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戰爭與帝國殘骸的再現：

閱讀阮清越《同情者》及《已提交》

Representing Remnants of War and Empire:

Reading Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*

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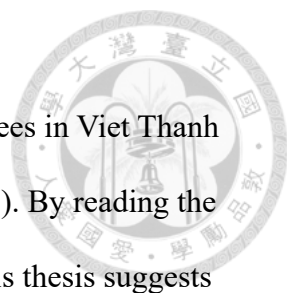
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Abstract



This thesis investigates the representation of war, empire, and refugees in Viet Thanh Nguyen's novels *The Sympathizer* (2015) and *The Committed* (2021). By reading the two novels together through the lens of Critical Refugee Studies, this thesis suggests that Nguyen disrupts both the spatial and temporal boundaries of the Vietnam War while uncovering the war's linkages to other histories and atrocities. In this way, this thesis attempts to show that these novels offer an opportunity to reconsider popular yet distorted versions of war and empire. Chapter One reviews the main scholarship in the field of Critical Refugee Studies, studies on refugees from Indochina in France, and selected key studies about and book reviews of Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*. A discussion of the key term representation is also included in this chapter. Chapter Two examines *The Sympathizer* by focusing on Nguyen's tracing of the refugees' routes and perspectives from Vietnam to the U.S. after the Vietnam War. This chapter also examines the question of who controls the means of representation. Chapter Three explores how *The Committed* further expands the spatial and temporal boundaries of the Vietnam War by following the refugee protagonist to France. This chapter also discusses the representation of French colonial empire and other atrocities such as those committed by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Chapter Four concludes the thesis by summarizing its findings and by foregrounding recent film projects about the Indochinese refugee camp in Penghu.

Keywords: Critical Refugee Studies, Vietnam War, French Empire, refugees, representation, Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, *The Committed*

摘要



本論文旨在藉由批判性難民研究（Critical Refugee Studies）的理論視角，探討美國越南裔作家阮清越（Viet Thanh Nguyen）之兩本小說《同情者》（2015）及《已提交》（2021）對於戰爭、帝國及難民的「再現」（representation）。藉此理論，本論文認為阮清越透過該兩本小說，試圖打破越戰時間與空間上傳統的認知框架，並揭露越戰與其他歷史、暴行之間的連結，亦即小說本身即提供對主流、被曲解的戰爭與帝國形象重新省思的機會。論文第一章介紹批判性難民研究中具代表性的學術研究、移居法國中南半島難民的相關文獻以及目前討論《同情者》、《已提交》兩本作品的文章及書評，並解釋所謂「再現」的定義。第二章探討《同情者》一書，以難民旁白的視角與路徑，呈現越戰過後從越南流離至美國的經歷，並討論戰爭的「再現」是由誰掌控。第三章探討《已提交》一書，如何以接續《同情者》，更進一步擴大越戰的時間與空間至法國，並討論法蘭西殖民帝國以及柬埔寨紅色高棉屠殺等暴力的「再現」。第四章總結本論文研究發現，以及延伸討論近期有關澎湖難民營之相關作品。

關鍵字：批判性難民研究、越戰、法蘭西殖民帝國、難民、再現、阮清越、
《同情者》、《已提交》

Chapter One

Introduction



I. Introduction

Celebrating “Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month,” the UN Refugee Agency of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) recently published an online article written by Sarah Schafer titled “In Their Own Words” (2021).¹ The article opens by addressing the Asian hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in 2020, and its influences on the Asian refugee communities in the U.S. The article incorporates interviews of four refugees from various backgrounds, sharing their routes to the U.S., as well as their thoughts on topics of “assimilation and discrimination, memory and forgetting, individual identity and community cohesion, and the complexities of discovering--and asserting--what it means to be American.” Emphasizing the refugees’ side of the narrative in the article’s title, Schafer shares their perspectives towards the U.S. and their struggles, while pairing their words with large pictures of smiling refugees in the background. The first of the four interviewees, Sang Rem, states her appreciation for the U.S. along with hopes for an inclusive country. While the other refugees’ responses briefly touch upon issues including their struggles, hardships, and experiences with discrimination in the U.S., Schafer closes with a humanitarian focus, mentioning support provided by the U.S., which “opened its doors to the Vietnamese escaping the war and the conflicts that followed,” as well as acknowledging the “anti-piracy and rescue-at-sea missions” launched by the UN Refugee Agency. Although the article claims to be written from

¹ Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, celebrated in May, aims to appreciate the contribution of Asian American and Pacific Islander communities in the U.S.

the perspective of refugees, these narratives are nevertheless discernably framed in a way that portrays the refugees as what Yên Lê Espiritu calls “objects of rescue” (*Body Counts* 10).

“In Their Own Words” serves as one of many examples of current, popular, and official framings of refugee situations: Helpless and grateful refugees, aided and welcomed by the U.S., are now ostensibly living in better conditions. In contrast, The Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CRSC) places such issues in a different light.² Instead of focusing on refugees as “objects of rescue,” and emphasizing U.S. aid, this online intellectual space sheds light on the violence of war and militarism that brought about the conditions and existence of refugees. Their website aims to “re-conceptualize refugee lifeworlds . . . as a site of social, political, and historical critiques that, when carefully traced, make transparent processes of colonization, war, and displacement” (CRSC). This website also provides links to multiple forms of knowledge production such as literary texts, news, and artworks, that aims to critique and educate readers about the situation of refugees. Furthermore, a section titled “critical vocabularies” lists helpful keywords and definitions that “are grounded in refugee histories and experiences” (CRSC).

Juxtaposing these two online sources on the issue of refugees illuminates the contrasting attitudes and perspectives that their forms of knowledge production offer. In brief, The Critical Refugee Studies Collective seeks to unravel the violence of war and empire that can be glossed over by popular narratives such as the article provided by the UN Refugee Agency. In other words, narratives that emphasize forms of support and acts of rescue provided by first-world countries can render the causes of

² The Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CRSC) is an online intellectual space dedicated to Critical Refugee Studies and funded by the University of California Office of the President (UCOP); see <https://criticalrefugeestudies.com/>.

the refugees' exile in a broader historical context invisible. Such problematic narratives can be further uncovered across a variety of texts including social commentary, film, and creative writing. Within the realm of fiction, the issue of the representation and framing of refugees is vividly portrayed, explored, and critiqued in Viet Thanh Nguyen's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Sympathizer* (2015) and its sequel *The Committed* (2021).

In this M.A. thesis, I focus on Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* as my primary texts to examine the issues of representation and the framings of war, empire, and refugees. Published in 2015, *The Sympathizer* follows the perspective of the unnamed Vietnamese protagonist, who is also a communist spy, along his route from Vietnam to the U.S. as a refugee after the Vietnam War. The protagonist is described as being able to "see any issue from both sides" (1). Through his exile, the protagonist, struggling to settle down in a new country, encounters multiple U.S. representations and framings of the war, refugees, and Asians. Through this process, he expresses his feelings and critiques towards forms of knowledge production as a Vietnamese in the U.S. One of the most prominent projects of representation depicted in the novel is his assisting a famous Auteur in putting together a Hollywood film called *The Hamlet*, which appears to be hinting at Francis Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now* (1979/2001). Simply, *The Hamlet* is a movie that is about the Vietnam War, depicted from the viewpoint of the U.S. Spotting problems in the film script, the protagonist makes attempts to provide suggestions, hoping to fix the representation of the Vietnamese people in the film. He eventually fails and is set on a trip with his friend, Bon, to Laos to prepare for their attack against the communists in Vietnam. Ultimately captured during his mission, the protagonist is forced to undergo torture and reeducation in Vietnam. *The Sympathizer* closes with his release and leaving

Vietnam with Bon on a boat, rendering him a refugee yet again.

The Committed, published in 2021, picks up the story of the unnamed protagonist being among the boat people, in this text arriving in Jakarta before heading to France. The novel, like *The Sympathizer*, is written from the protagonist's viewpoint as he encounters and critiques problematic framings and identifies traces of the French empire. Simply, the journey of the protagonist, through the people and incidents he encounters, threads Nguyen's critiques and discussions of refugees, empire, and the less glamorous sides of France. The unnamed protagonist enters France with the alias Vo Danh, which means "anonymous," and is referred to throughout the novel by Boss's gang as "crazy bastard" due to his mental instability resulting from his traumatizing reeducation in Vietnam. Throughout his time in France, he finds ways to survive, makes a living by selling drugs to French intellectuals, and engages in conversations with his mentally disturbed self and ghosts whose lives he is responsible for. The protagonist, again, encounters different forms of representation of refugees and, in this case, the French empire. These representations appear in forms such as newspapers, the performance organized by the Vietnamese Union, and the blackmail of powerful, rich white men masked in an exotic themed party. Besides encountering such representations, the protagonist also meets Algerian, Laotian, and Cambodian characters, noting how their routes intersect through broader histories of French colonialism.

In this thesis, I argue that Nguyen follows Espiritu's approach in *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (2014) of tracing the refugee's routes to the U.S. In *The Sympathizer*, Nguyen traces the routes of the Vietnamese protagonist from Vietnam to Guam, to the continental U.S., and Laos and Vietnam before becoming a refugee for a second time. In doing so, Nguyen disrupts the spatial

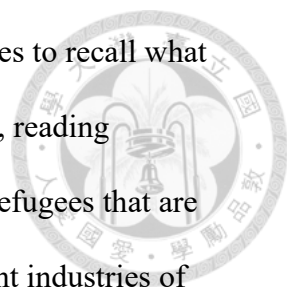
boundaries in depictions of the Vietnam War, and includes other postcolonial nations such as Laos and Cambodia that are also a part of the war but often excluded in popular narratives about it. In addition to expanding the geography of the Vietnam War, Nguyen's tracing of the narrator's life in the U.S. also unfolds the struggles and racism that these refugees encounter in their new lives. Furthermore, I will also discuss the connection between the two novels as Nguyen's *The Committed* takes the protagonist to France. In this second novel, Nguyen further disrupts spatial boundaries to depict the possible routes of refugees. Moreover, by bringing the protagonist to France, Nguyen disrupts both the spatial and temporal boundaries of the war and Vietnam's history of being colonized by the French. The routes of the refugees bring different places and incidents together to disclose the violence of war and empire, how these histories are connected, and how they may be erased. Placing the two novels side by side, my thesis seeks to better understand the representation of war and empire in Nguyen's work alongside the impact of other atrocities such as those committed by the horrific Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia.

