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INSTITUTO DE LETRAS  
DEPARTAMENTO DE LETRAS MODERNAS

FLAVIA RENATA MACHADO PAIANI

**THE AUTHOR, THE NARRATOR: RETELLING THE END OF THE “VIETNAM  
WAR” IN VIET THANH NGUYEN’S *THE SYMPATHIZER***

Porto Alegre

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\* \* \*

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“And when you have no more joy to give –  
very well – you still have your pain”.

Lou-Andreas Salomé

## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze the roles of the author and the narrator in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015), especially in retelling the end of the "Vietnam War" forty years after the "Fall of Saigon". For this purpose, this paper will briefly examine some of Nguyen's academic works and speeches related to the topic (and to his life) and analyze his debut novel by considering the places of the author and the narrator. The conclusion is that the narrator, as part of the world represented in the literary work, and the author, as part of the "real world" that participates in the literary work's creation, are present in *The Sympathizer*. That is, the narrator does not obliterate the author but it is his voice - the narrator's voice - that stands out in the novel.

**Keywords:** Viet Thanh Nguyen. *The Sympathizer*. Vietnam War. Author. Narrator.

## RESUMO

Este trabalho tem como objetivo analisar os papéis do autor e do narrador em *O Simpatizante* (2015), de Viet Thanh Nguyen, especialmente na releitura do fim da “Guerra do Vietnã” quarenta anos após a “Queda de Saigon”. Para tanto, este estudo examinará brevemente alguns dos trabalhos e discursos acadêmicos de Nguyen relacionados ao tema (e à sua vida), bem como analisará seu romance de estreia considerando os lugares do autor e do narrador. A conclusão é que o narrador, como parte do mundo representado na obra literária, e o autor, como parte do “mundo real” que participa da criação da obra literária, estão presentes em *O Simpatizante*. Ou seja, o narrador não oblitera o autor, mas é a sua voz - a voz do narrador - que se destaca no romance.

**Palavras-chave:** Viet Thanh Nguyen. *O Simpatizante*. Guerra do Vietnã. Autor. Narrador.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

As a historian with a taste for literature, I have been interested in working with the relationship between literature and history for a while. Contemporary novels with historical and autobiographical backgrounds seem appealing to me because they intertwine with memory and passion to a certain extent. This is why Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015) is the object of analysis here: a Vietnamese American writer who was born in Vietnam and raised in the United States writes about the end of the "Vietnam War"<sup>1</sup> from the perspective of a fictional character - a Communist double agent who relocates to the United States after the "Fall of Saigon"<sup>2</sup> (1975).

Historically the capture of the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon by North Vietnamese forces represents the end of the war in Vietnam. Fictionally the event is the starting point of Nguyen's debut novel, structured as a first-person narrative. The plot revolves around the unnamed narrator, who remains acting as a spy for the North Vietnamese during his stay in the United States. However, in an attempt to protect his anticommunist friend, he takes part in a failed mission in Thailand to "reconquer" Vietnam and is arrested. That is why his narrative is addressed to his "dear Commandant", for it is a confession to his superiors.

Although at first glance we should not mix up the author and the narrator, we should take a brief look at Nguyen's life and thoughts as a way to question Roland Barthes's essay, *The Death of the Author* (1968). The French philosopher states that "writing begins" when "the author enters his own death" and criticizes the fact that "the *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us" (BARTHES, 1977, p. 142-143, italics original). This is precisely the point I would like to talk about in this paper: how does *The Sympathizer* deal with the limits between the author and the narrator in the retelling of the end of the "Vietnam War"?

To answer this question, I will divide this paper into two chapters: *The Life of the Author* will focus on Nguyen's speeches on his work and its relationship with his life, whereas *The Death of the Author?* will focus on the novel itself. For this purpose, I will be quoting other academic works which delved into Nguyen's novel from different perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Viet Thanh Nguyen (2006, p. 33), the so-called "Vietnam War" (the Second Indochina War) is a misnomer because Vietnam is "a noun and not an adjective, a country and not a war". He prefers to write the name of the country separately - Viet Nam - as the Vietnamese do.

<sup>2</sup> From the North Vietnamese point of view, the event is known as the "Liberation of Saigon".

Sousa e Silva Gaspar (2018) examined how Nguyen questioned the American tactic of controlling the narrative of the war by writing his version of the American war in Vietnam. On the other hand, Feldman (2020) analyzed Nguyen's narrative strategies as a way to create the conditions for an aesthetic faith - that is, his narrative strategies would have allowed the possibility for the world of the text and the lived world to permeate each other. I am thus prone to analyze *The Sympathizer* from those different intersections as an attempt to answer the question that drives this paper.

## 2 THE LIFE OF THE AUTHOR

*“All wars are fought twice: the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory”.*

(NGUYEN, 2019, 23:50-24:03)

When Paul Ricoeur examines Halbwachs’s and Yerushalmi’s works, he notices that “whether personal or collective, memory refers back by definition to the past that continues to be living by virtue of the transmission from generation to generation” (RICOEUR, 2004, p. 398). This is a point that emerges from Viet Thanh Nguyen’s statements and is as important as “forgetting” - especially, in the sense of “erasure”. The problematic of forgetting intervenes in the problematic of memory, “namely, [in] the dialectic of presence and absence at the heart of the representation of the past, to which is added the feeling of distance proper to memories” (RICOEUR, 2004, p. 414).

