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Citizens of the Imagination: Refugee Memory in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*

Sandra Kumamoto Stanley

Viet Thanh Nguyen's Pulitzer-winning novel *The Sympathizer* tells the story of a double agent, a captain of the South Vietnamese army who flees with his general to the US during the 1975 fall of Saigon. A communist spy, Nguyen's narrator describes himself as "a man of two minds" and "a man of two faces" (1). Caught by his own peculiar double consciousness, the captain struggles with negotiating not only physical but also ideological borders. Before leaving Vietnam, the General insists on visiting what the narrator describes as the "hideous monument on Le Loi's grassy median" (25): "two massive marines charging forward." For the General, this militarized monument of armed soldiers represents a heroic South Vietnamese past, a public memory enshrined in material form and commemorative rituals. The narrator, however, observes, "All I could ponder was whether these

MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 66, number 2, Summer 2020.
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marines were protecting the people who strolled beneath their gaze on a sunny day, or, just as likely, were attacking the National Assembly at which their machine guns aimed." In this moment, Nguyen alludes to Ralph Ellison's iconic scene in which the Invisible Man contemplates the bronze statue of the Founder. In that scene, Ellison is referencing *Lifting the Veil of Ignorance*, the well-known Tuskegee statue of an erect Booker T. Washington lifting the veil from a crouching slave. Ellison's narrator states, "I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding" (36). The Invisible Man questions the Founder's ostensibly liberatory intentions, and Nguyen's narrator ponders the ambiguous liberatory effects of South Vietnam's militaristic ideology.

Both Ellison and Nguyen depict statues as public commemorative forms that transform historical memory into myth, with the power to enact a "more efficient blinding" (36). While Nguyen's General ceremonially salutes the statue with a MacArthurian flourish, the narrator, filled with a "mix of despair and anger," renews his "revolutionary vows" (25). This scene reinforces John Bodnar's argument that public memory "involves a struggle for supremacy between advocates of various political ideas and sentiments" (13). Yet, as James Young has argued, monument building is part of an ever-changing process, including the subversive acts of counter monuments. In fact, the very statue that the General reverentially salutes in the novel was later torn down by the North Vietnamese during the fall of Saigon, ostensibly signaling revolutionary victory over a hegemonic power, or, as Slavoj Žižek suggests, only a momentary absence before this former monument is replaced with another Master-Signifier (2). As the narrator and General flee Vietnam and eventually migrate to the US, they find themselves stateless refugees, caught within competing memories of a Vietnam that is already part of a receding past. While the figure of the refugee conjures images of vulnerability and loss, the stateless refugee may also have a subversive role, contesting the boundaries of nation states and the rights of citizenship. As Marianne Hirsch has argued, stateless memory may act "as a potential space of resistance to nationalist imaginaries, and as a platform of encounter and interconnection."[1]

In *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Nguyen observes that "all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory" (4). Here, in his nonfiction companion piece to *The Sympathizer*, he examines the globalized context of memory and identity against the complex history of the Vietnam

War, or, as he is quick to point out, what the Vietnamese describe as the American War. Against the backdrop of such landmark works as Paul Ricoeur's *Memory, History, and Forgetting*, Nguyen explores the perception of historical experience and the production of historical narratives of memory, and he critiques the ways that nationalistic memories may be the very means of propagating the wars that nations mourn. Nations have a way of remembering their own citizens, while demonizing or forgetting the other—especially those they deem the enemy or collateral casualties. Nguyen examines not only how the US remembers Vietnam through its national memorials while forgetting the Vietnamese but also how Vietnam remembers its dead while forgetting the South Vietnamese; and both nations fail to mourn so many of the collateral displaced and dead from surrounding countries such as Laos and Cambodia. While recognizing the dangers of using memorialized rituals as a means of propagating myopic nationalistic and ethnocentric concerns, Nguyen cautions against only producing counter-narratives of hegemonic memories in which subaltern groups are viewed as idealized victims. There is a risk that such narratives may reproduce the very ideology that the writers may wish to challenge, and, in viewing the other as an idealized victim, these writers may deny the other a complex humanity. For example, while praising the work that Ricoeur and Judith Butler have done in exploring ethical memory as related to marginalized groups and war, Nguyen assesses how these writers, in their critiques of the powerful, inadvertently reduce the other to victim. He argues that an ethics of recognition calls for seeing the other as a full subject, one capable of both humanity and inhumanity. At the heart of his work, Nguyen is searching for the concept of a just memory, exploring how one mourns for one's own losses and those suffered by others (including the enemy), how one recognizes one's own humanity and inhumanity, and how memory can be weaponized in the industrialization of memory. As he states, "A just memory demands . . . not just the movement between an ethics of remembering one's own and remembering others, but also a shift toward an ethics of recognition, of seeing and remembering how the inhuman inhabits the human" (*Nothing* 19).