Following Nguyen's important discussion of representation and industries of memory in *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (2016), I believe that both *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* serve as criticisms of popular and dominant narratives and representations created and distributed by first-world countries including the U.S. and France. These representations and narratives become alternative histories in people's minds. Nguyen argues that "[u]ntil those whose memories are left out not only speak up for themselves but also seize control of the means of memory making, there will be no transformation in memory" (*Nothing* 108). That is to say, it is not only important to consider what is represented but also who controls such representation--a concern that threads both of Nguyen's novels. In

“Representation,” W. J. T. Mitchell addresses the intertwined issues of aesthetic representation and political representation. While the former means “things that ‘stand for’ other things,” the latter is described as “persons who ‘act for’ other persons” (11). Such differentiation in political and aesthetic representation echoes what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” refers to as “*vertreten*” and “*darstellen*”--or respectively “a proxy and a portrait” (276). In *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (1990), Spivak further reminds us that “[u]nless the complicity between these two things [*Vertretung* and *Darstellung*] is kept in mind, there can be a great deal of political harm” (109).³ Likewise, Mitchell argues that “representation, even purely ‘aesthetic’ representation of fictional persons and events, can never be completely divorced from political and ideological questions” (15). Political representation, in this case, raises questions including, but not limited to: Who creates and controls such representation? How does knowledge production impact the retelling of stories of war and empire, and refugees? Following Nguyen’s discussion of the concept of “asymmetric memory” (*Nothing* 157), which centers on the unequal scale of the industries of memory, I would like to examine the different forms of knowledge production and industries of memory as they are depicted in the novels, and how they unfold the power relations embedded in the representation of refugees.

Having considered the issue of who holds the means of representation, I also seek to better understand what is being represented in Nguyen’s novels and how such retellings of stories of war, empire, and refugees bring about additional problems. These representations of the past are associated with Nguyen’s aim to create what he

³ Spivak in both “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* capitalizes the words *Vertretung* and *Darstellung*, while *vertreten* and *darstellen* are often used in lowercase.



calls a “just memory” (*Nothing* 12) or a memory that “constantly tries to recall what might be forgotten, accidentally or deliberately” (*Nothing* 17). Thus, reading Nguyen’s novels, I also examine the atrocities and struggles of the refugees that are glossed over or even erased through those representations in different industries of memory. I contend that to display possibilities of what may be erased by the popular representations displayed in the novels, Nguyen uses a refugee’s perspective to foreground the challenges refugees encounter in their exile to juxtapose the positive and humanitarian images presented by the U.S. and France. In other words, Nguyen’s novels display two versions of the world and memories of war and empire: the world represented in narratives or industries of memory, and the world that is experienced by the protagonist, a sometimes sinister character who is far removed from the stereotypical image of refugees as helpless victims. For Nguyen, to achieve just memory, it is necessary to see both sides as complex, by “remember[ing] our humanity and inhumanity, and . . . remember[ing] the humanity and inhumanity of others as well” (*Nothing* 97). I conclude in the final chapter of my thesis that Nguyen’s novels are a part of the growing number of forms of knowledge production in the realm of Critical Refugee Studies that attempt to create just memory by linking together and acknowledging atrocities that are often left on the periphery.

II. Literature Review

A. Critical Refugee Studies

In this section, I will review some of the main scholarship in the emerging field of Critical Refugee Studies. Though the field begins with a focus on Vietnamese refugees, this section also examines works focusing on refugees from other Southeast Asian countries, such as Cambodia and Laos, that adopt similar yet also distinct

concepts to rethink refugees, war, and the atrocities that thread Nguyen's novels. Critical Refugee Studies positions refugees as the subjects of, and not simply objects of, academic inquiry. This field hopes to "change traditional paradigms of doing research on refugees and challenge the current discourse on refugees within the academy and beyond it" (CRSC). Understanding Critical Refugee Studies is important for this research as it helps to perceive war, empire, and refugees from a different angle. The study aims to uncover the hidden violence of war and empire, which is also a key theme in Nguyen's novels, *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*.

In *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (2014), Yên Lê Espiritu exposes and examines the militarized and colonial nature of the U.S. military that is made "un-visible" beneath humanitarian missions and narratives of the Vietnam War (25). Finding the social-science definitions of "refugee," often portrayed "as a *problem* to be solved," to be problematic (5), Espiritu brings forth the concept and field of Critical Refugee Studies which "conceptualizes the 'refugee' as a critical idea but also as a social actor whose life, when traced, illuminates the interconnections of colonization, war, and global social change" (11). Moreover, she uses the method of critical juxtaposition, "the bringing together of seemingly different and disconnected events, communities, histories, and spaces in order to illuminate what would otherwise not be visible about the contours, contents, and afterlives of war and empire" (21). In brief, she aims to unveil erased historical narratives by disrupting both the spatial and temporal boundaries of histories of war and empire. Placing refugees as "a site of social critique" (3), Espiritu holds the U.S. accountable for the atrocities of the war and challenges U.S. rescue operations and popular productions of "assimilation narratives [that] construct Vietnamese as the 'good refugee' who enthusiastically and uncritically embrace and live the 'American

Dream” (6), which “erases the U.S. role in inducing the refugee crisis in the first place” (48). As a whole, Espiritu’s *Body Counts* aims to unsettle the dominant U.S. narratives of the Vietnam War and its refugees by exposing the atrocities caused by the U.S. military and positioning refugees as subjects rather than “objects of rescue” (10).

Following Espiritu’s discussion of Critical Refugee Studies, but also taking into account the atrocities caused by Vietnam in the Vietnam War, Viet Thanh Nguyen in *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (2016) explores how a war should be remembered and represented. To achieve a complex form of war memory, Nguyen proposes the notion of “just memory,” which “strives both to remember one’s own and others, . . . drawing attention to the life cycle of memories and their industrial production, how they are fashioned and forgotten, how they evolve and change” (12). Highlighting the connection between art productions and memory, Nguyen also argues that “[b]oth memory and forgetting are subject not only to the fabrications of art but also to the commodification of industry, which seeks to capture and domesticate art” (13). To contest “selective memory” (51)--which often appears in public memories and can “service power” as well as exclude other participants and victims of the Vietnam War (15)--a way to attain just memory is through what Nguyen calls the “ethics of recognition,” which “demands that we remember our humanity and inhumanity, and that we remember the humanity and inhumanity of others as well” (97). Thus, Nguyen argues that victims should not be “treated as objects of pity” (68), but as subjects. Another issue of war memory is connected to the industry of memory. Nguyen contends that if the marginalized cannot “seize control of the means of memory, there will be no transformation in memory” (108). He stresses that “[j]ust memory is only possible when the weak, the poor, the

marginalized, the different, and the demonized, or their advocates can influence or even seize the industry of memory” (18). By drawing attention to the industry of memory that shapes people’s memory of the past, Nguyen underlines the asymmetrical nature of the industry of memory in Vietnam and the U.S., including unequal screen time (169), and how people are more exposed to American narratives despite the results of the war (170). Finally, the author underlines that just memory also proceeds from “the ability to imagine a world where no one will be exiled” (283), or the end to forced relocation. All in all, Nguyen stresses that we “reconsider how we remember that event, who controls the industries of memory, and who abuses memory” (17). *Nothing Ever Dies* thereby sheds light on the pluralistic nature of past wars and atrocities and how they are represented in sites of memory.

In *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (2012), Mimi Thi Nguyen contends that while the gift of freedom can be seen as a promise, it “also discloses for us liberalism’s innovations of empire . . . [as] it may obscures those other powers that, through its giving, conceive and shape life” (2). Following Espiritu’s notion of Critical Refugee Studies, she critiques liberal empire by examining its link to refugees. More specifically, she uses refugees and their passages as a critical lens to disclose “the assemblages and powers through which liberal empire orders the world” (5), as well as the “normalizing of race war on behalf of freedom” (29). Regarding liberal empire, Nguyen states that “[t]he coupling of empire with the assumed scenes of liberalism . . . often goes by the name *the gift of freedom*, a world-shaping concept describing struggles aimed at freeing people from unenlightened forms of social organization through fields of power and violence” (3). Hence, Nguyen examines how the gratitude of refugees to the U.S. for their freedom, for instance, can be “a problem of imperial remains” (3). In her discussion of freedom and its mechanism in social

relations, she draws theories from scholars such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, stating that “[t]hese critical genealogies inform this book’s naming the gift of freedom as the workings of liberalism in its imperial form” (6). As a whole, the task of Nguyen’s book is to “understand the concept of the gift as a medium and a metaphor for grasping continuities between operations of liberalism’s powers” (22). In sum, Nguyen in *The Gift of Freedom* seeks to analyze the issues of liberalism and what is glossed over in certain understandings of it (25).

Aside from focusing on the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees, Critical Refugee Studies has also been adopted by scholars to focus on refugees from countries such as Laos and Cambodia, which are also linked through similar if also nonidentical histories. In *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora* (2015), Khatharya Um draws attention to the genocidal atrocities initiated by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia following French colonial rule and U.S. imperial incursions. Opposing narratives that focus on “the ruins of antiquity” in the country (2), which “reinforces this view of the Khmer Rouge period as historically compartmentalized” (3), Um emphasizes the need for contextualization, or “understand[ing] genocidal violence . . . [by] locating it within the sociohistorical context that produced it” (3). For instance, she points to the “different imperial formations” that influenced and shaped the communist forces of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia (4). The author also underscores the problem that “[the] density of refugee experiences . . . is often obscured in the dominant discourse about Cambodian Americans” (9). Aspiring to unravel the complexity of histories and atrocities, Um places theories “in conversation with survivor narratives” by making space for individual accounts through interviews with Cambodian refugees (10). All in all, Um’s work attempts to disrupt the temporal, spatial, and academic boundaries

that often leave Cambodian history and its victims at “the periphery of American public and intellectual life” (16). *From the Land of the Shadows* seeks not only to give voice but also to recenter Cambodia’s violent pasts and its refugees, which are commonly “veiled from the public gaze” (18).