The dialect of absence and presence traverses the stories about the American war in Vietnam, also known as the Second Indochina War. The term Indochina refers to the Southeast Asian region between India and China that comprises three former French colonial territories: Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam (see **Appendix A**). The U.S. involvement in the region dates back to the First Indochina War (1946-1954) in which the Truman administration supported and subsidized France to oppose the independence of Vietnam, proclaimed by the Nationalist (and Communist) leader Ho Chi Minh in 1945.

Ho Chi Minh was the founder of the Vietminh (1941), which stands for League for the Independence of Vietnam. The movement had popular support and fought France’s attempts to reimpose colonial rule. Eventually, the Vietminh defeated the French, but could not prevent the provisional division of Vietnam as a result of the Geneva Accords of 1954.

Either way, elections were supposed to be held in 1956 to decide the governing authority of the country. However, Ngo Dinh Diem, backed by the United States, opposed national elections and declared South Vietnam a sovereign state. As a result, North Vietnam, backed by the “Vietcong”<sup>3</sup> in the south, fought for the reunification of the country in the Second Indochina War (1954-1975), which also meant fighting the U.S. intervention in the

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<sup>3</sup> According to Boyle & Lim (2016), “the National Liberation Front (NLF) is formed in southern Viet Nam by the Communist Party of northern Viet Nam [in 1960]. The NLF’s military arm is referred to derogatorily as ‘Viet Cong’”.

country.<sup>4</sup> Although the Paris Peace Accords led to the U.S. military troops' withdrawal in 1973, the agreement was supposed to guarantee that the south had the right to self-determination.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the war only came to an end on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1975 after the surrender of the capital of South Vietnam. In turn, Viet Thanh Nguyen's life story as a refugee was just about to begin.

## 2.1 On Memory, Identity, and Otherness

Viet Thanh Nguyen was born in Ban Me Thuot, in the Central Highlands of Vietnam in 1971 and fled to the United States with his family after the "Fall of Saigon" in 1975. He attended Catholic schools during his childhood and teenage years before attending the University of California. Then he received his Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Ethnic Studies from Berkeley in 1992 and a Ph.D. in English from Berkeley in 1997. Today Nguyen is "a University Professor, the Aerol Arnold Chair of English, and a Professor of English, American Studies and Ethnicity, and Comparative Literature" at the University of Southern California (USC).<sup>6</sup> He is the author of a short story collection, *The Refugees* (2017), and a couple of novels, *The Sympathizer* (2015) and *The Committed* (2021). His debut novel won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2016.

The short bio above says little (or nothing) about Nguyen - neither about "the author *outside* the work as a human being living his own biographical life" nor about the author "as the creator of the work itself" (BAKHTIN, 1981, p. 254, italics original). If we want to know more about the author "as a human being", we should take a look at a journal article published in 2006. By analyzing how the works of art of some Asian American artists may be seen (or not) as an aesthetic and ethical commitment to the dead, Professor Nguyen talks about his own family and remembrances of childhood. His Catholic parents did not practice "ancestor worship", but "they kept photographs of their fathers and their mothers on the mantel, as was the custom, and prayed to God before them every evening" (NGUYEN, 2006, p. 7).

By talking about his parents' customs as refugees in the United States, Nguyen sheds light on the shared experiences of those who were separated from their families and

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<sup>4</sup> ROWE, John Carlos & BERG, Rick (Ed.). *The Vietnam War and American Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> SOUSA E SILVA GASPARGAS, Raquel María de. *De-Americanizing Viet Nam: The Representation of the "Vietnam War" in Viet Thanh Nguyen's The Sympathizer*. Trabajo fin de grado (UDC.FIL). Inglés: estudios lingüísticos y literarios. Coruña: Facultade de Filoloxía/Universidade da Coruña, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> For further information, go to the author's website: <https://vietnguyen.info/author-viet-thanh-nguyen>

homeland as a result of civil and revolutionary wars. For Nguyen, the problem of “mourning the dead” and “remembering the missing” is endemic to refugees. It is precisely a problem for storytellers/artists of/from minorities, smaller in terms of number and power, that may be “tempted to see themselves as victims” or depict themselves as such (NGUYEN, 2006, p. 9-10). The idea of the minority possessing power is usually overlooked in minority discourse. Vietnamese refugees may not see Vietnam as “a minor imperial power”, exerting influence over other Southeast Asian countries and overshadowing the presence of other refugees in the West (NGUYEN, 2006, p. 33).

The *real* problem here has a lot to do with the desires of those who remember<sup>7</sup> - how they remember, for what purposes, and in whose interest (NGUYEN, 2006, p. 15). Beyond the roles of victim and victimizer, Nguyen is concerned about how competing versions of memory retell the story of refugees.

As Vietnamese American sociologist Yen Le Espiritu points out, one of these versions is told by the U.S. media: “(...) in the absence of a ‘liberated’ Vietnam and people, (...) the media have deployed the refugee figure, the purported grateful beneficiary of U.S. style freedom, to remake the Vietnam War into a just and successful war” (ESPIRITU, 2006, p. 329). Brenda M. Boyle and Jeehyun Lim (2016) agree with Espiritu to a certain extent: “(...) the Vietnam syndrome tainted the American image of itself as a rescuer of the Third World and made it difficult for the South Vietnamese who resettled in the United States to narrate their experiences other than through scripts such as the narrative of the grateful refugee”.

