

Refocusing on Women and the Obscene in Viet Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*

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Viet Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* has a problem with women but it is a problem that the novel carefully and even deliberately confronts. While the novel could be read as the story of the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the essentially fragmenting and divisive process of assimilation, or even the implications of American imperial power globally, I read it through the lens of gender, considering the ways in which the physical bodies of women set the stage and even reframe the narrative for all of these readings. Because women's bodies are often implicated in struggles for power, they become, in this novel, the sites upon and through which male characters act out and process their desires for power and belonging. Because I read the novel as a feminist woman who lives in the world, I react to it viscerally as a woman; I cannot help but do so. As Sarah Ahmed writes in her book *Living A Feminist Life*, a feminist has a "sensible reaction to the injustices of the world, which we must register at first through our own experiences" (21). In order to "make sense of what does not make sense," I read through what Ahmed calls my own "feminist story" to personalize the disembodied, critical reading of texts. In a similar way, this novel is in some ways about the narrator's reformulation of his own story as he learns to view it in a new way.

While the main character of the novel is a man, the women of the novel refract his understanding of self, and even when he struggles to look directly at their inherently sexualized, often obscene treatment, Nguyen's relentless return to women's sexualized bodies provides the narrator a lens by which to reenvision his own doubled identity and complex story. At the same

time, the lurking, even ominous presence of obscenity enacted upon and through women's bodies haunts my perspective as a reader, and I suspect many others'—as readers, should we force ourselves to look through the shadowy narration of reluctantly acknowledged bodily experience, we, like the narrator, will begin to see the multifaceted, complex web of interlocking stories that undergird not only *The Sympathizer* and the prevailing understanding of the Vietnam War, but also the plight of women in the early twenty-first centuries, as more voices rise to counteract the cultural acceptance of obscenity in relation to women's bodies.

At first glance, this is not a novel that seems to be about women, but in many ways, the unnamed narrator of *The Sympathizer*—inherently doubled in his identities of bastard, double agent, immigrant, returner, and other things—understands his own self-identity in relation to the women in the novel, whether that be in the form of his mother, the hypersexualized Lana, the stylized representation of Vietnamese women in the novel's film, or, most seriously and fundamentally, the communist agent whose repression begins to force through the cracks of his memory. The novel opens with the narrator as a literal double agent, allied with both sides after the evacuation of Saigon and sent to the United States to keep tabs on the resistance. The son of a French priest and a Vietnamese mother, the narrator refers to himself repeatedly as a "a bastard." More than that, he is Americanized or assimilated, sent long ago to learn the ways of Americans but so adapted that it is no longer clear to most (including himself) whether he is Vietnamese or American.¹ In all of these doublings, the narrator struggles with the inherent

¹ In his time in America, the narrator works for a time at his old college, serves as a consultant on a film about the Vietnam War (although he finds it nearly impossible help provide a voice for the Vietnamese), meets an American politician, works for the fledgling resistance hoping to return home, and finally ends up returning to Vietnam.

bifurcation of identity imposed by others, and event comes to represent a hybridized voice through a complete break into collective voice and thinking. Styled a confession he is forced to write and rewrite, the story is told from a prison in Vietnam where the narrator is forced by his captors to address his guilt for failing to act and, to some extent, placing himself at the center of the story of the communist agent. While he did not participate in the obscene violence against her, he did not intervene, a failure to act that makes him realize his own complicity in his own failures. As he begins to confront his own failure to act at the scene of the violence against her, he simultaneously searches for agency as he sets himself in the center of her story, while also beginning to see the dominant force of American cultural hegemony through the women who disrupt tropes of Vietnamese women with their hybrid approaches to femininity. By finally learning to look at the plight of the women around him, he is able to realize that he, too, is subject to a power dynamic that leaves him always an Other who fails to be the subject in his own story.

The women in this novel often make the narrator and readers uncomfortable—they are hypersexualized, they are raped, they are victims, they are stereotyped, just to name a few—but this is a story that requires more than one reading. The narrator's journey to self-awareness and a reformulation of his own doubled identity cannot be separated from his own interactions with the female characters in the novel. As a man who is marginalized by his own "bastard" identity, the narrator simultaneously seeks to establish his own masculinity through his interaction with women and articulates nuanced portrayals of the ways in which they are defined in relation to their sexualized identity. In her study of the representation of women in Vietnamese film, Lan Duong argues that even Vietnamese male directors participate in the "technology of power" that marginalizes ethnic minorities, even in their home country. Despite the fact that the directors

she considers are Vietnamese, she argues that their “work not only relies on colonial stereotypes about women's victimisation, but also dovetails with the state's imperative to present a cohesive, multicultural nation in times of both war and peace” (Duong, 2015, 465). Her work makes it clear that rhetoric about women is reinforced by more than just white, colonial men; these narratives are so common that members of that same ethnic group can internalize and even reinforce them. As the narrator considers the way in which stories are represented, through art, film, and otherwise, his descriptions of the women around him suggests that he, too, becomes more aware of the problems with women. In order to confront the truly unjust and obscene realities of war, sexual violence, and abuse of power, the narrator is forced to confront his own role in the stories of the women in the novel and imagine a new way to represent the stories of those on the margins.