I argue that Nguyen's search for a just memory might be mirrored in Hirsch's description of a stateless memory—what I would describe as the exilic refugee memory. Critical refugee studies scholars such as Yến Lê Espiritu and Mimi Thi Nguyen have demonstrated that the memory of the Vietnam War has been forcefully fought over on multiple discursive battlefields. In each of their works, the figure of the stateless refugee becomes a potential site of resistance

to official memories constructed by those in power. Focusing on war memories and commemorations, Espiritu notes the ways that the South Vietnamese refugee has become a serviceable body for the US—one that functions as a means of transforming the image of the US from that of a loser in a war to a savior of a people. "Calling attention to the link between the trope of the 'good refugee' and the myth of 'the nation of refuge,'" Espiritu "argues that the figure of the Vietnamese refugee, the purported grateful beneficiary of the U.S. 'gift of freedom,' has been key to the (re)cuperation of American identities and the shoring up of U.S. militarism in the post-Vietnam War era" (2). Mimi Nguyen also notes the way that the figure of the Vietnamese refugee has been deployed to revise the imperialist history of the American involvement in the Vietnam War, deflecting the memory from the US as the representative of failed military conquests to the site of refuge—one that may come in the guise of a gift but has its own peculiar demands for payment.

Noting the subversive potential of critical refugee studies, Cathy Schlund-Vials contends that "this subfield further lays bare the costs of US imperialism and destabilizes the primacy of the nation-state by centrally locating refugees within interconnected matrices of colonialism, militarism, and globalization" (201). In his essay "Refugee Memories and Asian American Critique," Nguyen recognizes the vulnerability of the refugee who "exists without rights and the protection of nation-states, in refugee camps and immigration detention centers that share a lineage with concentration and death camps" (930). Drawing from Giorgio Agamben's argument, he also asserts that "the refugee brings into question the citizen, sovereignty, rights, people, and workers, everything associated with the nation-state and the struggle for inclusion and recognition within it." Distinguishing the immigrant from the displaced refugee, Nguyen argues, "Immigrant studies affirms the nation-states the immigrant comes from and settles into; refugee studies brings into question the viability of the nation-state."[2] Refugees who suffer from the vicissitudes of a precarious life can, because of their stateless status, disrupt the fantasies of nationalist belonging and offer alternative means of imagining the collective past and present. Distinct from immigrants who choose to migrate from one place to another, exilic refugees are caught in a liminal space—searching for not only a place of refuge but also a means of recovering a possible past lost to them, in the form of family members, homes, employment, and national identity. Espiritu cites a passage from Nguyên-Vo Thu Huong's "Forking Paths" in which the speaker argues that Vietnamese Americans need a viable past to

affirm their humanity: "It should not surprise anyone that Vietnamese Americans would want to remember amidst all that forgetting. One does not become recognizably human until one acts in one's history. And for that, one needs to have history" (qtd. in Espiritu 105). In the midst of so much loss, how might one imagine a just memory?

For Nguyen, a partial response to this question is embedded in his novel's title—*The Sympathizer*—and in his concept of being a "citizen of the imagination" ("No Excuses"). In an interview with David Haeselin, Nguyen notes, "Being a citizen of the imagination entails a sense of belonging without borders, of allegiance to one's ideas and feelings versus one's nation. For a reader, what this means is giving in to the empathy that is always required in the act of reading. Empathy can be narrow or wide, and being a citizen of the imagination requires a widening of empathy." Although Nguyen is focusing on the role of art as an agent of change, he acknowledges not only the subversive power of the citizen of the imagination against the hegemonic power of the nation but also the transformative power of empathy for the individual, social, and discursive sympathizer. Rather than defining models of belonging in terms of legal and cultural citizenship aligned with a nation, Nguyen imagines an alternative model of an emerging community, one, to use Paolo Virno's term, in which "*belonging as such*" is "no longer qualified by a determinate belonging 'to something'" (32). The very stateless status of the citizen of the imagination—"belonging without borders"—allows the stateless citizen in search of a just memory to critique inequitable industries of memory and traverse boundaries, allowing, as Hirsch suggests, "a platform for encounter and interconnection."

In the construction of both his creative work and his literary critical text, Nguyen attempts to create "a platform for encounter and interconnection." Both works act as companion pieces that explore the concepts of just and unjust memory, as well as disremembering and an unethical amnesia. In an interview, Nguyen notes,

> Both of these books come out of a line of me wanting to deal with Vietnam, and more broadly, the question of war and memory in general. The ideas in *Nothing Ever Dies* grew slowly—I worked on it for over a decade, but the book itself I wrote in a year. I threw out all the articles I'd written and then wrote it from scratch after I had finished *The Sympathizer*. Some of those ideas had filtered into the fiction—but all the work of the fiction worked itself into the writing of the nonfiction. The ambition in the back of my mind—I may not be there yet—is that I would love to be able to write fiction like criticism and criticism like fiction. ("Talking")