Being a refugee himself, Nguyen has told on several occasions about his experience of watching *Apocalypse Now* (1979) at a very young age and how he had seen himself as an American until the moment in which American soldiers started to kill Vietnamese civilians in the movie. “At that moment I felt myself split in two, faced with an impossible choice: was I the American doing the killing or was I the Vietnamese being killed?” (NGUYEN, 2019, 23:07-23:29).

In asking so, Nguyen presents an ethical issue that has aesthetic consequences when both minority and majority discourses fail to narrate stories (memories, counter-memories) about the war in Vietnam:

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<sup>7</sup> Nguyen poses a question similar to Paul Ricoeur’s when the French philosopher asks: “Is not memory fundamentally reflexive, as the pronominal form which predominates in French would lead us to believe: to remember (*se souvenir de*) something is at the same time to remember oneself (*se souvenir de soi*)?” However, Ricoeur concludes that “what” one remembers usually precedes “who” remembers (RICOEUR, 2004, p. 3).

From an ethical point of view, the horizon of our vision must be expansive, precisely because minorities have rarely been recognized, except as objects of horror or fascination. The ethical recognition of an other thus has a direct consequence for the aesthetics of narrative, through characterization. Faulty, inadequate, or stereotypical characterization rarely makes for enduring narratives in literature, drama, or film, outside of their deliberate deployment in satire, not only because they are flaws in technique but also because they are failures to recognize and hence represent the other (NGUYEN, 2006, p. 21).

May the other - the Vietnamese in majority discourse, for instance - be seen as the product of a certain kind of Orientalism<sup>8</sup> - that is, as the product of “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient”? Even though Edward Said (1979, p. 3) was mostly thinking about European culture (mainly British and French culture), I think it is not unlikely that American culture may have “gained strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self”, but in a different way.

Firstly, there was a major difference in how Americans and Europeans conceived the Orient. Back in the 1970s, Americans were most likely to associate the Orient with China and Japan (the Far East), whereas the French and the British associated it with the “place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies”, i.e., India and the Bible lands (SAID, 1979, p. 1-4). Secondly, the American domination over the “Orient” was not as old as the British and French domination, thus not constituting a long tradition of power and hegemony. Thirdly, it appears that the fight against Communism may have influenced the way Americans produced *their* idea of the Orient.

When Stephen Vlastos (1991) analyzes revisionist Vietnam history in the United States, he focuses on the similarities between their rhetorical strategy and Cold War discourse. From this perspective, the Soviet Union, China, and other Communist movements were seen as totalitarian and hostile, whereas the United States was seen as the defender of the Free World. When it comes to Vietnam, the Vietminh was seen as the aggressor who “provoked American intervention” (VLASTOS, 1991, p. 57). In saying so, revisionists marginalize “the historical experience of America’s Vietnam ‘enemy’: the millions of Vietnamese North and South who opposed U.S. intervention”. That is, those Vietnamese have

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<sup>8</sup> Orientalism has different - yet interdependent - meanings: the academic one, regarded as “a system of knowledge about the Orient”, in which anyone who researches the “Orient” is an Orientalist; the ontological and epistemological one, in which a distinction between “the Orient” and “the Occident” is made; a discursive one, in which European culture was able to produce the Orient “politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively” in the late 18th century (SAID, 1979, p. 3-6).

become “the ‘absent presence’ in revisionist history” inasmuch as they are depicted “as abstract agents of ‘external aggression’ and expansionist international Communism” (VLASTOS, 1991, p. 54).

As a result, I think it is suitable to quote Nguyen when he argues that the war in Vietnam was the war in which “American soldiers killing Vietnamese made no distinction between the Vietnamese in particular and Asians in general; nor did these soldiers notice the difference between Asians in Asia and Asians in America” (NGUYEN, 2006, p. 14). Asians have been seen without distinction as Asians (or “Orientals” back then) precisely because they are not seen beyond their alleged Asianness. One of the consequences may have been the forgettability of Asian Americans in American culture - “seen as foreigners or aliens who have not been [t]here for long, and who do not speak the language well” (NGUYEN, 2006, p. 13). In this regard, Nguyen brings up both the problematic of forgetting and the problematic of memory by using a specific word, “disremembering”:

(...) I can testify that being remembered as the other is a dismembering experience, what we can call a ‘disremembering’. Disremembering is not simply the failure to remember. Disremembering is the unethical and paradoxical mode of forgetting at the same time as remembering, or from the perspective of the other who is disremembered, of being simultaneously seen and not seen (NGUYEN, 2017, 21:45-22:25).<sup>9</sup>

The historical experience of Asian Americans in American culture is Nguyen’s experience too: their concurrent visibility and invisibility as a minority have shaped their identity and their power struggle (to be seen, to be heard). Being Asian American in the late 1960s - a new term back then - was to bear “a domestic racial identity and a revolutionary one” in the context of the civil rights movement, the Black Power movement, and the antiwar movement (NGUYEN, 2006, p. 14). If “those fights were one and the same”, so was the Asian Americans’ fight. However, their perceived foreignness in American culture would hardly change in the following decades, as well as their claim of belongingness to “America”.