While the narrator eventually realizes his own guilt in his own relationships to women, he is already a fragmented, barely visible character. The narrator of this novel has no name—the clearest and most obvious sign of his unclear and overlapping identity—but his unanchored and barely present character also does not provide vivid or particularly revealing description. The novel's style is detached and distant, often focused on abstract and intellectual rumination, so that when there is a vivid description, the reader can hardly forget it. And yet, this detached style often distracts, so that the concrete events of the narrative happen just out of focus. This shifting view, coupled with the book's focus on storytelling, suggests that *The Sympathizer* is a novel about the intersections of story and truth and how the desires of those who consume the stories

shape the way they are told and packaged.² When the narrator hearkens to Marx, struggling with the role of the Vietnamese in the movie on which he has been hired to consult, he notes that “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” (144). While this could certainly apply in various complicated ways to any of the Vietnamese characters in the book, for my purposes here, it is the female characters who cannot represent themselves, and indeed, it might seem, cannot even be represented.

Considering the Vietnam War and the experiences of soldiers in relation to gender is nothing new at this point in literary history; masculinity as a construct in literature can hardly be separated from Vietnam War literature. On an even larger scale, in her seminal book *The Remasculization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, Susan Jeffords argues that the representation of Vietnam “is emblematic of the general restricting of ideological production in America” (1). The “production and technologization of the male body as an aesthetic of spectacle” and the “blurring of fact and fiction” are key parts of the representation of Vietnam. Her argument, that these processes are enacted through the framework of gender, has long been a lens through which scholars engage with the representation Vietnam and the Vietnam War. More recent scholars consider the representation of the Vietnam War in the larger context of war literature. In his consideration of naturalist aesthetics in Vietnam War literature, Ty Hawkins argues that this fiction “becomes a means of bridging the gap between those who have

² This formulation calls to mind Tim O’Brien’s formulation of the concepts of the “story truth” and the “happening truth” in his famous collection *The Things They Carried*. In many ways, O’Brien has represented the Vietnam war to students of literature for decades and informs the way many of us think about the war.

experienced the horror of industrialized combat and those who have not" (1).³ Juxtaposing more realist texts with the fragmented, and postmodern approaches of writers like Tim O'Brien, Hawkins marks a difference between what Jameson would call the simulacrum of the "existential experience of war" and naturalist texts which reject wartime adaptation of anonymity or becoming lost in the ranks (qtd. In Hawkins 2). In his 2016 review for *The Guardian*, Randy Boyagado situates *The Sympathizer* as marking a change in Vietnam War literature, its style in striking contrast with O'Brien's "clipped, cool fragmentary narrative that has long served as the canonical US literary account of that divisive conflict and its ongoing aftermath."⁴ Instead, this novel is a "bold, artful and globally minded reimagining of the Vietnam war and its interwoven private and public legacies" (Boyagado). While Nguyen's novel is certainly not the naturalist or realist portrayal of the real Vietnam jungle, it does provide a narrative of grander scale, in which Vietnamese bodies—female, double agents, immigrants—become a key part of an aesthetics of representation that is challenged by widespread narratives of American mythology.⁵

³ Hawkins goes on to argue that the Vietnam War is an essentially modern—rather than postmodern—war, in that it "coupled progressive ideology to a fully realized military-industrial complex and nationalism—the three main ingredients necessary for modern war" (4). In the naturalist war text, he writes, the lower classes, who usually do not command but instead die on the front lines, "find a voice, a chance to tell us what it's like" (11). He crucially argues for this more realist approach to war narratives.

⁴ Like many who address the text, Boyagado begins by outlining the many possible readings of the text: "*The Sympathizer* can be read as a spy novel, a war novel, an immigrant novel, a novel of ideas, a political novel, a campus novel, a novel about the movies, and a novel, yes, about other novels."

⁵ Steven Best and Douglas Kellner argue that the American campaign in Vietnam "attempted to increase U.S. global power by containing 'communism and by imposing a consumer economy on Vietnam under the ideology of modernization" (71). Such a large-scale project relies on a narrative of American global presence in a modern economy that could be considered to fail in the failing of the United States troops in Vietnam.

While Jeffords's work focuses on the mobilization of constructions of masculinity to represent the war and package narratives for public consumption, in many ways, femininity and the representation of women are part of a much more complicated "aesthetic of spectacle" (1). Even in histories of the Vietnam War (and others, for that matter), the stories of women are often underdeveloped or complicated by the history of sexual violence and rape. In her book-length study of rape during wartime, Anne Barstow writes that among the many forms of "using" women, the "ultimate effect is the same: the combination of familiar forms of sexual objectification of women with the extraordinary power of the military in wartime has created enormous possibilities for new violence against women" (8). As Barstow finds in her research, it is difficult to quantify the sexual crimes in war environments, but the stories are almost literally unspeakable for the victims and repeat the same themes over and over. Like many theorists before her, she notes that the purpose of those who commit crimes of rape is "almost always to assert power over one another" (11). As Susan Brownmiller writes, man's "structural capacity to rape and women's corresponding structural vulnerability are as basic to the physiology of both our sexes as the primal act of sex itself" (13-14). In order to consider women in war, it's clear, it is essential to consider the way in which the constant threat of rape influences their stories.