Thus, the two works are dialogically interrelated, crossing generic borders linked by memory. Sarah Chihaya has described both works as multiple and "slippery" (367) in terms of genre, voice, and perspective. For instance, *Nothing Ever Dies* blends memoir writing with cultural and literary analysis, while *The Sympathizer* intersects with a number of genres, including the spy novel, war story, philosophical meditation, and satirical farce. In an early review of *The Sympathizer*, Pat Hoy confessed that he had initially assumed that the novel was a memoir, instinctively recognizing the blurring of the author's and the speaker's voices. Both works occupy interstitial spaces, merging the language of fiction and critique. Thus, as the refugee characters in his novel continually cross physical, cultural, and ideological borders, his novel also crosses narratological, generic, and metafictional borders. For instance, Nguyen explains that "with *The Sympathizer* I was hoping to construct a narrator who could say dramatically very critical things, but who wouldn't be restricted as an academic to source his beliefs" ("Talking").

The narrator of *The Sympathizer* reflects these multiple perspectives through not only his heteroglossic character, as a mixed-race double agent, but also his highly allusive language. In fact, I argue that Nguyen's allusions operate as linguistic sites of memory, through which the narrator implements strategies of resistance and reconceptualizes hegemonic paradigms. Although the narrator is a communist operative, a sympathizer of North Vietnam's Maoist revolution, the reader discovers early on in the novel that the captain is writing a memoir-like confession to the communist commandant while he is being tortured and reeducated in Vietnam. The commandant, who is a believer in a monologic communist worldview, feels the captain, who is a "man of two minds," has revealed his own sympathy for the enemy and has been infected by Western ideology, especially as reflected in his language. Toward the end of the novel, an exasperated commandant, who has impatiently read what he regards as the narrator's failed confession, berates the captain, stating that the narrator has confessed in content but not in style. He further remonstrates, "Even in this latest revision, you quote Uncle Ho only once. This is but one symptom, among many in your confession, that you prefer foreign intellectuals and culture over our native traditions. Why is that?" (312). The narrator tentatively answers, "I'm contaminated by the West?" "Exactly," says the commandant. The commandant understands the cultural and ideological power of allusions and quotations.

Taking my cue from the commandant's statement, I wish to examine Nguyen's exploration of a just memory and an exilic

refugee memory through the use of his allusions, which operate as discursive bearers of memory and culture. Allusions—scholarly, literary, cultural, and political—seep into both his novel and theoretical work, as Nguyen references multiple texts, including Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*, and Bao Ninh's *Sorrow of War*. A number of critics have mentioned the allusive nature of his fictional and nonfictional works, which reverberate like an echo chamber of sources.[3] In Nguyen's novel, his narrator draws heavily from allusions that the commandant would regard as not only products of "foreign intellectuals and culture" (312) but also signifiers of social and political treachery.

I would like to examine three such treacherous allusions: a reference to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* at the beginning of the novel, an allusion to Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* in the midst of the novel, and an allusion to a revolutionary and existential "nothing" (371) that is oft-repeated at the end of the novel. With each reference, the narrator enacts a subversive strategy, challenging the memories embedded in each allusion, as well as the industries of memory that may produce them. Rather than capitulate to the cultural hegemony of any of the allusions, the narrator challenges each: he appropriates and resignifies Eliot's allusion and he critiques Coppola's film and the director's manipulation of the industries of memory. In the final segment of the novel, he intertextually connects and critiques the concept of "nothing," which includes references to not only existential nothingness but also Ho Chi Minh's famous revolutionary saying: "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom" (27).[4]

I will emphasize the intertextual nature of these three allusions, stressing the social implications of those connections. When Julia Kristeva first developed her theory of intertextuality from Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, she was concerned with how texts were constructed not only out of already existent discourses but also out of a larger social and cultural textuality. Thus, for Kristeva, intertextuality was never a matter of merely discovering sources or influences; instead, she reminds us of the ways that texts are already embedded in multiple social discourses with their attendant ideological meaning. As such, these allusions do not exist in a self-contained system but come with multiple past traces of otherness.[5] In his own way, the commandant understands this point, when he tells the narrator, "The bad news is that your language betrays you" (319). Recognizing the ideological significance of the narrator's choice of multiple allusions as cultural repositories of the past, the commandant chastises him,

recognizing that the language that betrays him is the same language that reveals his betrayal of the commandant's monologic vision of the world.

