in the Bangkok cinema, show how successfully global entertainment removes ideological content or any critical comment other than that which it promotes. Have we at certain moments behaved like the audience in Bangkok? Nguyen's work would suggest so. Nguyen's and my own modest findings do not critique such profound thinkers as Paul Gilbert when arguing that "the construction of identity and difference is made in terms of characteristics that carry a specific emotional charge, namely in terms of people's perception of themselves" (Gilbert 71), they merely suggest that complex forms of affiliation may originate in something so banal as *Hamlet* and be evident in the behaviour of a cinema audience. Perhaps we have all integrated "war into consumerist practices" (Stahl 72), consciously or otherwise, whether in Bamberg, Barcelona, or Bangkok.

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