Like in many novels, in *The Sympathizer*, women initially seem to only be peripheral to the narrator's story, or at least, stock characters in and out of the war that occupy stereotypically gendered roles. Much of it is told in the narrator's own mind, even as he admits he has been forced to repeatedly revise his own "confession" at the orders of his captors, but women still enter the story, almost always in stereotypically and hypersexualized ways. While the imprisoned communist agent occupies the narrator's thoughts throughout, as he processes his guilt for doing "nothing" or "no thing" in her defense, the reader does not know the role she plays early

on. While he admits on page 10 he failed to save her, her disembodied screaming is disconcerting but hard to understand. The reader later reads the distant memory of her rape, realizing the source of the narrator's mostly repressed guilt surrounding her torture. Early on, however, the women who float in and out of the narrative, often barely described and almost bodiless, are distant and somewhat stereotypical. His now dead mother, seduced by a French priest, is a classic powerless woman fallen victim to the colonial oppressor who denies his own son. Bon's wife is martyred alongside their son when she dies in their attempt to escape Vietnam. And the General's wife is austere and respected, only to fall to bad American fashion and working in a cliched restaurant once she arrives in America. Each of these women is a victim in a stereotypically feminine way, and they are the only women the narrator mentions (besides the communist agent, briefly, abstractly, withholding key information) before he arrives in America.

Once the narrator is forced to escape to America, not surprisingly, the women he encounters in America are different in strikingly American ways. The women he describes at the appropriately chosen Occidental College are the white Chair's Asian wife and Ms. Mori, who works as the secretary in the Department of Oriental Studies. The Chair, who hangs an "elaborate Oriental rug on his wall, in lieu...of an actual Oriental," has an "Asian wife somewhere between one-half and two-thirds his age." While she was "not exactly beautiful but could hardly help but look beautiful next to the bow-tied Chair," he admits that her "genes are more resilient" (63). Having seemingly fetishized his research project to the point of an actual sexual and marital relationship, the Chair makes a subject of the "Amerasian, forever caught between worlds and

never knowing where he belongs" (63).⁶ Despite his supposedly enlightened intellectual perspective, the Chair advises the narrator to "assiduously cultivate those reflexes that Americans have learned innately, in order to counterweigh [his] Oriental instincts," leading the narrator to be unable to resist the comment: "Like yin and yang?" (65). Frustrated with being trapped within these systems of representation, the narrator recognizes the problematic dichotomy into which he is being forced, his identity fractured and fragmented across artificially imposed borders.

Ms. Mori, the departmental secretary, intersects with these stereotypes, pushing them further. With her sensible shoes and her age (forty-six, so most likely out of the age of potential motherhood), Ms. Mori's interest in the narrator seems to be outside of stereotyped roles for women. Their "condomless" intercourse evolves from smoke breaks and happy hours, with him largely continuing to call her "Ms. Mori," despite their physical intimacy (75). Early in the novel, she resists being defined by her Asianness, criticizing the Chair's assumption that she is somehow closer to her home culture than whites of European descent. After he asked her if she spoke Japanese, she remembers, the Chair compartmentalizes her experience, accusing her of forgetting her culture (75). "For a long time," she recalls, she "felt bad" and "wondered why [she] didn't want to speak Japanese, why [she] didn't already speak Japanese, why [she] would rather go to Paris or Istanbul or Barcelona rather than Tokyo." But her shame is short lived, as she soon finds herself thinking: "*Who cares?* Did anyone ask John F. Kennedy if he spoke Gaelic and visit

⁶ It is at this point in the novel that the Chair asks the narrator to write down the traits of his Oriental and Occidental heritage, resulting in two lists of stereotyped, race-based qualities, including "self-effacing" versus "occasionally opinionated," and "respectful of authority" and "Sometimes independent" (64).