In *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies* (2021), Ma Vang scrutinizes the erased history of the Hmong refugees, a history that is entangled with the U.S. secret war in Laos. Similar to other scholars working with Critical Refugee Studies, Vang considers refugees as “an epistemological subject that unravels the secrecy embedded in nation, race, and U.S. liberal militarized empire” (7). Underlining the “epistemic violence that erased the Hmong refugees’ and soldiers’ stories” (6), her work seeks to “disrupt the U.S. narratives that it was never present in Laos” (25). Moreover, following Mimi Nguyen’s discussion of imperial time, Vang argues that “Hmong presence in place and time disrupts the not-yet modern spatiotemporal representation that Hmong people . . . are placeless and timeless subjects even before they became refugees” (18). Through “resist[ing] positivist research on the Hmong people,” the incomplete understanding of the Hmong history becomes, for Vang, “a methodology for how to write about things we do not know . . . because they are missing from the ‘official’ archives or delayed in transmission” (24). Vang’s book “charts refugee epistemology and Hmong presence through the refugee archive as a perspective for doing historical analysis to understand the past in relation to the present” (25). She also mentions examples of redacted documents from President John F. Kennedy’s National Security Council Files to display how “state documents present an epistemological dilemma for knowledge production” (59). Apart from incomplete archives and redacted documents, the author also examines records such as maps, lists of Hmong refugees’ occupations, and the “CIA ID card” to

display “alternative sites outside of the archive where different forms of documentation and Hmong refugee histories might emerge” (91). Overall, Vang in *History on the Run* concentrates on the lack of knowledge production surrounding the history of the Hmong people and refugees, and making meaning of the absent.

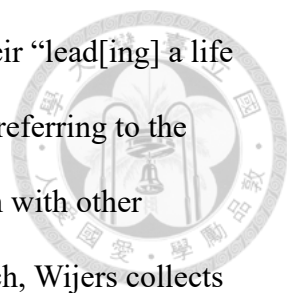
B. Refugees from Indochina in France

The critical discussions listed above mainly concentrate on refugees in the U.S. In terms of the discourse on refugees from Indochina in France, Gisèle L. Bousquet in *Behind the Bamboo Hedge: The Impact of Homeland Politics in the Parisian Vietnamese Community* (1991) draws attention to the homeland political activities, factions, and social dynamics among Vietnamese immigrants and refugees in France. Bousquet explains that her project “is an attempt to understand the significance of politics for the Parisian Vietnamese and their community” (16), and an attempt to challenge the “French ethnocentric view of Vietnamese politics and of homeland politics among immigrants” (15). Accordingly, she emphasizes her approach of “understanding their [Vietnamese] community from their own perspective” (15). Bousquet focuses on the two contesting Vietnamese political communities: the pro-Hanoi faction and the anticommunist faction (5). Throughout her discussion, she details the historical background and conflicts that led to the presence of Vietnamese immigrants and refugees in France, their politics, and how their community, compared with other ethnic groups, is received in France (74). She concludes that her study “focuses on factionalism in order to unravel conflicts among the various Vietnamese political organizations and to reveal the political intrigues brewing behind the bamboo hedge of the Vietnamese community” (173). She also contends that her study “enhances our understanding of the process that keeps such migrant groups in

overseas communities from being any more than partially integrated into the host country” (176). As a whole, Bousquet’s book sheds light on the dynamics of Vietnamese communities and politics from “an insider’s” perspective (10).

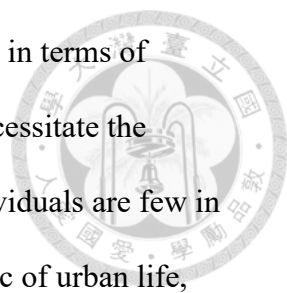
Another work that discusses the Vietnamese refugees in France is Nghia M. Vo’s *The Vietnamese Boat People, 1954 and 1975-1992* (2006). In this book, Vo reviews the history of the boat people’s diaspora and notes the countries that are involved in the refugees’ exodus. Yet, contrary to the perspectives of Critical Refugee Studies, the text elicits a singular and humanitarian attitude towards the countries that accepted refugees. For instance, the author opens the section discussing the refugees in France by stating that “[t]hese countries [including the U.S., France, Canada, and Australia] opened their arms and welcomed the refugees like no other places in the world” (173). Moreover, Vo stresses the numbers of refugees that found refuge in France, and notes that “[i]n late 1979, UNHRC presented its Nansen Medal to President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing in recognition of the French open arm policy toward asylum seekers for the last 50 years” (178). The section concludes with the line: “Overall, France took in more than 120,000 refugees, more than any other European country” (179). In terms of the Vietnamese refugee’s “struggle and achievement” in France (188), Vo, similar to Bousquet, touches upon the contested politics among Vietnamese immigrants and refugees. The author closes the section by praising the Vietnamese’s economic and educational success as they achieve their “French dream” (190). In sum, while *The Vietnamese Boat People, 1954 and 1975-1992* provides some valuable information about the history of the boat people, the text may also serve as an example of the kind of narrative that Critical Refugee Studies aims to question and critique.

Focusing on Cambodian refugees in France, G.D.M. Wijers in “The Reception of Cambodian Refugees in France” (2011) sheds light on possible explanations to the



“relative ‘invisibility’” of Cambodian communities in France, or their “lead[ing] a life ‘in the shadows’ of French society” (239). By invisibility, Wijers is referring to the “relatively smooth inclusion” of Cambodian refugees in comparison with other immigrant groups (253). Using a biographical ethnographic approach, Wijers collects his data from interviews with Cambodian refugees in Lyon and Paris. The author claims to take into consideration “the historical, social and political context of their arrival in France” to understand their “priority treatment” (250). For instance, Wijers mentions that “[h]elped by a language course at the CPH [*Centre Provisoire d’Hébergement*, a temporary shelter] and the centre’s mediation in finding a job, the Cambodian refugees were also helped by the positive effects of media exposure of their ordeal under the Khmer Rouge” (246). In addition, Wijers attributes the relative invisibility of Cambodian refugees to the “close bonds” between Cambodia and France from “the hundreds of Cambodians benefiting from educational cooperation agreements and studying in France [after decolonization in 1953]” (249). In brief, Wijers argues that Cambodian refugees’ “relatively smooth inclusion, and invisibility” in France comes from “the relative familiarity of this group [Cambodians] through a shared history and abundant media exposure” (253). As a whole, Wijers seems to present an optimistic attitude towards the integration of Cambodians in France. While Wijers’ article sheds light on Cambodian refugee’s unique diasporic experiences in France, it nevertheless overlooks the violence of the French empire.

Focusing on Hmong refugees in France, Khou Xiong in “Hmong in France: Assimilation and Adaptation” (2004) delves into topics of “the integration process, the generation gap, and changes in traditional cultural practices over time” (3), through interviews with 20 Hmong individuals living in France. Xiong draws attention to why “[t]he Hmong in France relative to their United States counterparts have been obliged



to let go of many cultural practices and traditions” (3). For instance, in terms of funeral traditions, Xiong states that “[m]any Hmong ceremonies necessitate the existence of elders who know the oral traditions” (3), but these individuals are few in number. Moreover, the author observes that “obstacles, characteristic of urban life, prevent the Hmong from practicing fully their culture” (3). Another source of cultural loss that Xiong introduces are the reactions from both parents and Hmong youth towards language loss. Xiong mentions that “usage of Hmong was shameful for the youth” and that “[s]peaking Hmong [was] considered ‘backwards’” (4). The article closes with the author’s conclusion that the Hmong people are “culturally integrated, [but] socially cut off” (5). Overall, Xiong’s article sheds light on some of the struggles, with an emphasis on the Hmong people’s loss of culture in their diaspora. Although Xiong’s study does not seem to follow the approach of Critical Refugee Studies--it was published at an earlier moment in 2004--this article still provides insights on the ongoing issues haunting not only the Hmong refugees, but also their offspring, in France.

C. Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*

In this section, I will examine selected key studies and book reviews that respond to Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*. Regarding existing critical discussions of *The Sympathizer*, scholars have approached this novel with various critical attitudes that support the central theme of Nguyen’s attempt to create a “just memory” (*Nothing* 12) of the Vietnam War. Critical discussions of *The Committed* are currently found in book reviews that center on Nguyen’s critique of colonialism.

Situating *The Sympathizer* within the field of Critical Refugee Studies, some

scholars draw attention to how Nguyen places refugees as subjects to tell the story. Yogita Goyal, for example, points out how Nguyen complicates the understanding of the Vietnam War by centering the refugee experience and “refus[ing] polarized narratives of Third World helpless victims and First World heroic saviors” (379). Following Espiritu’s usage of “body counts,” Sunny Xiang discusses the theme of representation in the novel and how Nguyen displays “the actually dead, the socially dead, and the representationally dead” (420). Resisting problematic narratives of the war, Ben Tran examines how Nguyen presents the war via complex viewpoints. He argues that Nguyen “uses the confession genre to combat the industrialized memory of the Vietnam War perpetuated by Hollywood films” (415). Moreover, Tran also contends that Nguyen’s use of the protagonist as a spy prevents the character from “wholly committing to either sides of the war” (415).