For the commandant, even allusions that signal coalitional relations between minority discourses would be regarded as products of foreign intellectuals. For example, in the oft-cited opening lines of the novel, Nguyen riffs on, or, to use Henry Louis Gates's term, signifies on Ellison's *Invisible Man,* evoking a connection between the African American and Asian American texts and their liminal narrators. Ellison writes, "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" (3). In turn, Nguyen writes, "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). Nguyen has described these lines as an homage—a form of memorial—to Ellison's influential work, which he echoes throughout his novel. Caroline Rody notes that this opening will be the beginning of his many interethnic references through which the captain negotiates a variety of literary and political allegiances that moves the "ironic, observing 'I'" to the sympathetic, communal "'we' of the "stateless migrants" at the end of the novel (402). I argue, however, that the narrator's statelessness also suggests a provisional and unfixed identity, a threat to the commandant's vision of his emerging nation state. Each allusion embodies an act of remembrance that the commandant can neither contain nor control.

The narrator consciously begins his second paragraph with an almost heavy-handed allusion to what is arguably the most canonical Anglo American work of the twentieth century: Eliot's *The Waste Land.* No doubt, for the commandant, the narrator's use of such an allusion speaks directly to the imperialism of the West—the colonizing power of the elite encoding its tradition on the individual talent. The captain states, "The month in question was April, the cruelest month" (1). Hugh Kenner reminds us that, for many high modernist poets, their richly allusive poetry of "classroom accuracies" (158) could be viewed as an archeological site, offering layers and layers of literary mnemonic sources. In this way, allusions carry the weight, baggage, or even garbage, as Shanks, Platt, and Rathje remind us, of history and memory. As Nguyen suggests, "Memory is a strategic

resource in the struggle for power" (*Nothing* 10). The publication of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in 1922 signals a pivotal modernist moment, reflecting a consolidation of Anglo American literary power for a poem exploring, ironically, a sense of powerlessness in a fragmented world. Conventional readings of Eliot's poem position it as a postwar poem, articulating a moment of historical and psychological disillusionment, mixing "memory and desire" (29), shoring together a "heap of broken images" (30). As writers viewed the devastation of the Great War, they responded by searching for new modes of literary representations, ones that would prioritize the individual and interiority over the collective and linguistic inventiveness and experimentation over modes of realism. Of course, critics have read the poem through multiple lenses, investigating it as an aesthetic, psychological, cultural, deconstructed, and postcolonial artifact. However, I don't think it is an accident that the captain alludes to this archetypal modernist poem, influenced by the vicissitudes of World War I, at the impending moment of the end of the Vietnam War.

The modernist revolution, of course, would be antithetical to the commandant's own Marxist revolution and preferred literary modes of social realist representation. The commandant demands that the narrator, whom he complains is a "bourgeois intellectual" (319) infected by "the language of the elite," must reeducate himself and write in a simple and direct style for the people, invoking a "collective revolutionary consciousness." The commandant, however, does not appreciate the captain's subversive linguistic maneuvers. Rather than attribute to Eliot's poem a universal propagative power, the captain reclaims April "as the cruelest month" (1), not for the angst-ridden writers of the post-World War I period but rather for the Vietnamese experiencing their own war-torn era. Homi Bhabha has long alerted us to the ways that mimicry can, in fact, be a means of disrupting hegemonic power. He notes that when colonial authority is imitated or reproduced, a space of ambivalence or slippage occurs in which the colonized may subvert the master discourse, turning the colonial subject's gaze on the colonial power. Bhabha asserts that "mimicry represents an ironic compromise" (86) and "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite*." Mimicry, as "the sign of a double articulation," enacts a complex strategy of regulating and appropriating the Other, at the same time it "poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers." Although the narrator does not disavow the significance of Eliot's literary and mnemonic experience, he is widening the ethical spectrum of a just

memory for not only the Anglo American experience but also the nationalist and communist Vietnamese experience of 30 April 1975. Our narrator, a "man of two faces" (1), knows that his allusion to April has a double Vietnamese reference to both the fall of Saigon and the liberation of Saigon—depending on whether one sees the event from the perspective of the South or North Vietnamese. Thus, the narrator's allusion to April is not an ironic play with Chaucerian echoes or a reference to Jessie Weston's fertility myths but, rather, a reappropriation of Vietnamese history. Whether or not April represents the cruelest month is determined by the perspective of the curators of memory who remember this date. Nguyen asserts that both memory and forgetting are strategic resources, and the captain invokes the dual significance of 30 April, attempting not to engage in a cultural amnesia of one group at the expense of another. Ultimately, the narrator, with his ironic and multiple viewpoints, refuses to be regulated by any colonizing power of remembering or forgetting.

Reminiscent of Tina Chen's concept of the double agent, the narrator acknowledges that he has multiple allegiances with and sympathies for others, including his ideological enemies; he confesses to the commandant: "I cannot help but sympathize with them [the southern soldiers], as I do with many others" (36). The narrator's dilemma is embodied in his undying loyalty to his two blood brothers, Man, his communist handler, and Bon, a nationalist patriot. Even as he sends the narrator to the US to act as a communist mole, Man compels the narrator, who is attracted to the American culture industry, to acknowledge that he wishes to go to the US—"land of supermarkets and superhighways, of supersonic jets and Superman, of supercarriers and the Super Bowl!" (29). Yet once in the US, the captain feels displaced, repeatedly caught in the ethical dilemma of his double agency, as well as his problematic culpability and allegiances. He believes Americans are either repressing and forgetting or appropriating and rewriting the Vietnamese experience from America's own insulated memory. At one point, the narrator feels he can effect change in the context of the American culture industry as he takes on the role of the "technical consultant in charge of authenticity" (179) in a film concerning the Vietnam War. Instead, he finds that the filmmaker has transformed memory into spectacle, essentially weaponizing the past in the industrialization of memory.