Dublin or if he ate potatoes every night or if he collected paintings of leprechauns? So why are *we* supposed to not forget *our* culture? Isn't my culture right here since I was both here?" (75). Recognizing that the Chair makes the common assumption that Asians are more simply and intrinsically tied to some vision of their home culture, Ms. Mori must fight her own internalized identification to recognize her own feelings.⁷

While Ms. Mori—predictably—is associated with sex shortly after her arrival in the narrative, her relationship to sex is far from stereotypical. Besides her age, Sophia Mori's role is that of sexual teacher, liberated from old-fashioned rules policing female sexuality. While the sexually knowledgeable older woman is not a new trope, she is more than a simple stock character. The narrator associates his "tutelage" under Ms. Mori with a larger sense of mindset change as he comes to realize that "true revolution also involved sexual liberation" (77). Ms. Mori explains her rejection of iconic Asian woman submission, saying she "can't put on the whole sukiyaki-and-sayaonara show they love, the chopsticks in the hair kind of mumbo jumbo, all that Suzie Won bullshit, like every white man who comes along is William Holden or Marlon Brando, even if he looks like Mickey Rooney" (74). Her comedic commentary suggests, unsurprisingly, that the Asian woman is expected, in the popular culture and in internalized narratives, to be impressed simply by the white man's white maleness, by virtue of the power of Western empire.

Throughout this section of the novel, mapped through the female bodies around him, the narrator weaves together the politics of sex, empire, and Catholicism.; it's no accident that

⁷ This ideology has a long history, including Structuralist critical approaches like Ernest Fenollosa's "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry."

Nguyen creates an unnamed, bastard narrator who is the son of a priest. Connecting his rejection with the church's (and others') categorization of sex and the body as obscene, the narrator thinks that the sight of naked children in Vietnam scandalized their "French overlords, who saw this childhood nudity as evidence of our barbarism, which then justified their raping, pillaging, and looting, all sanctioned in the holy name of getting our children to wear some clothes so they would not be so tempting to decent Christians whose spirit and flesh were both in question" (78). Succinctly and scathingly condemning the church's displacement of desire onto colonial bodies, the narrator connects the violence of war to the repression of sexual desire. He refuses contemporary definitions of obscenity; shortly after describing masturbating into the body of a dead squid, he writes that "Some will undoubtedly find this episode obscene. Not !! Massacre is obscene. Torture is obscene. Three million dead is obscene. Masturbation, even with an admittedly nonconsensual squid? Not so much. I, for one, am a person who believes that the world would be a better place if the word 'murder' made us mumble as much as the word 'masturbation'" (80). The passage with the squid is initially shocking, but the narrator chastises the reader for that reaction, shaming us for our nonchalant reaction to violent scenes and hypocritical attitudes about sex.⁸

It's no accident that this last paragraph moves from the narrator's relationship with Ms. Mori to the masturbation with a squid—it is the narrator's liberated sexual relationship with an Americanized, critically-aware Japanese-American woman that sparks an intellectual exploration of the history of gender stereotypes and sexual repression. The narrator moves from the Chair's

⁸ Even in class, students are initially shocked, but the novel itself corrects their reading, forcing them into a more mature, more thoughtful reaction.

younger wife, whose pictures in a scarlet cheongsam makes it possible to mistake her for her husband's daughter, to Ms. Mori, who refuses to be wholly defined by her ethnicity, and, to some extent, by her gender. This journey of female representation, fragmented as it is, leads the narrator to thinking of way in which the history of American power in Vietnam has been tied in to the history of sex and erotics. Channeling Benjamin Franklin, the narrator is aware of "the importance of the erotic to the political" (77), particularly by navigating his own relationship to women and sex. Ms. Mori's refusal to fit in any established categories for Asians or women—or particularly Asian women—forces the narrator towards his own reformulation of the women in his confession.

Lana—the sexually empowered, rockstar daughter of the general—is a start. Her parents try to force into the idealized image of female submission, but when they fail, they call her insane, that timeless method for neutralizing female opposition.⁹ While the narrator remembers her as demure in a school girl's ao dai, the Lana the family has tried to marginalize has claimed her own sexuality. Even the narrator was

shocked by the black leather skirt that threatened to reveal a glimpse of the of that secret I had so often fantasized about. Above the miniskirt, her gold silk halter top shimmered with every gyration of her torso as she flexed her lungs, her specialty being the rock-'-em, sock-'-em numbers that the blues and rock bands of our homeland had mastered in order to entertain American troops and Americanized youth. (116)

⁹ Lana is forced to actually make an attempt on her own life to get her parents to take her seriously, representing insanity (or more accurately, mental illness) rather than actually having it.

The narrator says that while some men “preferred those innocent school girls....some pastoral, pure vision,” but he thinks he prefers Lana because he was “impure” and impurity was all he “deserved” (124). But Lana’s impurity is also what makes her desirable. He may think his own stigma draws him to her, but both of them are more modern, evolving subjects, not one thing or another in a world defined by binary. When she sings Nancy Sinatra, she is not “afflicted” with monolingualism but provides a “richer more textured version” “layered with English and French and Vietnamese” (238): Lana’s art and representation is richer for its hybridity, but it is also desirable to the hybrid, immigrant away from home. It allows him to feel connected to his homeland and makes her more desirable. Lana does not play hard to get and her sexuality is on display. Turning his attention in brash fashion to her breasts, the narrator comes to read her body as the metaphorical landscape of his own desire—for her, for Vietnam, for belonging—in a simultaneously self-aware and traditionally masculine gesture of displacing male desire onto the female body. The verb, “to cleave,” he notes, means “both to cut apart and to put together. A woman’s cleavage perfectly illustrated this double and contradictory meaning, the breasts separate two entities with one identity. The double meaning was also present in how cleavage separated a woman from a man and yet drew him to her with the irresistible force” (241). His sexual desire here doubles with his desire for belonging for his essentially doubled identity. His very identity is only readable through the medium of the sexualized female body, even as she claims her own sexuality in the face of the submissive female image her parents espouse.¹⁰ When