## 2.2 On Writing

Following Mallarmé’s assumptions, Roland Barthes states that language itself is a substitute for “me” - that is, “it is language which speaks, not the author” (BARTHES, 1977,

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<sup>9</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen reads an excerpt from his book, *Nothing Ever Dies* - Vietnam and the Memory of War (2016).

p. 143). He argues that when a fact is narrated, it turns into the practice of the symbol itself, occurring the disconnection between the author and the writing. Besides, a text is “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash”, so “the claim to decipher a text” is futile when “everything is to be *disentangled*” and the meaning is to be posited ceaselessly (BARTHES, 1977, p. 146-147, italics original). In saying so, Barthes tries to restore the place of the reader as someone who gives a text its unity. For him, it is not the origin of a text (the author), but its destination (the reader) that matters, in a way that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (BARTHES, 1977. p. 148).

Now let me see if it is possible to understand Nguyen’s speeches and writings from Barthes’s point of view. On the one hand, Nguyen’s writings are at the crossroads of other writings and are not entangled with an ultimate meaning precisely because of the place of the reader. On the other hand, even though he expresses himself using words “only explainable through other words”, he is associated with his texts in a way that *transcends* the moment of the enunciation. In this regard, Barthes moves in another direction by distinguishing the Author (as a “belief”) and the modern scriptor.

The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*. (...) In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing (...); there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now* (BARTHES, 1977, p. 145, italics original).

Barthes’s assertiveness has a lot to do with his linguistic point of view of the writing as enunciation. If language does not know a “person”, but a “subject”, the author cannot be the person who exceeds the writing - they are “never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*” (BARTHES, 1977, p. 145, italics original). In short, Barthes is not interested in the process of writing (that implies an author preceding the writing) for the only time that exists in this case is the time of the enunciation.

However, another possibility of working with the idea of an author is to take Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of the chronotope into consideration. By chronotope, the Russian philosopher means “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p. 84). In saying so, he believes that the author is someone who lives their life outside their work, but the author is also the creator of the work



whose chronotope is different from the chronotope of their life. But what are the time-space relationships in Nguyen's novel? What role does the idea of an author-creator play in his work? These are questions that will be examined in the next chapter.

### **3 THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR?**

I grew up feeling that in my parents' very Vietnamese household, I was an American spying on these Vietnamese people. And when I was outside in the American world, I was a Vietnamese spying on these Americans (NGUYEN, 2017, 17:50-18:04).

The fact that Nguyen's childhood in the United States was traversed by the feeling of non-belongingness to "America" would apparently echo in his literary work as a double non-belongingness: neither Vietnamese nor American. His debut novel follows a spy walking through a similar path. As the author-creator, Nguyen could have represented "the world either from the point of view of the hero participating in the represented event, or from the point of view of a narrator, or from that of an assumed author" (BAKHTIN, 1981, p. 256). Nevertheless, he preferred to represent the temporal-spatial world and its events from the first-person perspective of a non-omniscient narrator, in which the character - a "man of two minds" - reinforces his place in the novel: neither a loyal communist agent nor a real anticommunist officer. The way the author-creator represents this world "as if he had seen and observed them himself" is played by the narrator who apparently "eliminates" the author in order to see, observe, and narrate the story from his particular point of view, disentangled from the author's.

#### **3.1 The Writing: Retelling the End of the American War in Vietnam**

Saigon was about to fall. Da Nang and Nha Trang had already fallen. The Americans had fled. The president had fled too. The General, his family, and his staff wanted to flee as well. But "the atmosphere was strangely quiet in Saigon, most of the Saigonese citizenry behaving like people in a scuppered marriage, willing to cling gamely to each other and drown so long as nobody declared the adulterous truth" (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 16).

The truth is that "the novel, despite its subject of war, is not action-packed. A handful of violent events are connected by long stretches of aimless waiting, drifting, preparing, or dialoging" (FELDMAN, 2020, p. 26). Besides, the protagonist-narrator presents some of the story's main characters and tells his perception of the "Fall of Saigon" mostly in Chapter 1, which interests me the most for now.

Although the protagonist is a communist spy, thus contributing to the “fall” of the capital of South Vietnam, he narrates the event in an isolation cell, remembering the time he was undercover. “I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds” (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 9). That is why the unnamed narrator switches words when he writes his confession to his “dear Commandant”. The “Fall of Saigon” can also be seen as the “Liberation of Saigon”, depending on one’s side of the war, for instance.

As a double agent, the narrator was supposed not only to be acquainted with the American ways of thinking, but also to think *as* Americans do (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 21). For this reason, he had spent some years in the United States, being “part scholarship student, part spy-in-training, the lone representative of our people at a sylvan little college called Occidental, its motto *Occidens Proximus Orienti*” (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 20, italics original). He managed to speak English as well as an American, read American history and literature, smoked pot, and lost his virginity “in the dreamy, sun-besotted world of Southern California” (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 20). In short, he became an expert on American culture, so that he could properly discuss “baseball standings, the awfulness of Jane Fonda, or the merits of the Rolling Stones versus the Beatles” (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 15). The narrator’s irony fits the character’s “two minds”. That is, despite the narrator’s confinement, he can still make jokes about the first time he was an undercover agent in “America”.