In his quest for a just memory, Nguyen recognizes that "memories are signs and products of power, and, in turn, they service power" (*Nothing* 15). He wryly notes that although "the United States lost the war in fact, it won the war in memory on most of the world's cultural

fronts outside of Vietnam, dominating as it does moviemaking, book publishing, fine art, and the production of historical archives." The soft power of the culture industry can trump the hard power of the industrial military complex. As such, he urges his readers to engage in the conscious critique of the industrialization of memory, and he notes, citing Jean Baudrillard, that "cinematographic power" (qtd. in *Nothing* 127) may be not only equal but superior to the power of "the industrial and military complexes." In his fiction and nonfiction, Nguyen, conscious of America's cultural domination, makes a searing indictment against *Apocalypse Now*, which is Coppola's reimagining of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* through the appropriation of the memory of the Vietnam War. In *The Sympathizer*, Coppola is represented by the thinly veiled figure of the Auteur, and his film is now entitled *The Hamlet*. Instead of a resignified allusion, we may very well regard this as an unveiled allusion, in which the author lays bare the film's modes of representation. In some ways echoing Chinua Achebe's famous critique of *Heart of Darkness*, Nguyen notes, "*Apocalypse Now* deploys a limited ethical vision that offers insight into the white man's heart of darkness, where he is both human and inhuman, but at the expense of keeping the other simply inhuman, as either savage threat or faceless victim " (121). Nguyen argues that even if one is depicted as inhuman, at least one has been represented; in the film, the white man remains the subject of the Vietnam War, while the Vietnamese, both the South Vietnamese and Viet Cong, are simply subject to the war.

Echoing Paul Virilio's statement that "war is cinema and cinema is war" (qtd. in *Nothing* 122), the Auteur in *The Sympathizer* proclaims to his crew that "making this movie was going to war itself" (178). While Art is crucial to the ethical work of a just memory, Nguyen asserts that it can also be coopted by capitalist concerns and be transformed into a commodity. The Auteur believes he is producing a transcendent work of Art, but the narrator knows he is producing a form of commodified propaganda, reflecting US ideology. Despite the US's "reduced industrial base," Nguyen argues that "it is still a superpower in the globalization of its own memories, symbolized in Hollywood and its movies, which feature American memories as well as American armaments" (*Nothing* 108). Thus, *The Hamlet* depicts the Americans as saviors, the South Vietnamese as victims, and the Viet Cong as rapists, coopting the Vietnamese story into American celluloid memories.

The narrator, who has joined the Auteur's production as a technical consultant, initially believes that he will be able not only to

improve the material conditions of the Vietnamese extras but also to influence the filmmaker's depiction of the Vietnamese in the memory industry. Although he is able to effect a few changes, he soon realizes that he has deluded himself, concluding, "They owned the means of production, and therefore the means of representation, and the best we could ever hope for was to get a word in edgewise before our anonymous death" (179). The narrator finds that he is an invisible man, a mere pawn, and not a Maoist infiltrator, in the Auteur's vision. As the Auteur cannot escape the political ideology embedded in his Art, the narrator cannot escape his complicity in the Auteur's film. Later, after watching the film, a dismayed Bon succinctly encapsulates the nature of unjust memory in this cultural production; gazing at the narrator, he states, "You were going to make sure we came off well. . . . But we weren't even human" (289).

The narrator attempts to challenge the Auteur several times, but, when he questions the Auteur about the necessity of a rape scene, an enraged Auteur calls the narrator a "sellout" and a "loser" (163), and, in their ensuing verbal battle, the Auteur threatens to kill the narrator. As the film production nears its end, the Auteur plans to blow up the fabricated movie set cemetery as the final spectacle of the film, thus blowing into oblivion the simulated Vietnamese graves of those who have already been cinematically erased. As he visits the faux cemetery for the last time, the narrator experiences his own near erasure and is blown up, ostensibly at the Auteur's instigation. In another nod to Ellison's Invisible Man, who was nearly killed while he worked producing Optic White for Liberty Paints, Nguyen depicts the narrator waking up in an all-white room in a white gown. The narrator broods, "Not to own the means of production can lead to premature death, but not to own the means of representation is also a kind of death" (194). Similarly, the Invisible Man experiences a scene of death and rebirth as he comprehends the lie of the Optic White motto: "If It's Optic White, It's the Right White" (217) or, implicitly, "if you're white, you're right" (218).