¹⁰ Lana’s mother, Madame, lectures Lana on the “importance of maintaining her virginity and of cultivating the ‘Three Submissions and Four Virtues’” (115). Here, Madame refers to the Confucian guides for women, which mandates submission to a woman’s father, husband, and sons, once she is a widow, and the four virtues of wifely virtue, speech, manner/appearance, and work.

the General tells him that he would never let him marry his daughter—"You should have known better, Captain. You are a soldier. Everything and everyone belongs in his proper place. How could you ever believe we would allow our daughter to be with someone of your kind?" (291)—the narrator is reminded of the way his particular identity leaves him marginalized by all of the groups to which he wants to belong.

The narrator's relationship with Lana—forbidden as it is—is tied to his own longing for affirmation from a father figure and his home culture. The General, for whom he and Bon kill an innocent major and the narrator eventually kills another man in a display of loyalty, is the man who might have been his father-in-law and has been his commanding officer (on at least one of the sides he plays). Neither of the Vietnamese nor American, he is fractured by his ethnic identity in America. As Nguyen himself wrote, the "Vietnamese in America are both intimate and alien" (Interview, 2015). But even as his experience is Vietnamese, he had no memory of his home country:

How I remembered it was through American movies and books, all of them in the English language that I had decided was mine at some unspoken, unconscious level. I heard broken English all around me, spoken by refugees whom I couldn't help but see through American eyes: fresh off the boat, foreign, laughable, hateful. That was not me. I could not see how I could live a life in two languages equally well, so I decided to master one and ignore the other. But in mastering that language and its culture, I learned too well how Americans viewed the Vietnamese. (Nguyen, 2015)

Like many immigrants, Nguyen is alienated from his own history. Instead, he learns through the "industry of memory" surrounding the film versions of the Vietnam War. "The power of U.S.

culture is that it is global," Nguyen said in a 2016 interview, such that instead of reading history books, people watch *Apocalypse Now*. Outside of Vietnam, people watch movies that manipulate historical facts in favor of recognizable narrative arc.¹¹ Nguyen clearly understands that his own understanding of self learns a simulacrum vision of his own history, an inaccurate representation substituting for any authentic vision of Vietnam.

Film and narrative representation dominates many people's imagination of Vietnam, and even there, Vietnamese women's representation is filtered through just a few narrow channels. Women were often rape victims or prostitutes, simplified into a sexualized version of the Madonna-whore dichotomy.¹² As Gina Marie Weaver explains in her book about rape in Vietnam War films, in order to "avoid offending audiences," many filmmakers "subtly converted narratives that focused on violence to Vietnamese women to avoid offending audiences. In doing so, these films erased violence toward women" (124).¹³ These sorts of stories have become so pervasive

¹¹ As Hai-Dang Phan and Hao Phan write in their review, Nguyen's main accomplishment in the novel is to "synthesize, rapidly and relentlessly, a vast cache of historical, literary and cultural material on the subject of the Vietnam War" (1).

¹² Prostitution does not play a large role in *The Sympathizer*, but the narrator does discuss what he calls the myth of the "prostitute in whose chest beats the proverbial heart of gold. Let me assure you, if there is one part of a prostitute that is made of gold, it is not her heart. That some believe otherwise is a tribute to the conscientious performer" (37). He notes later that "the creation of native prostitutes to service foreign privates is an inevitable outcome of a war of occupation, one of those nasty little side effects of defending freedom that all the wives, sisters, girlfriends, mothers, pastors, and politicians in Smallville, USA, pretend to ignore" (38). Refusing to allow prostitutes to fall settle into simply clichés, the narrator addresses another unwelcome reality of the war.

¹³ Weaver also notes that this sort of marginalization is not unique to representation of the Vietnam War. In World War II films, "German soldiers were often presented as good and decent people separate from the

that often, people start to believe they are the only version available. As Edward Miller writes in his essay about the “Vietnamese turn” in studies of the war, for decades most of the history about the war “was written by authors who knew very little about Vietnam,” “produced mainly by specialists in American history and culture” because of their desire to understand the war “as an episode in US history” (14).¹⁴ More popular reviews recognize this as well, such as Philip Caputo’s review for *The New York Times*. He notes that among the immense library of fiction and nonfiction” surrounding the war, there are only a few “with Vietnamese characters speaking in their own voices.”¹⁵ As Nguyen said in a 2017 interview, “The literature by Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Americans is out there for anyone who knows how to use Google. But so many here and abroad would rather not know, or when a new Vietnamese author is published, would prefer to say, ‘At last! A voice for the Vietnamese!’ In fact, there are so many voices, for the Vietnamese people are very loud.” This misconception that there is no voice from Vietnam relies on stereotypes about Vietnamese being unable or unwilling to speak; it is part of a larger phenomenon in which the representative power is assumed to rest in the hands of the powerful American “industry of memory.”