While some scholars focus on the positioning of the refugees depicted in *The Sympathizer*, others center on the relations between knowledge production, artistic representation, and war. In her article, Sylvia Shin Huey Chong examines the issues and influences of representation produced by a fictional Vietnam war film, *The Hamlet*. Chong believes that representations through film can be considered an act of war itself since the ideologies presented through it becomes a dangerous tool for position and power. Similarly, Sandra Kumamoto Stanley briefly analyzes the statues of the marines that are depicted in *The Sympathizer* as a form of commemoration. Stanley also displays several scholarly debates that are related to public memory and argues that the statelessness of the refugees can be regarded as a “potential site of resistance to official memories” (284). In addition, Yu-yen Liu contends that Nguyen’s reflecting critically on knowledge production about the Vietnam War can be used to discuss other wars in general. She examines the issue of war representations in *The*

Sympathizer with a focus on films and emphasizes how war narratives are “molded in different genres and voices, both literary and cinematic, both critical and ironic” (548).

Focusing on the exposure of atrocities presented in the novel, Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi in a 2020 article extends the criticism of the violence caused by the U.S. military to include the transpacific settler-colonial conditions and American military violence that can be observed in *The Sympathizer*. Drawing attention to Nguyen’s “two-way critique” in *The Sympathizer*, Anjali Prabhu believes that the novel serves as a double-edge attack on both the U.S. military and revolutionary communists (389). Moreover, Prabhu discusses how the narrator’s inaction in face of violence is also a form of violence. These articles, read together, regard the presence of war atrocities in the novel and who should be responsible for them.

Analyzing the narrative style and language in *The Sympathizer* as essential in understanding Nguyen’s attempt to write a just memory, Sarah Chihaya discusses how Nguyen depicts the notion of multiplicity through both the novel’s shift in between genres and also its narrator’s slides between “I” and “we” in his narration. More specifically, she contends that the complex nature of war violence and the positions of the refugees cannot be properly represented in a single genre. Likewise, Caroline Rody examines the intertextuality, interethnicity, and literary references in *The Sympathizer*. Like Chihaya, Rody mentions the author’s change of pronoun from “I” to “we” in the novel and its implied meanings. In terms of audience, Min Hyoung Song acknowledges the efforts Nguyen has made to break the norms of Asian American studies and reach a broader audience through his creative writings. Song uses Nguyen’s writings as an example to display the emerging trends of “creativity [and] experimentation” in the attempts to engage with the public (410). Finally, in a

2018 article in *PMLA*,⁴ Nguyen stresses his hope of writing something that can make the readers “feel something” (435). He also expresses his hope that the work of literary critics can reach beyond their specialties, not just to the public, but also to other academic disciplines.

Critical discussions of the 2021 novel *The Committed* so far mainly consist of book reviews as academic articles on this novel are currently still scarce. In “How Viet Thanh Nguyen Turns Fiction into Criticism,” Jonathan Dee foregrounds the theme of critiquing French colonialism in the novel. Dee introduces the novel’s protagonist as “the metaphorical and literal product of France’s own long and ugly history in Vietnam.” Moreover, discussing how both Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* focus on the issue of the opposing perspectives and narratives of the colonizer and the colonized, Dee argues that Nguyen “punctures the self-images of French and American colonizers.” Also focusing on the theme of colonialism, Junot Díaz in his review of *The Committed*, “His Debut Novel Won the Pulitzer. Now It Has an Action-Packed Sequel,” centers on specific keywords: the immigrant, the spy, the ghost, and the war. He mentions how the similarity between those four words are “[their] nature . . . to return” and haunt. Díaz also argues that the protagonist “embodies the maxim that while colonialism’s atrocities are never past, its victims are never present either.” Overall, Díaz examines how Nguyen works with the remnants of colonialism and how the forgotten, such as the protagonist, “[battles] all the forces that would erase and distort him.” Viewing *The Committed* as a dense political novel, Aminatta Forna perceives Nguyen’s novel as a work that challenges the dominant narratives of colonialism. Making a connection with Nguyen’s first novel, she argues,

⁴ *PMLA* volume 133, issue 2 published in 2018 includes a section titled “Theories and Methodologies” that features ten articles, some of which I have discussed above, analyzing Nguyen’s works including *The Sympathizer* and *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*.

“Where *The Sympathizer* challenged the popular narrative of the Vietnam war, the narrative being challenged here [*The Committed*] is that of [French] empire.” Her focus on Nguyen’s novel is on how it brings a different perspective of the past and critiques it. In “Where Solidarity Cannot Exist: On Viet Thanh Nguyen’s ‘The Committed,’” Piper French looks at the novel’s depiction of the journey of the “unwanted,” the refugees. French contends that “Nguyen accurately and convincingly depicts a city [namely Paris] that both leans on and marginalizes its immigrant and refugee populations.” The author states that Nguyen “[articulates] a perverse truth . . . about the corrosive effect of nation-states, political ideology, and imperialism on the individual.” As a whole, French emphasizes Nguyen’s disclosure of the undesirable aspects of France with the memorable remark: “No stone revealing human filth is left unturned.”

III. Chapter Breakdown

In Chapter One of this thesis, I have examined current and popular framings and narratives of refugees through definitions, images, articles, and news provided by the UN Refugee Agency. By doing so, I have focused on what details or narratives are being emphasized and what is being erased. After discussing these examples, I then provided a literature review for my thesis by introducing the emerging field of Critical Refugee Studies, its approaches to refugees and war, and how these approaches engage with and differ from popular and received academic narratives of refugees. In this part, I reviewed works from key scholars in this field including Yên Lê Espiritu, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Mimi Thi Nguyen, Khatharya Um, and Ma Vang to better understand their approaches in the field of Critical Refugee Studies. Furthermore, to better understand discussions on refugees from Indochina in France, I reviewed works

including those written by Gisèle L. Bousquet, Nghia M. Vo, G.D.M. Wijers, and Khou Xiong. Finally, this chapter provided an overview of how *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* have so far been discussed and received.

In Chapter Two, I will turn to Nguyen's 2015 novel *The Sympathizer*. Here, I will focus on Nguyen's tracing of the refugees' routes and their perspectives in their exile. I will argue that such an approach is consistent with Critical Refugee Studies. My goal is to understand the violence and complexity of the war in a broader geographical and historical context. In other words, I believe that by following the refugees to the U.S., Nguyen brings into picture countries, territories, and people that also participated in or are affected by the war but are often erased. Next, I will focus on the representations of the war and of refugees that appear in the U.S., juxtaposed with the Vietnamese protagonist's perspectives. Pointing to representations of the war and Asians and Asian Americans will also allow me to discuss how representations obscure some of the facts of war and reinforce other narratives. I will build my argument on Nguyen's discussion of industries of memory in *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. Focusing on this study leads me to discuss how Nguyen's novel is also one of the examples of knowledge production that aims to oppose other problematic narratives.

In Chapter Three, I will turn to Nguyen's 2021 novel *The Committed* to extend my focus on the routes of the refugee protagonist. I will not only discuss what Nguyen's novel unsettles when he links the routes of the protagonist from the U.S. to France; I will also examine which incidents and linkages to the war and the French empire are disclosed through the protagonist's journey. While Chapter One concentrates on the theme of the Vietnam War, this chapter focuses on the legacy and ongoing effects of French colonialism. I will argue that Nguyen attempts to disrupt

spatial and temporal boundaries as he critiques and examines forms of violence, such as colonization, committed by France. This chapter will also look at different forms of representation of the refugees, the colonized, and different racialized groups in France.

The final chapter will conclude the thesis by discussing how Nguyen's works shed light on narratives of war and empire and the topic of representation. I will also discuss how this project may be relevant in Taiwan and how Taiwan has also been entangled in the Vietnam War as one of the many routes of passage for refugees from Vietnam and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. I will conclude my thesis by underlining the potential importance of thinking about Nguyen's texts and conducting this research in a Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures in Taiwan.

Chapter Two

The Sympathizer: Representing Remnants of War in the U.S.

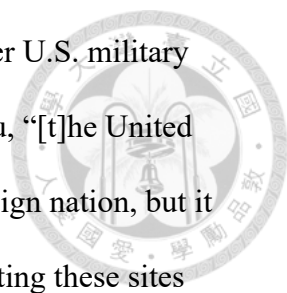
In this chapter, I will examine how Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel *The Sympathizer* unveils issues of representation regarding the Vietnam War and its refugees. I will begin this chapter by drawing on some of the key arguments and aims of Critical Refugee Studies through Yên Lê Espiritu's *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* to better understand its approach towards not only the spatial and temporal framing of the Vietnam War but also its viewpoint on war narratives. I will then proceed to discuss how Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* helps us to better understand the countries and sites that are entangled in the war, the routes of the refugees, and the perspectives of the refugees that are presented throughout the novel. Following the discussion of the plot and narrative voice of *The Sympathizer*, the second section of this chapter will focus on how Nguyen exposes the issue of who controls the means of representation. Thus, this section will open with a discussion on what Nguyen calls "asymmetric memory" (*Nothing* 157), to stress the imbalanced control over war representation between Vietnam and the U.S. After considering the issue of who represents, the final section of this chapter will delve into the problem of what is being represented. This section will mobilize what Nguyen terms "just memory" (*Nothing* 12) to discuss problematic memories of atrocities portrayed in *The Sympathizer*. To exemplify the possible distortions of war representation, I will unpack some of the discrepancies of the refugee experience by juxtaposing the refugees' experience of exile, presented through the protagonist's narrative, with the war narratives that are produced and circulated by the U.S.



I. Illuminating Refugee Routes: Links to Critical Refugee Studies

In *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*, Yên Lê Espiritu marks the routes of refugees from the Vietnam War. By tracing the most traveled route for Vietnamese refugees fleeing to the United States, Espiritu examines the violence and militarism behind the facade of seemingly humanitarian terms such as refuge and refugees. The violence, which include the “U.S. Colonialism in the Philippines, U.S. Militarism in Guam, settler colonialism in California, and the Vietnam War” (47), are connected and are disclosed upon close examination of the U.S.’s plan to transfer the Vietnamese refugees to the U.S. More specifically, each site used to shelter the refugees reveals the U.S.’s underlying, often inhumane control over these sites, which jeopardizes and endangers the lives of the locals (47). In doing so, Espiritu briefly introduces key U.S. Pacific military bases including Clark AFB in the Philippines, Anderson AFB in Guam, and California’s Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, “credited and valorized for resettling Vietnamese refugees in 1975” (39). Accordingly, Espiritu contends that tracing refugee routes allows us to “[connect] Vietnamese displacement to that of Filipino, Chamorros, and Native Americans, and [make] intelligible the military colonialisms that engulf these spaces” (48).