Although the captain wakes up to an oppressive whiteness, he realizes that the white Auteur is responsible for only part of his sense of powerlessness in the overwhelmingly white environment in which "white is right" (Ellison 95). The narrator must also confront his responsibility for his own inhumanity through his repressed memories. His all-white room reminds him of another all-white room from his past in Saigon: the interrogation room, also called the movie theater, in which he, at the behest of his CIA mentor Claude, psychologically tortured a Vietnamese prisoner, the Watchman. The narrator once

justified such complicit actions as a necessity to protect his double agent identity; however, in his present-day white hospital room, the narrator realizes that he has whitewashed this memory, that he actually enjoyed psychologically breaking the Watchman. The narrator understands the way he is linked to the Auteur, for the Watchman was "a character in a movie, as it were, that Claude had produced, and I had directed. The Watchman could not represent himself; I had represented him" (192). In the end, the Watchman, as an act of resistance, kills himself "to sabotage the means of production that you did not own, to destroy the representation that owned you."

As invoked in Nguyen's ethics of memory, the narrator must further confront his own inhumanity: his culpability in torturing his fellow citizens and his responsibility for the deaths of innocent people, as well as his own passivity, his refusal to act. The narrator returns to Vietnam with his good friend Bon, a loyalist to the South Vietnamese regime, in an ostensible invasion of Vietnam. Still acting as a spy, the narrator is captured and tortured by his fellow revolutionaries, forced to undergo a brutal reeducation program and to write and then rewrite his confession. Nguyen argues that in order for the other—whether the ethnic minority, or the colonized subaltern, or the disempowered—to achieve full subjectivity, that self must recognize both its humanity and inhumanity.

In the process of writing his forced confession, the narrator must also confront the concept of "nothing"—an allusive and illusive word that becomes central to his epiphany. As the narrator wrestles with his memory of his former actions, he must acknowledge his own responsibility for his past, coming to terms with his own constructions of a just memory, with his own humanity and inhumanity, and, ultimately, with the multiple meanings of "nothing." The narrator discovers that his good friend, Man, is the camp's commissar, the ostensible power behind the commandant, who has been in charge of his reeducation. He initially does not recognize Man, whose face was burned off by napalm, but, once he does recognize him, he must grapple with the fact that his good friend is in charge of his reeducation and, hence, his torture. Bewildered, the narrator pleads, "I have nothing left to confess" (336). However, he finds that he has been engaged in an act of disremembering and unethical amnesia, for he has repressed his most horrific memory: the brutal rape and torture of a female communist agent at the hands of her own southern countrymen following the directive of the CIA. Although he had attempted to convince the Auteur to eliminate the rape scene in the film *The Hamlet*, he now realizes that in the movie theater of the inter-

rogation room, he passively watched his communist comrade being viciously tortured and raped and did nothing. Both Ben Tran and Sylvia Shin Huey Chong assert that the narrator's crime is that he is guilty of doing "nothing" (336). For Tran, the narrator is specifically guilty of a passive spectatorship, and any passive spectator of war—"who is both a witness to historical events and a viewer of movies" (414)—contributes "to the unethical memory of war." Chong, who is also interested in the complicit spectator, highlights Nguyen's disturbingly graphic description of the violent rape of the communist agent and raises question about not just spectatorship but the ethics of witnessing (376). Here, in his confession, the narrator's admission that he did nothing signals a failure of moral action.

But the narrator must come to another understanding of the slippery term "nothing." As he undergoes his reeducating process of torture, the captain, the man with two faces, also loses faith in the revolutionary cause, and he discovers that Man, who is now a man with no face, has done the same. More and more, he believes that the ostensibly opposing groups, whether nationalist or communist, are interchangeable. In an earlier scene, the narrator and his counter-revolutionary militia are shocked to meet the "last men standing of the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam" (292). Ironically, the leader, a nationalist admiral, now looks like Ho Chi Minh, and the leader's men, in guerilla garb, look like the Viet Cong. The nationalists and the communists seem increasingly indistinguishable. Both groups seem to operate by imposing their ideology on the polis and controlling society through "guilt, dread, and anxiety" (281). At one point, the General states to the narrator that the South Vietnamese must "resist being forgotten," and to do so, they should encourage resentment: "Always resent, never relent. Perhaps that should be our motto" (138). In fact, both groups seemed to have appropriated this motto of resentment, becoming trapped in their own false consciousness. In echoing the Nietzschean term *ressentiment*, Nguyen seems to suggest that both groups have become infected by *ressentiment* and the slave mentality of the herd, seeking to scapegoat the other and control their own group by a conformist herd mentality. If, as Marx states, history repeats itself, "the first time as tragedy, the second as farce" (9), then the nationalists have transformed into the communists and vice versa. As Žižek implicitly asks, will one Master-Signifier simply replace another Master-Signifier? Is one ideology simply as empty as the other? In such a vision of emptiness, is the narrator, confronting the illusion of what he once believed to be truth, then left with nothingness—a Nietzschean nihilism or the existential absurd? This is a key question that Nguyen explores at the end of his novel.