Nazi leadership,” while “the Japanese were characterized almost exclusively in terms of racial difference—a faceless mob of stereotyped Asians” (125).

¹⁴ This essay is part of a special issue of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* focusing on this shift in scholarly work on the war.

¹⁵ Caputo rightly notes that: “The more powerful a country is, the more disposed its people will be to see it as the lead actor in the sometimes farcical, often tragic pageant of history. So it is that we, citizens of a superpower, have viewed the Vietnam War as a solely American drama in which the febrile land of tigers and elephants was mere backdrop and the Vietnamese mere extras.”

Nguyen addresses the troubling, inadequate representation of rape in Vietnam War history through the narrator's work on an American film. As Pat Hoy notes, the description of the filming disrupts the pleasure of reading the novel. Reminded of Conrad, the film scenes cause Hoy to pause before he begins the "creative work of reading" (685). The narrator is initially brought on to consult because he objects to the one-dimensional representation of the Vietnamese extras in the film. There are many things to object to about the film, most of which are somewhere between racist and oblivious oversimplifying of racial Others, but for my purposes here, it is the film's representation of the rape of one notable female character that matters. Mai is a village girl whose rape is presented in detail in the film. The narrator calls it a "brutal act of imagination," but unlike the torture scene featuring a Vietnamese man, the filming of the rape scene is private, so when the narrator finally sees it, he is in a theatre. The scene has no music, and is filmed in painful, horrifying detail:

Long shots from the cave's darkened corners depicted a human octopus writhing at the cave's center, the naked Mai struggling under the backs and limbs of her half-naked rapists. When we saw glimpses of her naked body, most of it was obscured by the strategically placed legs, and arms, and buttocks of the VC....Alternating with these long shots were extreme close ups of Mai's battered face with its howling mouth and bloody nose, one eye so swollen it had closed completely. (287)

Next, the film switches to her view of their predatory faces, "faces flushed with home-brewed rice wine, bared teeth crusty with lichen, squinty, eyes squeezed shut in ecstasy, the only possible feeling burning in one's gut was the desire for their utter extinction" (287). This scene—filled with repulsive language and longer than it needs to be—refuses to allow viewers to erase or forget rape, to sterilize it or pretend like it is anything other than a horrifying, violent act of

power. And yet it is utterly melodramatic, fictionalized, and in service of a narrative that will be served up to American audiences, with Vietnamese women serving as the victims of heinous crime.

But this is not the only rape in the book. It is on page nine that the narrator first mentions the communist agent, although on the first time through the book, the reader might miss it or only wonder at its significance. He describes her trying to swallow an incriminating document before being sent to an interrogation cell. The communist agent haunts his memory, and he recalls “looking at her faces, then and now,” three years after she has been imprisoned (10). And, then, like a ghost, she is gone, a wispy memory in the text that only appears now and again. The rape that haunts me, as a reader, is hers, narrated from a distance, foggy, all the more horrifying and hard to keep distance. The first time I read this book, I got to the very end, and I wondered: how can I possibly teach this book? This is obscene. But to not teach it seemed even worse, because while it is tempting to avoid thinking about rape in war, it is unethical. As Anne Barstow writes in *War's Dirty Secret*, “rape in conflict situations is often carefully planned, at high levels. It is systematic rape, even strategic rape—rape used as a weapon of war” (2).¹⁶ Representation of these crimes is often either erased, veiled or dramatized to the points of melodrama, like the version in the fictional film of the novel. As Weaver writes, Stone’s portrayal of rape in *Platoon* is “so muted and understated as to nearly be invisible. Numbed viewers may even miss the fact that a rape even occurred” (138). To some extent, this representational difference is at the heart of Nguyen’s disturbing yet essential portrayal of rape in *The Sympathizer*. At the end of the book, the Communist Agent is strapped to a table, that the

¹⁶ Barstow’s book has chapters on different conflicts and the history of rape in those areas.

narrator sees the “naked buttocks,” “three engorged members,” and one fondling the “stubby length of the ugliest part of most adult male bodies” (350). The narrator says the policeman climbs “awkwardly onto the table between her legs” and one says that the “bitch is asking for it” before they take turns raping her (350). Many readers feel tempted to skim this scene or skip ahead, brought to nausea by its horror when the narrator says she could no longer scream, the “youngest policeman having silenced her,” the reader is forced to confront the fact that he has committed an act of rape by forcing his penis into her mouth (351). When one of the policemen says the agent “needs a good washing” while shaking a bottle of warm soda, the narrator says that they “flushed themselves out of her and left the drained bottle inside, buried to the throat of its neck”; the reader must acknowledge that they have inserted a soda bottle into her vagina, violating her once again (352).