Back in Vietnam, the protagonist was supposed to spy on the General, working for him as his “junior officer of intelligence”. The General assigns communist readings to the narrator, for he does not read Marx, Lenin, or Mao. However, he reads the notes written by his “junior officer” in order to be acquainted with the enemy’s thinking. He is described as “a thin man of excellent posture”, “a veteran campaigner”, “an epicurean and a Christian”, who believed in “the French and the Americans”.

The narrator does not denominate himself as Christian, but he confesses that his father had been a Catholic priest. Also, his father was French and his mother was Vietnamese. In his own words, “my mother was native, my father was foreign, and strangers and acquaintances had enjoyed reminding me of this ever since my childhood, spitting on me and calling me bastard, although sometimes, for variety, they called me bastard before they spit on me” (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 29).

Despite being undercover, the narrator’s identification with Claude, “our most trusted American friend”, has something to do with his origins. The CIA man was “one-sixteenth *Negro*” and this sole fact would apparently explain why he could “dance cha-cha like one of

us” (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 12-13). Also, when the narrator mentions his long-time friends, Man and Bon, he emphasizes their admiration for Alexandre Dumas, who was a great novelist and a *quadroon*<sup>10</sup> (in the narrator’s own words). On the one hand, their self-denomination as “the Three Musketeers” and their motto “all for one and one for all” was a sort of self-identification with Dumas’s work. On the other hand, the French writer himself was a model for them, “colonized by the same French who despised him for his ancestry” (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 25).

The narrator’s words may sound offensive nowadays. Firstly, the Merriam-Webster dictionary states that “Negro” is a dated, often offensive word.<sup>11</sup> Thus the narrator could have referred to Claude’s ancestry as Black African, for example. Nonetheless, as the narrator is not a 21st-century man, he may have spoken as a man of his time, for he is writing his confession in the 1970s. Secondly, the reference to the percentage of Black ancestry has no ironic connotations when the narrator refers to Dumas as a “quadroon”. Be it offensive or not back in the 1970s, the apparent impact of the word and its alleged meaning in French society seems to reinforce the narrator’s bond with the “other”. That is, the “other in relation to myself, to *me*” is also the other we can discover in ourselves, which means that we are not “radically alien to whatever is not us” (TODOROV, 1984, p. 3).

Something similar happens when the narrator talks about Bon.<sup>12</sup> He sees Man as his fellow conspirator (i.e, a communist), but Bon is seen differently. He “was a genuine patriot, a republican who had volunteered to fight, having hated the communists ever since the local cadre encouraged his father, the village chief, to kneel in the village square and make his confession before forcefully inserting a bullet behind his ear” (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 24). Here the narrator puts himself in his friend’s shoes by stressing his fellows’ violence. However, it seems not only an attempt to explain Bon’s anticommunism but to associate Bon’s worldview and experience with genuine patriotism.

In another scene, the narrator is accompanied by his friends, drinking beer and listening to Trinh Cong Son, followed by the Beatles, at a bar full of young soldiers and marines. When he looks around, he realizes that he was surrounded by his enemies, “and yet

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<sup>10</sup> Today it is a dated, yet offensive word that refers to “a person with one-quarter Black ancestry”. “Quadroon.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/quadroon>. Accessed 3 Oct. 2022.

<sup>11</sup> “Negro.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/Dictionary/Negro>. Accessed 3 Oct. 2022.

<sup>12</sup> The narrator’s loyalty to Bon is explicit in another scene when the narrator is arrested and sent to a reeducation camp after the General’s mission in Thailand failed to “reconquer” Vietnam. His attempt at protecting his friend Bon, one of the conspirators, was useless but pointed to how meaningful friendship is to the protagonist (above ideologies and political struggles).

they were also brothers-in-arms. Their beloved city was about to fall, but mine was soon to be liberated” (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 26). In this regard, I agree with Feldman (2020, p. 27) when he points out that “the narrator's ability to ‘sympathize’ with his enemies and his Westernized self, though, makes him conflicted”. As a result, “he has lost the liberty to form a self because for both sides, he is neither a participant in culture nor a citizen (...)” (FELDMAN, 2020, p. 27). In a way, the narrator’s full awareness of his non-belongingness is not taken for granted in the novel, but it is something that keeps torturing him at different moments.

When he and his friends were about to leave the beer garden, the narrator is harassed by three drunken Vietnamese marines who called him “bastard”. The fact that they did not pay respect to him as their superior (he was a captain, they were lieutenants) shows how they interpreted the situation. One of them manifested his disappointment on how “majors and colonels and generals” had been favored and “saved their own asses”. In turn, the marines stayed in the country to cover the retreat, which reinforced the idea that their job was “to be dead”. The tenser the situation gets between the narrator and the drunken men, the tenser the situation gets outside the beer garden. It is when they hear the first of the bombs, apparently addressed to the airport. “Five-hundred-pound bombs. (...) Then it seemed as if every gun in the city went off from downtown to the airport, light weaponry going *clack-clack-clack* and heavy weaponry going *chug-chug-chug*, flurries of orange tracers swirling into the sky” (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 27). Despite the bomb attacks, the narrator was still ruminating on the insults, as if calling him “bastard” could affect him more than the bombs.