For the commandant, such a vision of nothingness would be anathema. His vision of a reeducated communist world is seeped with a prescribed narrative of a nationalistic memory. The commandant insists that the narrator must remember his crimes against the Watchman and female communist agent, as well as mourn for their own communist heroes. The commandant makes it clear that, in the teleological arc of the confession, some bodies are worth mourning and others are not, some bodies are worth remembering and others are not. For the commandant, the narrator's responsibility for the deaths of Sonny and the crapulent major is inconsequential; for him their "pitiful lives" (357) are superfluous to his narrative and, thus, unremembered. Understanding that the commandant is a man with a monologic vision, Man warns the narrator: "You frighten him. You are nothing but a shadow standing at the mouth of his cave, some strange creature that sees things from two sides. People like you must be purged because you bear the contamination that can destroy the revolution's purity" (335). Despite his own disillusionment, Man, arguing that he is attempting to save the narrator "for [his] own good," authorizes the narrator's continued torture, forcing the narrator into a psychic breakdown and his ultimate epiphany: "It was me, screaming the one word that had dangled before me since the question was first asked—nothing—the answer that I could neither see nor hear until now—nothing!—the answer I screamed again and again and again—*nothing!*—because I was, at last, enlightened" (368).

In the final stage of his reeducation, the captain comprehends a double understanding of nothing and nothingness. And he does so as he realizes the significance of another allusion to nothing: Ho Chi Minh's "golden words NOTHING IS MORE PRECIOUS THAN INDEPENDENCE AND FREEDOM" (323). In his own way, the narrator has come to a point of intertextual enlightenment. The narrator ponders,

> What had I intuited at last? Namely this: while nothing is more precious than independence and freedom, *nothing is also more precious than independence and freedom.* These two slogans are almost the same, but not quite. 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. . . . Besides a man with no face, only a man of two minds could get this joke, about how a revolution for independence and freedom could make those things *worth less than nothing.* (375–76)

Nguyen invokes both hegemonic and subversive forms of memory as he demonstrates the oscillating play of signification in the palimpsestic layers of Ho Chi Minh's famous words.

Echoing Bhabha's mantra of "almost the same, but not quite" (86), the narrator is invoking a slippage in meaning, one that references mimicry's "sign of a double articulation"—the regulation and appropriation of the other, as well as the other's challenge to "'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers." This time, however, the hegemonic power is attributed to the revolutionary individual rather than the colonial power. The first slogan is Ho Chi Minh's iconic words, and, while this choice of allusions would certainly win the commandant's ideological approval, he would be enraged by the narrator's paradoxical use of the phrase. The repetition of the line subverts the cultural memory and disciplinary power of Ho Chi Minh's words; the monologic has transformed into the dialogic. Moreover, the narrator asserts that the second slogan is a joke, one that subverts the meaning of the first catchphrase. After all, Ho Chi Minh's suit is empty, paralleling the empty rhetoric of the revolution. The narrator states, "I understood, at last, how our revolution had gone from being the vanguard of political change to the rearguard hoarding power. In this transformation, we were not unusual. Hadn't the French and Americans done exactly the same?" (376). In this intertextual rendering of Ho Chi Minh's maxim, we can see several palimpsestic layers, reminding us of the French and American ideals and failings embedded in the words "freedom" and "independence," as well as their colonial history with Vietnam. It is important for the narrator to excavate this archaeological site of memory and also to acknowledge the asymmetrical nature of the industrialization of memory. While he determines that people like the singularly-minded commandant are dangerous people, he recognizes that the commandant was created out of a long line of historical and ideological moments of violence shared by multiple nation states: "They are the ones who say nothing with great piousness, who ask everyone else to die for nothing, who revere nothing. Such a man could not tolerate someone who laughed at nothing" (371).

It is important to note that, although the narrator's epiphany of nothing might seem to lead to an existential revelation that life is absurd and that the individual needs to embark on a Sartrean quest for an authentic existence, Nguyen is anxious to clarify that this is not the case. Comparing his work to *Invisible Man,* Nguyen states in an interview with Paul Tran that "Ellison's book traces a similar narrative of someone coming into consciousness, becoming a revolutionary, and then, discovering the revolution has failed, turns back to individualism" ("Viet Thanh Nguyen"). But he disagrees with Ellison's ending, for "the individual who is nothing might still be more

important than the failure of the revolution. And so the individual continues to assert the importance of being revolutionary and practicing solidarity." Ellison, who after all was named after Ralph Waldo Emerson, contends that in *Invisible Man,* "The protagonist's story is his social bequest. And I'll tell you something else: The bequest is hopeful" (qtd. in Rosenblatt). The story expresses "an appeal for self-reliance" for "nothing is possible means anything is possible." In contrast, Nguyen has observed, "I did not want to write a narrative of communist disillusionment resulting in liberal individualism. . . . What would a post-communist politics that is not also a pro-capitalist politics look like?" ("Remembering and Forgetting").