The scene is violent, disconcerting and difficult to read; it is also difficult to see, not that any reader would want to. The scene is “muted and understated” like Weaver’s description of the rape scene in *Platoon*. As the book comes to a close, it becomes clear that the juxtaposition of these two rape scenes is essential to the novel. One is clearly visible, dramatized and even melodramatic. Another is out of focus, barely there, seeping up out of the narrator’s repressed unconscious and reminding him that he is guilty, as he is forced to acknowledge in his imprisonment, of “nothing.” The narrator represses the memory to the point of denial, and the style of writing makes it seem like the novel itself is in denial about it. Having been present at this crime, he is not guilty of raping her, but he is guilty of doing nothing to prevent this crime. The “muted” nature of this scene, and the fact that the narrator has basically repressed it to the point that it only comes to light at the very end of the novel, makes it clear that he, like us, does not want to look. The first time I taught this book, I could tell the students did not want to talk

about this scene. Their personal stories, feminist or not, cannot totally be left outside of the classroom. They did not want to look, like the narrator, but eventually, their personal reactions to the scene refracted their reading of the text, allowing them to see with more clarity implications of doing nothing.

Even reviewers and critics of the novel did not seem to want to talk about the sexual violence in the book; if they mentioned it all, it was usually to relegate it to the realm of metaphor or dismiss it before moving on to some more serious interpretation. One contributor to Nguyen's book club was struck by the rape scene, "which "had" to be part of the film and graphically detailed," leaving the reader "compelled to wonder about it being a symbolic representation of the land defoliation, the mass maiming and killing of the people, the total disruption of the society, the complete upheaval of the nation as it was" (Nguyen, et al.).¹⁷ Rather than considering the possibility of the rape representing what it is—rape, sexual violence, the victimization of women in military and other power structures—the reader is quick to read it as metaphor, almost seemingly dismissive of it "having" to be included in the film. In Ron Charles's 2015 *Washington Post* review, he acknowledges that "Yes, there are gang rapes and slow electrocutions and all the other ghastly tools of the trade here, but what's particularly striking is the way Nguyen concentrates on that species of psychological abuse." Quick to move on from the gang rape—listed quickly, barely noted—this reader dismisses it in favor of a more global concern.¹⁸ While the rapes in the book certainly connect to other themes, reviewers,

¹⁷ This excerpt is taken from the published account of a book club to which Nguyen seemingly already belonged, allegedly pleasantly surprised when someone chose his book for the group. The metanarrative of this conversation provides a striking companion to this reading of the text.

readers, and students of literature are quick to move on from such scenes of sexual violence, preferring to read seemingly larger scale allegorical analyses that might allow men's experiences to remain foregrounded.

These two scenes in context connect to one of the novel's key question of representation. The film cannot represent the true horror of what happens to the communist agent, suggesting that one of the challenges for people attempting to understand rape, violence, women, and Vietnam is the nature of the narratives, images, and representations that exist. In relation to the film, the narrator says a

great work of art is something as real as reality itself, and sometimes even more real than the real. Long after this war is forgotten, when its existence is a paragraph in a schoolbook students won't even bother to read, and everyone who survived it is dead, their bodies dust, their memories atoms, their emotions no longer in motion, this work of art will still shine so brightly it will not just be about the war but it will be the war. (178)¹⁹

Like the reality of the rape of the communist agent, which was in danger of disintegrating into dust, reality is displaced by narrative representation. But because the event, in the end, cannot be completely displaced—because in the end, the narrator must remember and acknowledge his guilt—the novel suggests that it is through recovering these lost stories that this representative issue can be addressed.

¹⁹ The narrator returns to Mao, who said that "art and literature were crucial to revolution. Conversely, he warned, art and literature could also be tools of domination. Art could not be separated from politics, and politics needed art in order to reach the people where they lived, through eliminate them" (173).

The narrator himself exists in the story shapeless and nameless, and in some ways, his fixation on the agent's violent rape and victimization is about him. The narrator's identity fragments through a variety of binaries that do not fit with his lived experience. The unacknowledged child of a priest and a barely present Vietnamese mother, he is torn between Vietnam and America, the two sides of the Vietnamese War, and the desires for rebellion and affirmation. While it is his story in a sense, it is driven by his inability to choose and act, his lack of power and agency, and his own marginalization. In eventually condemning himself for doing "nothing," the narrator imagines himself as having had the power to intercede (even if he didn't). While in practice stepping in might have meant a physical altercation with multiple, violent men, in theory, it would have also meant making a choice and choosing a side. Imagining himself as the failed hero in this story keeps her in the unfocused background and reproduces masculinist narrative traditions. By making her story central to his own story, or, essentially about him, he attempts to claim some sort of agency in imagining himself as someone capable of doing something. But at the same time, this indecision, and his eventual evolution into a man who begins to see the limited roles into which women are forced, provides a methodology for understanding the female bodies in the text. The narrator's reaction to these women helps the reader understand the impossibility of understanding women's hypersexualized roles in many narratives, whether they are the stories of war or the myths of America.