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As it has been shown, the narrator tells the events from a very particular point of view. In a way, his racial/ethnic roots play an important role in how he presents some characters who took part in those events. He tends to stress their mixed-race origins, which makes room for empathy and self-identification. From Claude, the American friend, to Alexandre Dumas, who is not a character in the novel but a literary bond of his friendship with Man and Bon, the protagonist overlooks the differences in his racial/ethnic ancestry and focuses on the similarities. That is, it does not matter if his ancestors were not Black (as Claude’s were) as long as their skills, tastes, life story, or racial exclusion were similar.

For this reason, being called “bastard”<sup>13</sup> affects the narrator significantly. Although the word has not always had offensive connotations, it sounded like an insult in the novel, which is emphasized in Chapter 2. Being seen as the “illegitimate son” of his own country impelled him to get closer to Man, Bon, and even the General, for they “never sneered about my muddled heritage” (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 31).

This “muddled heritage” is shown in his narrative through moments of recollection and ambiguous worldview. On the one hand, his Catholic foreign father and Vietnamese mother have been mostly present in his affective memories, especially his mother - in the pho<sup>14</sup> he eats that reminds him of his mother’s pho, in the chocolate-covered biscuits that his father used to give him every Christmas. On the other hand, the motto *Occidens Proximus Orienti* was not only his college’s motto in “America” but apparently an extension of his worldview. Not only had the narrator enjoyed American music and other similar goods, but also posed questions that seemed to reproduce the alleged South Vietnamese feelings<sup>15</sup> towards the Americans in those days. “(...) the Americans - our friends, our benefactors, our protectors - had spurned our request to send more money. And what would we have done with that money? Buy the ammunition, gas, and spare parts for the weapons, planes, and tanks the same Americans had bestowed on us for free” (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 12).

The fact that the protagonist tells the story of the “Fall of Saigon” by helping the South Vietnamese military elite flee to the United States reinforces his position as a “man of two faces” and the perception of “fall”, not “liberation”. That is, although he was undercover at the time, what he puts into evidence is the plan to escape in Chapter 1. The mention of the sequence of attacks before “the gloomiest April” - Ban Me Thuot had been sacked, Da Nang and Nha Trang had fallen - is not praise for the North Vietnamese forces. It is rather a criticism of the war. As civilians fight to escape on barges and boats, the narrator feels embarrassingly moved by them. “Perhaps it was not correct, politically speaking, for me to feel sympathy for them, but my mother would have been one of them if she were alive. She

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<sup>13</sup> For further information regarding the definition of “bastard”, click on <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bastard>.

<sup>14</sup> In a Proustian epiphany, the narrator explains how this soup was made in his household: “(...) Madame’s pho had dissolved me and transported me back in time to my mother’s household, where she concocted the broth from the gray beef bones given by my father from his leftovers. Usually we ate the pho without the thin slices of beef that were its protein, we being too poor to afford the meat itself (...). Madame’s pho harkened back to the warmth of my mother’s kitchen, which was probably not as warm as it was in my memories, but never mind - I had to stop periodically to savor not only my soup but the marrow of my memories” (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 156).

<sup>15</sup> Nguyen’s novel seems to echo the alleged South Vietnamese feeling that Vietnamese American scholars, who are mostly South Vietnamese refugees, write about: “The fall of Sài Gòn led them [the South Vietnamese] to place the blame on the United States for abandoning South Vietnam, on the Soviet Union for supplying the communists, and on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) for violating the Paris Peace Accords” (HOANG, 2016, p. 61).

was a poor person, I was her poor child, and no one asks poor people if they want war” (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 12).

The memory of his mother moves the narrator towards empathy and implicitly places North Vietnam as the aggressor that is not empathetic. Yet he does not explicitly blame the communists for this. Not only was he a communist himself, but he was writing a confession to his “dear Commandant” at the moment he recalls the events, which “obscures the distinction between truthful testimony and coerced confession” (XIANG, 2018, p. 424). But he also seems to blame the United States for the “abandonment” of South Vietnam, especially when he reproduces other characters’ speeches that reinforce the idea of “abandonment”.

In a conversation with the General, the protagonist observes that his superior was “querulous about how the Americans had promised us salvation from communism if we only did as we were told. They started this war, and now that they’re tired of it, they’ve sold us out” (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 20). At the same time, the General seems to realize that there is no one to blame but themselves since “we were foolish enough to think they [*the Americans*] would keep their word. Now there’s nowhere to go but America” (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 20). The General’s awareness of the Americans’ role in the war seems to reiterate their position as aggressors since they were the ones who started the war.

Sousa e Silva Gaspar (2018) seeks “the true meaning of the war” in her analysis of the narrator’s confession. She believes that what ultimately underlies his confession is the understanding of “truth”. That is, the narrator tries to understand the meaning of Ho Chi Minh’s slogan, realizing that “while nothing is more precious than independence and freedom, nothing is also more precious than independence and freedom!” (NGUYEN, 2015, p. 414). The slogan may be interpreted as if “in a war, both sides are fighting for freedom and independence, except each one uses the methods that best fit their perspectives”. For Sousa e Silva Gaspar, this is the difference between Nguyen’s novel and other American novels whose subject is the “Vietnam War”: in *The Sympathizer*, “the war was fought for independence and freedom, because nothing was more important than that; however, France, America, North Viet Nam, they all started their wars with the intention to free Viet Nam (...)” (SOUSA E SILVA GASPARGAR, 2018, p. 19). But it seems to me that if “nothing is also more precious than independence and freedom”, the fight for “independence and freedom” may disregard any legal, moral, or ethical obstacles to conquering what is meant to be precious. In a way, the slogan may point to “the nothingness of those values” (SOUSA E SILVA GASPARGAR, 2018, p. 19).