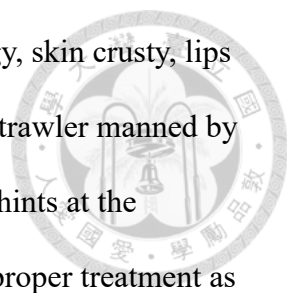
Following Espiritu’s observations, we can better understand how Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer* also quietly depicts the routes of the refugees by folding in U.S. military interventions in the Philippines and Guam. In the novel, when the unnamed protagonist and his friend, Bon, are preparing to leave Vietnam, Bon says to their blood brother, Man, that they will meet again in the Philippines. However, he is immediately corrected by the protagonist, who explains that “it was actually Guam, for the dictator Marcos was fed up with refugees and no longer accepted more” (19). This explanation shows the routes of the refugees before reaching their host country,



as well as how refugee camps can be a burden to the countries, under U.S. military colonialism, that are pressured to accept them. According to Espiritu, “[t]he United States could not impose its military will on the Philippines, a sovereign nation, but it could and did on Guam, its unincorporated territory” (36). Highlighting these sites thus illuminates U.S. military interventions in the Pacific. Another incident in the novel that mentions the refugee camps is when the protagonist is settled in Guam after witnessing the death of Bon’s wife and son. The protagonist describes their exile: “We continued to weep as we were trucked to Camp Asan, where, thanks to the General, we were given barracks that were luxurious compared to the tents waiting for the other late arrivals” (68). The plot soon follows the protagonist to yet another camp as he narrates: “Over the next few days, we wept and we waited. Sometimes, for variety, we waited and we wept. Just when the self-flagellation was beginning to wear me down, we were picked up and shuttled on to Camp Pendleton in San Diego, California . . . Awaiting us was another refugee camp” (73). In addition, when the protagonist helps assist the Auteur in making a movie about Vietnam, they not only film the movie in the Philippines, but also go on “a field trip to the refugee camp at Bataan, where I [the protagonist] recruited a hundred Vietnamese extras” (198). The description of the different camps settled by the protagonist and other refugees hints not only at more refugee routes, but also the different places and institutions in which they are entangled in this historical event. Furthermore, several countries that are linked to the refugees’ routes are acknowledged in the novel. For instance, the protagonist learns from a newspaper about a second wave of refugees, the boat people, fleeing Vietnam from the Communist regime. In the novel, the newspaper reports that “only one in two boats was surviving the crossing from the beaches and the inlets of our homeland to the nearest semifriendly shores in Hong Kong,

Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, storms and pirates sinking the rest” (210). The novel folds in and acknowledges the sites that are entangled and involved in accepting refugees. In doing so, Nguyen disrupts the spatial boundaries of the war, depicting Vietnamese refugees fleeing to places other than the U.S. Thus, the countries and sites that are listed in the novel show not only the impact the Vietnam War has on Vietnam and the U.S., but also how it affects and spills beyond these borders to Southeast Asian countries near Vietnam.

Moreover, in contrast to popular portrayals of refugees that “often pair the construct of Vietnamese refugees as passive objects of sympathy with a plea for the West to ‘assume an active role in caring, counseling, or intervening’” (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 50), *The Sympathizer* is written through the perspective of and with the voice of a Vietnamese refugee. For instance, the protagonist, who is as we know also the narrator of the story, details the poor living conditions and challenges faced by refugees. He describes that in Camp Pendleton in San Diego, “[a]long with thousands of others that summer, we also bathed in showers that lacked stalls and lived with strangers in barracks” (74). Such details reveal the harsh condition in the camps, as well as the frustration and lack of dignity for the refugees often glossed over by words of gratitude prominent in U.S. and French narratives discussed in the previous chapter. In this case, the description of the refugee camps echo what Lisa Yoneyama--following the work of Jenny Edkins--calls “spaces of exception” as human beings living there experience “temporary suspension of law and rights” (*Cold War Ruins* 102-03). Another similar example is the protagonist’s observation of the lack of personal space in Camp Pendleton as “[s]heets strung up on clotheslines divided the barracks into family quarters” (74). As for the Vietnamese extras that the protagonist recruits from the Philippines for the Auteur’s Hollywood film, the protagonist



recounts that “they looked bad and smelled a little worse: hair mangy, skin crusty, lips chapped, various glands swollen, collectively reeking like a fishing trawler manned by landlubbers with unsteady digestive tracts” (198). Such description hints at the atrocious living conditions of the refugees as they are barely given proper treatment as human beings. Such moments in the novel also seem to echo Espiritu’s discussion of how the confinement of refugees in refugee camps “projects the imprisoned as inhuman or subhuman and transmutes their personhood into objecthood” (*Body Counts* 63). In other words, the refugees are relegated to organized objects, or as Espiritu following Giorgio Agamben describes, “‘bare life,’ stripped of juridical protections and reduced to a biological minimum but not declared dead or outside the rule of law” (*Body Counts* 76). The novel further hints at the difficulty to leave the camps, and even the possibility of not being able to leave. For instance, the protagonist mentions in a letter that “none of us would be released without the helping hand of a sponsor, whose job it was to guarantee that we would not become dependent on the welfare state” (90). Nguyen’s novel thereby reveals how the futures and well-being of the refugees are not guaranteed.

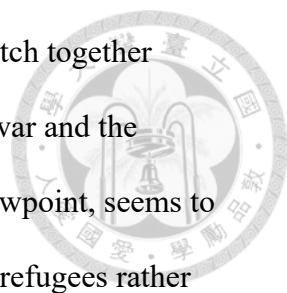
Moreover, *The Sympathizer* continues to voice the possible frustrations of the refugees, challenging the often-optimistic narratives of the refugees’ living conditions after arriving in their host countries. For instance, the protagonist as the narrator details the separation of families, explaining that though admitted to live in the U.S., “[s]ome of us left alone, some of us left as families, some of our families were divvied up and parceled out” (90). This shows the forced separation of refugee families and the potential underlying trauma that accompanies their experience. Describing their potential separation and settlement in different states, the novel exemplifies how refugees are treated as objects to be moved. Moreover, the protagonist lists the

rumored occurrences of some of the refugees in the U.S. heard from trading stories, which includes

the clan turned into slave labor by a farmer in Modesto, and the naïve girl who fled to Spokane to marry her GI sweetheart and was sold to a brothel, and the widower with nine children who went out into a Minnesotan winter and lay down in the snow on his back with mouth open until he was buried and frozen, and the ex-Ranger who bought a gun and dispatched his wife and two children before killing himself in Cleveland, and the regretful refugees on Guam who petitioned to go back to our homeland, never to be heard from again. (93)

The lengthy list of rumored tragedies shows that the war and frustrations for the refugees do not end with their setting foot on American soil. Instead, some continue to encounter struggles and tragic occurrences that are not often discussed in dominant Vietnam War narratives. These descriptions unsettle the temporal boundaries of the war, illuminating that the war and its impact do not simply end for the refugees. The novel also mentions that jobs that the soldiers of the ARVN take on in the U.S. to make a living; such jobs include positions such as “a janitor” “a mechanic” “short-order cook” “deliveryman” (119). Writing from the refugees’ point of view displays that although the refugees were rescued by the U.S. for fighting on their side, they do not seem to share the honor of veterans; instead, they labor simply to make ends meet.

The Sympathizer closes by extending the refugees’ routes as the protagonist shoulders another task to protect his friend. Towards the end of the novel, the protagonist returns to Vietnam for an attack on the communists but is instead captured and confined in a reeducation camp. After days of torture, the protagonist sets off with his friend Bon to flee Vietnam and is rendered a refugee yet again. Here, the protagonist says, “[t]omorrow we will join those tens and thousands who have taken



to the sea, refugees from a revolution” (492). The novel seems to stitch together possible routes that refugees are forced to take because of both the war and the revolution. This narrative, displaying the exiles from a refugee’s viewpoint, seems to emphasize the helplessness and violence that are overwhelming the refugees rather than their receiving aid from developed countries. On his second exile, after the reeducation in Vietnam, the protagonist expresses that “[t]omorrow we will find ourselves among strangers, reluctant mariners of who a tentative manifest can be written . . . Collectively we will be called the boat people” (495). The term *boat people* from the narrator’s point of view seems unable to convey the complexity of the refugees’ journeys, routes, and traumas. However different the stories are for different individuals, they are simplified to mean a group of people sailing on boats. The protagonist also talks about the reluctance of these refugees as they leave home, which is often replaced by narratives of their gratitude and willingness to be saved by other developed countries. The novel concludes with the narrator conveying the refugees’ thoughts in their exile to no promised destination: “Thousands more must be staring into darkness like us, gripped by scandalous thoughts, extravagant hopes, and forbidden plots. We lie in wait for the right moment and the just cause, which, at this moment, is simply wanting to live” (495). This passage conveys the unforeseeable future for the refugees and their hopes for wanting simply to survive. It also shows that the refugees’ experience as wanderers in exile portrayed in the novel is only one of many examples of the remnants of war and revolution, encouraging readers to view refugee passages as more complex than stereotypical views of refugees as passive victims.

In sum, following the refugee protagonist’s viewpoints and routes, the novel illustrates some of the complexities of the Vietnam War and its widespread impact.