In a sense, the women in the novel who are successful—that is to say, not raped or dead—find a way to navigate these artificially-imposed and seemingly mutually exclusive roles. Isabelle Thuy Pelaud's book *This is All I Choose to Tell* considers the role of hybridity in Vietnamese American literature, which, she says, it "not positive or negative in itself. The readiness to embrace those located at the margins as potential bearers of positive change

capable of repudiating domination, or to treat in-betweenness as a gift, an enigmatic access to language that may possibly reveal an opening in ourselves and the world we inhabit, can mask the immense difficulty, stress, pain, and contradictions that arise to various degrees when the people involved are located on the margin at the intersection of cultures" (50). Her work is imbued with a sense of possibility, of the ways in which power structures can be displaced through borders broken and binaries shattered. The current systems of representations—film classics and established authors—lead students to associate Vietnam with helicopters and *Miss Saigon* but rarely represent American soldiers cutting off Vietnamese ears and teeth and trophies (acts that would have been deemed unthinkable against European enemies). In service of maintaining these safe stories, according to Susan Jeffords, many who represent Vietnam follow a genre structure more like the "romance, in which the plot variation alters little and the readers' pleasure is grounded on the working out of a predictable ending less significant than the events leading to it" and to "the confirmation of what is already known, the already displayed, the already dead" (6). Formulaic stories are comfortable, even soothing, to the reader or viewer, but these stories also shore up the foundations of sterilizing and oversimplified narratives that are palatable to the American mythology.

Women disrupt these narratives, especially when their stories refuse to reinforce the grand narratives of American representation. The narrator's journey to releasing his repressed memories, of his guilt of doing nothing, in some ways ends and begins with women. The moment of utter obscenity is the communist agent's strategic, repeated, out of focus rape, but the narrator's realization of hybridity—ending with his move to the "man of two minds, me and myself" (376). At this point, he moves to the first-person plural, referring to himself as "we" instead of "I." Like the deformed, two-headed baby in the jar, Man's alter ego the commissar,

and the narrator's double agent status throughout the book, he ends with a fragmented, bifurcated self. Forcing himself to acknowledge the truly obscene finalizes the split, the only representation of himself that can exist in this trauma. As Jeffords explains, in relation to the War, masculine men have been taught to fight against the "ruthless strategies of the feminine" rather than to be "responsible for its own oppressions and violence, allowing the masculine to relieve itself of the role of the oppressor" (76). In this sense, the "remasculization" is the reinforcement of borders, leading to the shattering of identity in this novel.

And yet, Lana and Ms. Mori survive, hybridized and potentially "repudiating domination," to return to Pelaud. This possibility for disruption is not just in themselves, but in the ways others react to them. Refusing to be just one thing while denying what Nhung Tuyet Tran calls the "myth of equality," they, and others like them, have no need to fracture, blur their vision, and repress. Lan Duong argues that "Trans-Vietnamese feminism" is essentially collaborative and acknowledges borders as foundational while refusing the assumption that diaspora is "an inauthentic representation of the former," allowing both diaspora and homeland as real and authentic pieces of Vietnamese identity. This framework instead "places in relief the gendered relations of power and shifting political contexts within which artists produce and are received" (15-16).²⁰ Essentially, this suggests that changing the framework through which we receive stories—particularly those about women—can be read through overlapping and ambiguous

²⁰ Here, Duong works extensively with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's idea of a "feminism without borders," in which she acknowledges that "fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears, and containment that borders represent" (2).

lenses. Representing women in multifaceted ways opens avenues for reading that improve the stories of others on the margins, too.

Nguyen's novel pushes readers to look at the obscene—to look, to redefine, to theorize. When the primal scene of obscenity begins to bubble back up in his memory, no longer capable of being repressed, it is largely because he is also tortured while a prisoner, but it also because he is learning how to look. If a feminist reading is to “make sense of things that happen,” while acknowledging that our own experiences as readers intersect with our views as theorists, then the feminist reader must be aware of her own reaction to the obscenity of rape. (Ahmed 21). As Ahmed argues, part of the work of feminism is to become the problem by not letting it recede (35-36). Addressing the highly uncomfortable scenes of rape interacts with other gendered portrayals of women. As the book presents the overlapping, intersecting, visions of women's bodies in a patriarchal, colonial, Americanized story, their stories also work together to change the representation. By learning how to look at the obscene, or the stories that have often been too unpleasant to tell, we begin to tell the whole story of the War, including the voices of women, the Vietnamese, and the many others whose stories have only been fragments, barely present, in the narrative of history. While women have long been the method by which men establish their masculine dominance, the vehicle onto which they displace their desire, in this model, women are the means by which the story is hybridized, decentralized, refocused, and even retold.

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