Either way, I would like to shed light on some issues mentioned in the previous paragraph. Firstly, the government of France did not start the war with “the intention to free Vietnam”. The French were colonizers, not leaders of a national liberation movement in Indochina. Secondly, the United States government did not start the war “with the intention to free Vietnam” either. Americans’ struggle with communism in Asia had nothing to do with Asians’ welfare, but with a historical context (Cold War) that took America’s economic interests worldwide into consideration. Thirdly, the absence of South Vietnam as (a region of) a country that took an active part in the war disregards its peculiar fight for “independence and freedom”. If North Vietnam’s efforts were to free Vietnam from France’s attempts at recolonization and America’s intervention in their country, South Vietnam’s efforts were to free their country from the North Vietnamese influence. According to Vietnamese American historian Tuan Hoang,

Because of the ascent of the Viet Minh during the First Indochina War [1946-1954], an anticommunist ideology circulated in selected circles but did not blossom until after the Geneva Accords [1956]. Not long after the installment of Ngo Dinh Diem as prime minister, anticommunism found a venue for expression in South Vietnam. The first five years of Ngo Dinh Diem’s rule saw a flourishing of anticommunist publications from Sai Gon and other southern cities (...) Many [publications] featured writings by fervent anticommunist émigrés from North Vietnam, and criticized three aspects of communism: revolutionary violence and repression, class struggle, and thought control. The fact that most of these anticommunist authors were not Catholic highlighted a significant change from the leading role that Catholics played in the 1920s and 1930s (HOANG, 2016, p. 56).

Here Hoang is not primarily talking about Ngo Dinh Diem’s anticommunist government in South Vietnam, but the anticommunist émigrés from North Vietnam. The writer Duyệt Anh is an example of a northern émigré in 1954 who was anticommunist but also anti-American and anti-Cold War (HOANG, 2016, p. 61-62). That is, Hoang wants to stress that not every anticommunist in Vietnam was pro-America. In turn, Vlastos (1991, p. 55-56) stresses the social configuration of those who supported France at the time, “Catholics, the Southern religious sects, and the wealthy, particularly large landlords”, and those who joined the Vietminh, i.e., “the majority of Vietnamese”. In a way, Vlastos argues that Vietminh’s vast popular base allowed them to defeat France’s army and led to the emergence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), i.e., North Vietnam as “Vietnam’s first post-colonial state”.



The aftermath of the First Indochina War represented a time of “nation-building competition between Sài Gòn [South Vietnam] and Hà Nội [North Vietnam]”, in a way that “each side claimed the mantle of nationalism and sought to portray the other side as falsely or illegitimately nationalistic” (HOANG, 2016, p. 57). However, the perception of the end of the Second Indochina War would impact the anticommunist South Vietnamese differently this time. For them, it was “the pain of national loss” (HOANG, 2016, p. 67).

In other words, anticommunist émigrés from North Vietnam who moved to South Vietnam (and are mentioned here as “South Vietnamese” due to their residence, not necessarily their birth) would feel “the pain of national loss” at the end of the Second Indochina War. They would flee to other countries, especially the United States, and become “refugees”. Their attempts to create a sovereign state by separating the south from the north would fail, whereas North Vietnam would succeed by ignoring the Paris Peace Accords and reunifying both regions.

On the one hand, Espiritu argues that those refugees have maintained the anticommunist narrative since then, “in part because it is the primary language with which Vietnamese refugees, as objects of US rescue fantasies, could tell their history and be understood from within the US social and political landscape” (ESPIRITU, 2014, p. 96). On the other hand, Hoang argues that “the arrest and incarceration of South Vietnamese military officers and government officials” in reeducation camps would impact diasporic anticommunism significantly because “incarceration affected the most politically prominent and influential groups of the Sài Gòn regime” (HOANG, 2016, p. 67).

The author was a 4-year-old kid when he became a refugee in the United States, while the narrator was a 30-year-old man. Nguyen did not witness what his narrator witnessed in Los Angeles or Saigon, but it is not unlikely that the author has heard similar stories in his life and recreated some of them in his narrative. Although it seems evident that the chronotopes of the author and the narrator are different, “the work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p. 254). We will discuss it in the following topic, taking the roles of the author and the narrator into account.

### 3.2 The Author, the Narrator

When talking about the functions of medieval figures, such as the rogue, the clown, and the fool, Bakhtin states that they have a feature, which is also a privilege, that is, “the right to be ‘other’ in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available; none of these categories quite suits them, they see the underside and the falseness of every situation” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p. 159). In this regard, Nguyen’s narrator is a spy whose alleged privilege is “the right to be ‘other’ in this world” but whose main disadvantage is paradoxically the ability to “see the underside” - or rather “both sides” - in a way that he may sympathize with the alleged enemy. Feldman observes that the narrator “is not the fully exteriorized rogue or fool” in the novel - on the contrary, he is “in a later ‘stage in the transformation of the rogue’”, who is introduced as a major protagonist and “the bearer of the authorial point of view” (FELDMAN, 2020, p. 25-26).