Taking a step further, *The Sympathizer*'s acknowledging and imagining these struggles also address the multivalent issue of human rights. According to Guy Beauregard, Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, and Hsiu-chuan Lee, the issue of human rights is crucial as it is "inevitably contested for those moving between, living beyond, and in many cases struggling with dual or multiple affiliations with nation-states" (7). Moreover, the refugees' perspectives and experiences open the discussion on their rights. As Beauregard, Schlund-Vials, and Lee contend, "[w]hile the emergence and solidification of nation-states along the development of Western modernity has consolidated the idea of civil rights, the 'rights' for immigrants, migrants, refugees, . . . , the racialized and the colonized remain unsettled and contested" (7). In terms of refugee routes, *The Sympathizer* folds in various countries, peoples, and institutions. The novel shows the struggles and poor living and health conditions facing these people, and thus challenges dominant narratives that paint optimistic images of their rescue. In this way, *The Sympathizer* echoes the aim of Beauregard, Schlund-Vials, and Lee to "attempt to restore to presence 'the subjects of human rights' . . . --subjects who have been rendered invisible or relegated to the position of the inhuman" (8). In brief, Nguyen's novel sheds light on a different narrative, told from a refugee's viewpoint, to expose the wounds physically and mentally inflicted upon refugees who carry with them the remnants of war.

II. Controlling Representation and Memory

Having considered the novel's plot setting, the protagonist's perspective, and links to Critical Refugee Studies, I now wish to turn to the issue of who controls what is being remembered of the war, which is also a key theme that lies at the heart of *The Sympathizer*. A struggle experienced by the refugees illustrated in Marx's famous

quotation--“They cannot represent themselves. They must be represented”--seems to thread the novel and is exemplified in different knowledge productions in the text.⁵ Discussing Western representations of the Orient, Edward Said contends that “[i]t is Europe that articulates the Orient; this articulation is the prerogative, not of the puppet master, but of a genuine creator, whose life-giving power represents, animates, constitutes the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries” (57). Such aspects of representation echo with W.J.T. Mitchell’s idea of political representation, or “persons who ‘act for’ other persons” (11). According to Mitchell, a key issue of representation (as mentioned in Chapter One) is that it “can never be completely divorced from political and ideological questions” (15). As I will discuss below, the multiple representations of the Vietnamese and the Vietnam War presented by characters from the U.S. in *The Sympathizer* illuminate such questions and their potential effects.

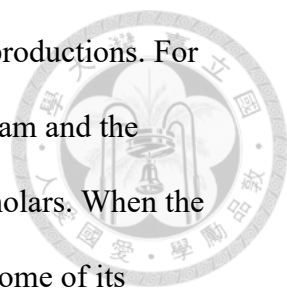
In *Nothing Ever Dies*, Nguyen discusses how an industry creates memories (106). He contends that “[a]n industry of memory includes the material and ideological forces that determine how and why memories are produced and circulated, and who has access to, and control of, the memory industries” (107). Simply put, the wealthy and powerful have more control over memories than the weak and the poor. Thus, Nguyen reminds that, if the marginalized cannot “seize control of the means of memory, there will be no transformation in memory. Without such control, those who speak up for themselves and others will realize they do not determine the volume of their voice. Those who control the industry of memory, who allows them to speak, set that volume” (108). Countries like the U.S. which are more powerful in terms of their

⁵ The quotation “They cannot represent themselves. They must be represented” is originally from Karl Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*; it also appears as the epigraph in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.

war machines also have the capability to justify their doings through Hollywood and its movies (108). More specifically, Nguyen lists a few examples including video games called *Call of Duty*, *Black Ops*, and a film entitled *The Deer Hunter*, where the other is simply depicted as non-human (109). Responding to such problem, *The Sympathizer* presents the issue of “asymmetrical representation,” where representations encountered by audiences in the U.S. are far more dominant and influential than those produced by the Vietnamese (157).

In *The Sympathizer*, the issue of who controls representation appears throughout the protagonist’s exile in the U.S. as he encounters different forms of knowledge production that attempt to paint the Vietnam War in a particular manner. To begin with, the novel shows the General’s concern for how a big industry like Hollywood might portray the Vietnam War. He encourages the protagonist to provide feedback on the film as “[o]therwise who knows what kind of Hollywood story they’re going to make” (161). Although in this part of the novel, Nguyen has not yet provided details about the content of the film, the general is aware of the impact Hollywood can have on the world’s understanding of the Vietnam War. Another issue is that the Auteur believes that the plot of the film is more important than the authenticity of the event. Thus, if the film is about a historical event, the incident may potentially be distorted for the sake of the audience’s entertainment. When the protagonist argues that there is a lack of speaking parts for the Vietnamese roles, the Auteur’s secretary, Violet, replies that “it boils down to is who pays for the tickets and goes to the movies. Frankly Vietnamese audiences aren’t going to watch the movie, are they” (173). Thus, it appears that the intended audience in the U.S. and received notions of entertainment influence the framing of the war in the film.

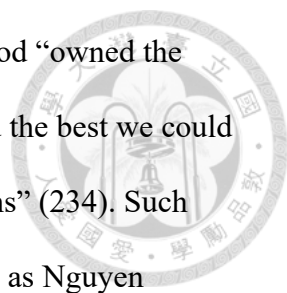
Moreover, *The Sympathizer* illustrates how details regarding minorities and



people of different ethnicities are simplified in popular knowledge productions. For instance, rather than consulting the protagonist for facts about Vietnam and the Vietnamese, the Auteur relies on the findings written by western scholars. When the narrator challenges the Auteur on the authenticity of the script and some of its inaccuracies, the Auteur responds: “I researched your country . . . I read Joseph Buttinger and Frances Fitzgerald. He’s the foremost historian on your little part of the world. And she won the Pulitzer Prize. She dissected your psychology. I think I know something about your people” (170). In this case, even though the protagonist himself is Vietnamese, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning writer appears to be more capable of representing the Vietnamese and is more accepted by the Auteur. In addition, the Auteur doesn’t seem to care about whether the details regarding Vietnam are accurate as the protagonist mentions that “[the Auteur] acknowledged he did not know that Montagnard was simply a French catchall term for the dozens of Highland minorities” (174). In response to this incident, the Auteur also replies that no one would care. Since it is the U.S. that controls the industry of memory through Hollywood, the content is framed in a way that suits the tastes, imaginations, and interests of its intended audience. In this case, the distinction between the minorities in Vietnam would be ignored.

One of the main struggles for the protagonist is realizing that the Auteur is capable of representing the story of the Vietnam War and the people involved. During this process, the protagonist becomes aware that “[w]e [the Vietnamese] cannot represent ourselves. Hollywood represents us. So we must do what we can to ensure that we are presented well” (189).⁶ Furthermore, the criticism of this issue is also

⁶ Here, of course, the protagonist’s line adapts Edward Said’s epigraph in *Orientalism*, “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented,” which is originally from Karl Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, as discussed earlier in this section.



summarized in the narrator's epiphany that the Auteur and Hollywood "owned the means of production, and therefore the means of representation, and the best we could hope for was to get a word in edgewise before our anonymous deaths" (234). Such criticism towards representation is mentioned in *Nothing Ever Dies*, as Nguyen contends that "[a]rt and ethical work are never enough to effect change without power. Just memory is only possible when the weak, the poor, the marginalized, the different, and the demonized, or their advocates can influence or even seize the industry of memory" (18). Thus, by showing that protagonist's failed attempt to shape the Auteur's work, *The Sympathizer* appears to hint at the difficulty for refugees to seize the means of production. After watching *The Hamlet* in Thailand, Bon tells the protagonist a similar idea that "they [the Auteur and Hollywood] run the game. You don't run anything. That means you can't change anything. Not from the inside. When you got nothing, you got to change things from the outside" (376). In other words, the protagonist's attempt to fix the image and representation of the war and his people cannot be realized when it is the Auteur's production. Crucially, as Nguyen writes about the struggle of the protagonist to fix the film's representation, the novel itself, revealed to be the protagonist's confession, becomes a representation of the refugees. The protagonist declares at the end of the novel: "We have nothing to leave to anyone except these words, our best attempt to represent ourselves against all those who sought to represent us" (492). In this case, the refugees' experience and their exile written from the narrator's perspective becomes an alternative form of knowledge production. In a broader aspect, Nguyen's novel, acting as a form of criticism, becomes itself powerful a means of production contesting popular and dominant narratives of the Vietnam War.

According to John Tagg's discussion on photography and truth in *The Burden of*

Representation, “[w]e must not forget the claims of a discredited documentary tradition to fight ‘for’ ‘truth’ or ‘in favour’ of ‘truth’ and see that the battle is one that should be directed at the rules, operative in our society, according to which ‘true’ and ‘false’ representations are separated” (94). Accordingly, Tagg maintains that representation “is a battle waged against those institutions privileged and empowered in our society to produce and transmit ‘true’ discourse” (94). In other words, those who have power have the voice to decide what narrative remains the truth and should officially be remembered. In *The Sympathizer*, a prominent example of those capable of manipulating the truth is Hollywood. Although Hollywood films are not created to document the truth but for entertainment, their influence on the audience has a similar effect as it too produces influential discourse. Such an idea is illuminated in *The Sympathizer* as it appears to warn against the impact of industries of memory like Hollywood. When the protagonist becomes aware that what he can change in the Auteur’s film is limited, he admits: “I naively believed that I could divert the Hollywood organism from its goal, the simultaneous lobotomization and pickpocketing of the world’s audiences” (175). The protagonist’s epiphany reflects the influence and power of the U.S. film industry. The protagonist, facing his failed attempt to fix the representation of the film, also argues that one would control history “so long as one commanded the bright lights of center stage” (176). In this case, the Auteur’s film may arouse heroic sentiments as the protagonist describes: “Movies were America’s way of softening up the rest of the world, Hollywood relentlessly assaulting the mental defenses of audiences with the hit, smash, the spectacles, the block-buster, and, yes, even the box office bomb” (225). The protagonist acknowledges not only the power of films due to their popularity and special effects, but also how these films could normalize the occurrences of war. He observes that

“[t]he point was that it was the American story they watched and loved, up until the day that they themselves might be bombed by the planes they had seen in American movies” (225).