Rather than turn toward the existential void or an Emersonian individualism, Nguyen's narrator transforms his narrative voice from an "I" into a "we." His plural self, signaling a collective identity, affirms that "yes, despite everything, in the face of *nothing*—we still consider ourselves revolutionary. . . . We lie in wait for the right moment and the just cause" (382). In addition, the narrator's plural self also affirms his sympathy for others, including the undesirables and the marginalized like himself. Rather than getting trapped in a cycle of unjust memories, the narrator finds he must forgive his friend and torturer, Man, as well as himself for his inhumanity. Nguyen is aware that sympathy and forgiveness do not guarantee a just society or just memory. As Man notes, "Sympathy alone would never persuade the rich to share willingly and the powerful to give up power voluntarily. Revolution made those impossible things happen" (327). But, in *Nothing Ever Dies,* Nguyen also asks us to imagine a just forgetting, a "future where nations at war seem absurd" (286).

At the end of the novel, the narrator is once more a stateless refugee. The narrator and the other refugees are set adrift between borders, but not without purpose. He carries his confession—in the form of the novel—with him. Nguyen's work is itself a novel of refugee memories and enacts its own form of just memory. As such, Nguyen affirms the multiple functions of personal, social, and metafictional border crossings, including the complex journey of "coming into consciousness" ("Viet Thanh Nguyen") between the individual self and revolutionary self, between the "I" as self and the "we" as a collective other, between the writer and the reader, between the reader and character. He asks us to explore the imaginative possibilities of assuming the role of the sympathizer—with its suggestive significations of complicity, understanding, and social practice. What is the nature of a just, pluralistic memory that refuses to valorize powerful nationalistic discourses that perpetuate the destruction of others

and resist narratives that reify the other—even if it is to imagine the other as a perpetrator of social injustice? What would it mean to have a just forgetting of the past that may lead to a future imaginary that transcends the war narratives of nations? Ultimately, affirming the potential resistant power of art, Nguyen yearns for a world where individuals see themselves not as citizens of nations, perpetuating entrapping discourses of memory, but as "citizens of the imagination" (*Nothing* 286), providing disrupting alternatives possible in a resistant refugee memory, a site of "belonging without borders" ("No Excuses").

Notes

1. Žižek begins *Tarrying with the Negative* with a description of the 1989 overthrow of the Romanian communist government, in which the rebels cut out the red star, leaving a hole in middle of the flag. During this passing moment, they shed one Master-Signifier before replacing it with another, and Žižek notes that the rebels experience this temporary moment as open and unbounded by hegemonic power. In her description of stateless memory, Hirsch suggests that stateless memory operates as a "suspension or hiatus of time and space," offering an alternative site to official monumental space. Distinguishing stateless memory from migrant memory, Hirsch argues that the prior mnemonic form highlights a pause, a suspension of mobility associated with the migrant, who is headed to a particular destination.
2. Nguyen has insisted that he be called a refugee rather than an immigrant. He has stated that refugee experiences are regarded differently from immigrant experiences: "Refugees are unwanted where they come from. They're unwanted where they go to. They're a different legal category. They're a different category of feeling in terms of how the refugees experience themselves" ("Call Me a Refugee").
3. Scholars who have discussed Nguyen's use of allusions include Sarah Chihaya and Caroline Rody. Chihaya highlights the slippages between "multiple impersonations" (369)—of both genres and identities—in Nguyen's novel, linking Nguyen's slippery references to his concerns with empathy and "an ethics of recognition." Rody specifically notes how Nguyen uses interethnic allusions "on the level of intertextual cathexis, through which the text gains interesting dimensions of longing and affiliation" (398). However, I will focus on allusions aligned with more hegemonic traditions, which the narrator must critique.
4. Although the commandant would approve of the use of Ho Chi Minh's well-known saying, he would be appalled at the narrator's ironic use of

the phrase, which is also based on the espoused ideals—freedom and independence—of Vietnam's former colonizers: France and the US. Significantly, "nothing" is also the first word of the title of Nguyen's critical text, *Nothing Ever Dies*, an allusion to the power of rememories of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. As Nguyen notes in *Nothing Ever Dies*, "A rememory is a memory that inflicts physical and psychic blows; it is a sense that the past has not vanished but is solid as a house, present in all its trauma and malevolence" (65).

5. Here, I reference Kristeva's concept of intertextuality, which she first coined in her work "Word, Dialogue and Novel," because she emphasizes that the text is a dynamic site that highlights relational processes. I argue that one of the key moments of knowledge for the narrator is a moment of intertextual enlightenment.

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