I do not mean here that the author prevails as the “authorial” point of view in the novel but I shall not disregard that he might be “wearing” a mask in the Bakhtinian sense.<sup>16</sup> That is, “the novelist stands in need of some essential formal and generic mask that could serve to define the position from which he views life, as well as the position from which he makes that life public” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p. 161).

In contrast, Norman Friedman (1955), in summarizing Mark Schorer’s thoughts, states that the devices of point of view allow the author to “disentangle his own prejudices and predispositions from those of his characters”. He goes beyond by stressing that artistic “truth” can successfully create “the illusion of reality” by limiting the presence of the author’s own voice (FRIEDMAN, 1955, p. 1164-1167). Among those devices, Friedman mentions the witness-narrator and the protagonist-narrator.

The witness-narrator (“I” as witness) addresses the reader in the first person, is involved in the action, and is acquainted with the most important characters, but is not the main character of the story. Hence the witness-narrator has enough mobility to get in touch with other sources of information. On the other hand, the protagonist-narrator (“I” as protagonist) does not have enough mobility or a variety of sources of information since they are involved in the action itself. In short, the protagonist-narrator “is limited almost entirely

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<sup>16</sup> Like the aforementioned figures, Nguyen’s spy is “laughed at by others” (similar to bullying in his case) and himself (he can still make jokes about himself and others while incarcerated). Unlike these figures, Nguyen’s spy rejects the function of “externalizing things”, that is, he may be a man of “life’s perpetual spy” but not a man of life’s reflector (BAKHTIN, 1981, p. 159-161).

to his[her] own thoughts, feelings, and perceptions”, and so is the story they tell (FRIEDMAN, 1955, p. 1174).

Either way, both modes (“I” as witness and “I” as protagonist) eliminate the author because they are limited to the narrator’s mind, according to Friedman (1955). Even when the narrator gets in touch with other characters, what prevails is the narrator’s perception of them, not the characters themselves. For example, as Nguyen’s narrator is not omniscient, other conflicts that might have been developed in the story are not depicted, for the narrator only narrates the events he takes part in. Even when Nguyen’s narrator narrates the events he has heard of, such as Bon’s parents’ fate, he is the one who empathizes with his friend’s loss. It is thus the narrator’s feeling that is put into evidence in the novel.

Unlike historical accounts, which allegedly “insist on a homology between the sequence of their own telling [and] the form they impose to create a coherent explanation in the form of a narrative”, novels dramatize “the gaps that always exist between what is told and the telling of it (...)” (HOLQUIST, 1981, p. xxviii). The history of the “Vietnam War” is part of the author’s life story, as well as his experience as a Vietnamese refugee in the United States. But once his “imaginative capability of perceiving history” takes a literary form, it does not sound like a “literary testimony”<sup>17</sup> (MARGARONIS, 2008; RICHARDSON, 2016). That is, although there are victims, perpetrators, and bystanders in his novel, the voice that stands out is the narrator’s voice who is concurrently the victim, the perpetrator, and the bystander. The fact that the author was not an eyewitness to most of the events in the novel does not illegitimize his unnamed narrator. Here the search for authenticity as a consequence of the historical and traumatic magnitude of the events is replaced by affective memories, values, and experiences that the narrator deals with throughout his life, in a way that the novel also dramatizes the gaps that exist in fictional representations.

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<sup>17</sup> “(...) the literature of testimony is also often imbued with an authority based on the classical idea of authenticity: the person speaking is the person who saw these things” (MARGARONIS, 2008, p. 139).

#### 4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

How does *The Sympathizer* deal with the limits between the author and the narrator in the retelling of the end of the “Vietnam War”? I have tried to answer this question since the very beginning by stressing the differences and similarities between the author and the narrator. That is, I focused on the author’s life, as well as his academic works in the first part of the study (“The Life of the Author”), then I worked on Nguyen’s novel in an attempt to think about the author-creator in the second part of the study (“The Death of the Author?”).

I played with Barthes’s words as a way to organize the paper. I also used Bakhtin’s categories in order to analyze and understand the aforementioned limits. The author-creator is different from the author, for the latter is the one who lives his/her biographical life outside his/her work while the former is the creator of the work itself. However, the literary work has a specific device that allows the separation of the author from their work: the point of view. In this regard, the protagonist-narrator is one of the devices that enables the “death” (“elimination”, “disappearance”) of the author (although not necessarily in a Barthesian way).

Despite some similarities, the narrator’s experiences, tastes, and skills do not coincide with the author’s. Actually, because their chronotopes are different, the novel benefits from both worlds, in a way that they can permeate and enrich each other. So if one wants to understand how the events related to the American war in Vietnam are told in the novel, one should understand the role of the narrator’s racial/ethnic background, for instance. In turn, if one wants to understand the author’s place in American culture (including the depictions of the “Vietnam War” he grew up with), one should understand the place of Asian Americans, especially the Vietnamese, in the United States.

My conclusion is that the narrator, as part of the world represented in the literary work, and the author, as part of the “real world” that participates in the literary work’s creation, are present in *The Sympathizer*. That is, the narrator does not obliterate the author but it is his voice - the narrator’s voice - that stands out in the novel.

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APPENDIX A



Vietnam (1954-1976).

Image available at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Viet-Minh#/media/1/628312/244106> on Sep. 12th, 2022.