Another issue of representation that is disclosed in *The Sympathizer* is through the description of the Auteur’s film’s Vietnamese extras, who in Nguyen’s text are actual refugees. In contrast to the actors that would be remembered in movies, the novel suggests that the actual refugees would be forgotten, “leaving history in the tunnels along with the dead” (175). In *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, Judith Butler contends that “not everyone counts as a subject” (31). The extras in the novel are treated, in both their real lives and their roles in the Hollywood film, as what Butler calls “lives that are not quite lives, cast as ‘destructible’ and ‘ungrievable’” (31). Media contribute to the framing of the refugees since, as Butler maintains, “such populations are ‘lose-able,’ or can be forfeited, precisely because they are framed as being already lost or forfeited” (31). In *The Sympathizer*, the lives of the refugees are portrayed as disposable, just as they are used simply as props for the Auteur’s film. This idea is emphasized when the protagonist remarks that “the film shoot was going to generate tales of the movie people from Hollywood that would be passed on for decades, stretched even taller for each succeeding generation. As for the extras, the boat people, they would be forgotten. No one remembered the extras” (203-04). It would seem that the Auteur is trying to recreate history through his work, yet he uses actual refugees and asks them to perform a staged version of the war. This arrangement hints that films could erase actual incidents and people. The protagonist reveals the irony that the Vietnamese extras “[serve] merely as raw material for an

epic about white men saving good yellow people from bad yellow people” (175).⁷ In this case, not only are the refugees seen as disposable lives, but they are asked to help recreate a new version of the Vietnam War, distort their own past, and arguably enhance the image of their lives as “ungrievable” (Butler 31).

Besides this film, there are also other texts presented in the novel that show how the U.S. may control the representation of the war. One example involves the letters that the protagonist sends to Man through his fake aunt in France. In this case, it is the narrator who writes the letters, and the character’s caution of the contents he writes reveals that refugees might be pressured not to express certain sentiments. As he writes his letter, he considers that “[p]erhaps unknown censors were reading refugee mail, looking for dejected, angry refugees who could not or would not dream the American Dream. I was careful, then, to present myself as just another immigrant, glad to be in the land where the pursuit of happiness was guaranteed in writing” (186). In control of the refugee’s stay in the U.S., the state may also--if only in the imagination--restrict the narratives of the refugees. Hence, those with power don’t necessarily have to present anything in order to control what is being represented. That is to say, there are other ways to control the range of possible narratives of the war and its refugees.

All in all, *The Sympathizer* illuminates the issue of who hold the means of representation and who has control over it through various forms of texts and discourse. Asymmetrical representations can be easily detected through the protagonist’s attempts to fight against influential people or corporations’ framing of the same incident he has encountered. The novel reveals that those who have power

⁷ This quotation from *The Sympathizer* adapts the famous line “White men are saving brown women from brown men” from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

control what is known as the truth and can shape the past into a different version while the victims of the history become forgotten or used as justifications for war. By focusing on this issue, *The Sympathizer* critically sheds light on this subject matter and forcefully contests those popular representations of the Vietnam War by including other possible perspectives of the refugees.

III. Exposing Problematic Narratives through Juxtaposition

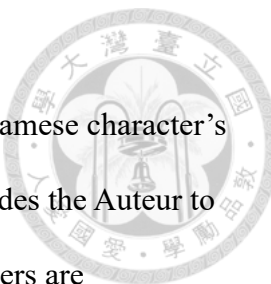
In *Nothing Ever Dies*, Nguyen aims to unsettle the temporal and spatial boundaries of the war and address “the lack of inclusiveness” found in many works of public memory. As discussed earlier, he emphasizes a concept he terms “just memory,” which “strives both to remember one’s own and others, while at the same time drawing attention to the life cycle of memories and their industrial production, how they are fashioned and forgotten, how they evolve and change” (12). Nguyen explains that “[a] just memory constantly tries to recall what might be forgotten, accidentally or deliberately, through self-serving interests” (17). In his discussion of artworks on war and memory, Nguyen contends that “[b]oth memory and forgetting are subject not only to the fabrications of art, but also to the commodification of industry, which seeks to capture and domesticate art” (13). Simply put, art is a part of the memory industry and memories “service power” (15). I believe that the problematic representations can be observed in *The Sympathizer* through the novel’s juxtaposition of the content of popular representations and the incidents experienced by the refugees. This way of examining representation is similar to David Palumbo-Liu’s contention that “[i]t is . . . critical to examine the complex dialectic between the imposition of certain narrations of assimilation, the contradictions within and between such narratives, resistance to such narratives that result in eminently hybrid cultures

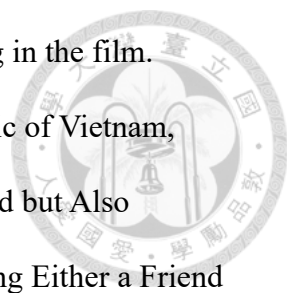
and subjectivities” (237).

To begin with, when the novel’s protagonist arrives in the U.S. and works in a university, he is photographed presumably for the student journal. Immediately, the protagonist suspects himself to be presented as a grateful refugee. He confirms that, “[a]s expected, I had smiled dutifully at my desk when the student journalist photographed me, aware that I would be on the front page, yellow teeth appearing white in the back-and-white photograph. I was doing my best to imitation of a Third World child on one of those milk cartons” (82). According to Giorgio Agamben, “humanitarian organizations . . . can only grasp human life in the figure of a bare or sacred life,” or in other words, “life that can be killed but not sacrificed,” which is “made into the object of aid and protection” (133). To specify, Agamben mentions the ‘imploring eyes’ of the Rwandan child, whose photograph is shown to obtain money but who ‘is now becoming more and more difficult to find alive’” (133). In some ways similar to Agamben’s discussion of the photograph of the refugee child from Rwanda, the photograph of the protagonist in the U.S. illustrates the popular and common framing of a refugee: both apparently helpless and grateful for being saved. That is to say, the protagonist’s image is arguably framed as “the object of aid and protection” (Agamben 133). The photograph taken by the student journalist will possibly become part of the forms of discourse that contribute to how refugees are portrayed and understood. Yet, this photograph, when juxtaposed with the protagonist’s thoughts, seems to expose how such framing can be contested or questioned. The protagonist reflects: “I was also one of those unfortunate cases who could not help but wonder whether my need for American charity was due to my having been the recipient of American aid” (82). Through this reflection, the protagonist implies that he is manipulating the image to suit the popular imagination

of refugees rather than being passively framed by it.

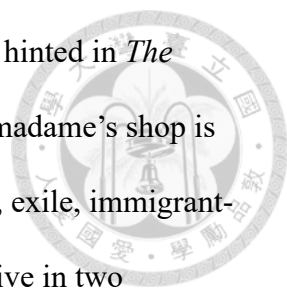
Another key example in the novel can be seen through the Vietnamese character's role in the Auteur's film. Although the protagonist eventually persuades the Auteur to add several Vietnamese characters with speaking parts, these characters are nevertheless framed in a way that reinforces the U.S.'s heroic mission or, what Michael Dillon and Julian Reid call "war being waged in pursuit of liberal democracy and perpetual peace" (2). For instance, the character of the older brother named Benny is said to have "loved his American rescuers and served as their translator" (206); the sister, Mai, "would fall in love with the young, handsome, idealistic Sergeant Jay Bellamy" (206); the little brother "would be crowned with a Yankee cap in the final scene and airlifted into the heavens, his ultimate destination being Jay Bellamy's family in St. Louis, where he would be given a golden retriever and the nickname Danny Boy" (206). The characters seem to be cast as stereotypical grateful refugees who are charmed by their western heroes and granted a better future because of the U.S. military intervention. These narratives, as Palumbo-Liu observes, "[suggest] that refugees should be grateful to the United States for rescuing them from a backward culture in Indochina and providing them with the opportunity for a modern life" (240). As for the roles that the Vietnamese extras are assigned to play, the protagonist mentions that they can be easily categorized into several groups that are often assigned to be killed in the film. Exposing such a problem, the protagonist in *The Sympathizer* notes that "[t]he majority of the roles fell under the category of civilian (i.e., Possibly Innocent but Also Possibly Viet Cong and Therefore Possibly Going to Be Killed for Either Being Innocent or Being Viet Cong)" (212). In other words, the film seems to categorize the Vietnamese characters into either good or bad, neither to be completely trusted. That is to say, the Vietnamese characters are not portrayed as





complicated individuals in contrast to the American soldiers starring in the film. Likewise, the roles assigned to members of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, which the protagonist describes as “the category of Possibly Friend but Also Possibly Enemy and Therefore Possibly Going to Be Killed for Being Either a Friend or an Enemy” (212). The Vietnamese roles, in this case, seem like disposable people designed simply to set off the heroic and complicated U.S. soldier roles. Moreover, the protagonist uses his own perspective as a refugee to explain his observations of the characters in the film. For instance, the narrator provides the definition: “Viet Cong (i.e., Possibly Freedom-Loving Nationalist but Also Possibly Hateful Red Communist but Really Who Cares so Kill Him [or Her] Anyway)” (212). The roles in the movie paired with the protagonist’s mocking description of them shows the movie’s problematic representation of the Vietnam War. Rather than simply focusing on the main characters, the U.S. soldiers, the protagonist draws attention to the roles of the extras and scrutinizes how they are portrayed in the film. The flat representation of the film characters juxtaposed with the protagonist’s experience and other Vietnamese characters from the novel display the drastic discrepancy between actual, complicated characters versus simplified, misrepresented roles featured in the Auteur’s film.

The juxtaposition of the refugees’ feelings and the Auteur’s perspectives in the novel also sheds light on the struggles of the refugees, which are often glossed over by other narratives of gratitude and justifications of the war. In “The ‘We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose’ Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the ‘Fall of Saigon,’” Espiritu mentions that “media has deployed the refugee figure, the purported grateful beneficiary of U.S.-style freedom, to remake the Vietnam War into a just and successful war” (329). As for the refugees, their “war sufferings remain unmentionable and unmourned in most U.S. public discussion of Vietnam” (329).



Espiritu's emphasis on the refugees' unrecognized sufferings is also hinted in *The Sympathizer*. For instance, the protagonist notices that the clock in madame's shop is set to Saigon time rather than U.S. time. He remarks that "[r]efugee, exile, immigrant--whatever species of displaced human we were, we did not simply live in two cultures, as celebrants of the great American melting pot imagined. Displaced people also lived in two time zones, the here and there, the present and the past, being as we were reluctant time travelers" (260). The protagonist's observation exhibits the refugees' reluctance to leave their home rather than the eagerness to settle in the host country. A similar sentiment is also expressed by Bon when asked why he wants to go back to Vietnam and fight rather than staying in the U.S. Bon replies: "What am I living for? A life in our apartment? That's not a home. It's a jail cell without bars. All of us--we're all in jail cells without bars. We're not men anymore" (291). From a refugee's perspective, although resettled in the U.S., Bon doesn't enjoy his situation and demasculinized status. Because of various limitations, poor living conditions, loss of family members in his exile, Bon feels like he lost the meaning of life. This narrative is drastically different from the narrative that the Auteur attempts to present in his film. The protagonist describes that "[b]y the movie's last shot, of innocent Danny Boy sitting in the open doorway of a Huey helicopter ascending slowly into the clear blue heavens, weeping as he gazed over his war-ravaged homeland" (374). The movie ends with Danny Boy being rescued by the U.S. soldiers, which seems to show the brave and humanitarian deeds of the U.S. soldiers saving the refugees. Yet, from the narrative of the refugee characters in the novel, the war, struggle, and trauma don't end with their rescue but continue long after their arrival in the U.S. Such story telling seems to respond to Yên Lê Espiritu and Lan Duong's question: If "spectacular acts of military atrocities are the markers of violence, then what off-screen violent

acts remain unmarked” (588)?

Discussing what is being represented in the Auteur’s film, the protagonist points out that its contents can take the place of actual history in the audience’s minds. That is to say, artistic discourse can change what the audience members remember of this history. The Auteur explains to the workers of the film that they should be proud of their work because

[a] great work of art is something as real as reality itself, and sometimes even more real than the real. Long after this war is forgotten, when its existence is a paragraph in a schoolbook students won’t even bother to read, and everyone who survived it is dead, . . . This work of art will still shine so brightly it will not be just about the war but it will be the war. (223)

In other words, the make-believe can become the reality through artistic production. Because art can influence how its audience feel, for movies that portray the war with heroic characters doing good for the world, the protagonist comments that “[t]he Movie was just a sequel to our war and a prequel to the next one America was destined to wage” (235). According to Espiritu, “[j]uxtaposed against recuperated Vietnam Veterans, the freed and indebted Vietnamese refugees remake the case for the appropriateness of U.S. War in Vietnam” (“‘We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose’ Syndrome” 339). In this case, rather than condemning the Vietnam War, movies can become entangled in the war machine, encouraging and justifying the war while glossing over the underlying atrocities. As Dillon and Reid argue, “[w]ar not only impacts on culture, it is itself a complex cultural phenomenon deeply sutured into modern institutions and practices” (9). Although the U.S. didn’t win the Vietnam War, it is nevertheless free to depict victories and good deeds in the Auteur’s film. The war appears to be fought again on the screen, and having not only more impact on

people's memory than the actual occurrence, but also making distortions of historical events believable.

All in all, *The Sympathizer* folds in representations that are both questionable and powerful. In addition, the gaps between the actual experiences of the refugees and the ones imagined or framed from the westerners' viewpoint create a stark contrast. I believe that displaying such contrasts shows not only Nguyen's criticism of popular misrepresentations and problematic framings but also allows him to present a more complex set of narratives about the Vietnam War, including characters who are varied and complex. What is being represented can easily influence how people think of this history, what they remember, and what they forget. Regarding the black wall in Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., Nguyen contends that "[a]bsent from the memorial are the casualties who are easier to forget, the veterans who suffer from trauma, or are homeless, or have committed suicide" (*Nothing* 49). Nguyen also argues that "[c]ollectively, these postwar dead and wounded far outnumber the wartime deaths, but this nation, like other nations, has difficulty acknowledging them and their ills" (*Nothing* 49). In contrast, *The Sympathizer* acknowledges and centers the stories of characters standing for people who are not officially commemorated in public monuments. The novel not only challenges texts that minimize the complexities of the Vietnam War but also becomes a voice for the lives that lie beyond existing discursive frames.

Chapter Three

The Committed: Representing Remnants of Empire in France

In the previous chapter, I have shown how Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* tells the story from a refugee's perspective by tracing the protagonist's routes during his exile, disrupting both the spatial and temporal boundaries of the Vietnam War. I have also discussed how this novel addresses the issue of representation, including who controls the means of representation and what is represented, regarding the war and its refugees. In this chapter, I will begin by exploring how Nguyen in *The Committed*, a sequel to *The Sympathizer*, further expands the boundaries of the refugees' exile to include France, a place linked to other incidents and atrocities related to the French colonial empire through the characters and events that the unnamed protagonist encounters. Following the section, I will delve into the issue of who controls the narratives and representation of the refugees, immigrants, and their descendants. Just as the previous chapter elaborates on how the idea of what Nguyen in *Nothing Ever Dies* calls "asymmetric memory" can be used to describe the unequal exposure and influence of war narratives in *The Sympathizer* (157), this section will also explore who controls narratives of refugees and of colonialism, and whose voices are silenced. The final section of this chapter will focus on the issues that arise from different representations of the colonial empire that are interlaced throughout the novel that involve characters from, or descendants of characters from, various parts of the French empire. More specifically, problematic forms of representation can be discerned through the various performances related to French colonialism that seems to stress gratitude from the colonized and even arouse a disturbing sense of adventure and dominance for the former colonizers. These issues are revealed through the counter-narrative perspective of the protagonist, who is by this time a three-time

refugee.



I. Refugee Routes and Other Colonial Traces

As discussed earlier in this thesis, Yên Lê Espiritu in *Body Counts* adopts a methodology that she refers to as “critical juxtaposition” (21) to disclose the violence of U.S. militarism across various locations. Defined as “the bringing together of seemingly different and disconnected events, communities, histories, and spaces in order to illustrate what would otherwise not be visible about the contours, contents, and afterlives of war and empire” (21), this form of “critical juxtaposition” helps to illuminate the link between the Hmong refugees and U.S. secret war in Lao as investigated by Ma Vang in *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies*. In this study, Vang aims to rethink the refugee “as a figure that questions the established principles of citizenship, nation, and the state” (10). Thus, Vang proposes, following Espiritu, that “the refugee is both a critical idea and a social actor ‘whose life, when traced, illuminates the interconnections of colonization, war, and global social change’” (10). Likewise, Nguyen in *The Committed* extends the story of the protagonist’s journey from *The Sympathizer*, and brings in not only more routes and locations, but also characters of different backgrounds whose stories are all, in one way or another, caught in the web of French colonization or the Vietnam War. The linking together of these characters, places, and events reveals leftover traces of the colonial past. Hence, I now wish to turn to how Nguyen uses a form of “critical juxtaposition” to uncover links that produced the remnants of colonial empire that are, as Espiritu puts it, often deserted at the margins of history (*Body Counts* 21).

The Committed opens with the protagonist packed on a boat with others as “boat people” heading towards Indonesia, fleeing the Communist regime in Vietnam. As he

did in *The Sympathizer*, Nguyen writes from the same Vietnamese protagonist's perspective and with his voice. Focusing on the viewpoint of the boat people, the sequel opens with a self-introduction: "We were the unwanted, the unneeded, and the unseen, invisible to all but ourselves. Less than nothing, we also saw the nothing as we crouched blindly in the unlit belly of our ark, 150 of us sweating in a space not meant for us mammals but for the fish of the sea" (xi). Through this description, Nguyen stresses the harsh conditions of the refugees fleeing by boat. Furthermore, rather than placing the refugees as the "objects of rescue" (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 10), in which the refugees are depicted as passive objects, Nguyen lists the things that the refugees desire in their state. For instance, the protagonist declares:

We, the unwanted, wanted so much. We wanted food, water, and parasols, although umbrellas would be fine. We wanted clean clothes, baths, and toilets, . . . We wanted an estimated time of arrival. We wanted not to be dead on arrival. We wanted to be rescued from being barbecued by the unrelenting sun. (xii-xiii)

This description places the refugees, the marginalized, as the subjects, telling the story and actively expressing their human desires and feelings. Moreover, the description of the protagonist waiting for their luggage not only hints the refugees' awkward presence in the airport, creating a stark contrast with tourists, but also mentions the refugee camp that the refugees stayed at before arrival. From the protagonist's point of view, he states that

We were not tourists, or expatriates, or returnees, or diplomats, or businessmen, or any class of dignified traveler. No, we were refugees, and our experience in a time machine called an international jetliner was not enough to dispel the year we had languished in a reeducation camp or the two years we had passed in a refugee camp on an Indonesian island called Galang. (5)

The protagonist mentions the route as well as the hardship and trauma they have endured. Their experiences and conditions set them apart, physically and mentally, from other travelers. Comparing the protagonist to travelers in the airport not only places the refugees as the subjects of this experience, but also hints the struggles they had to face before being admitted to first-world countries such as France.⁸

Apart from expressing the refugees' subjective feelings through the protagonist, some keywords in the novel can bear double meanings that allude to the complexities that the refugees face in their exile. To begin with, upon arriving in France, the protagonist describes it as an "asylum, the fever dream of all refugees" (4). The use of the word "asylum" (4) to describe France as a place of sanctuary seems to have a double meaning. As stated in the "Critical Vocabularies" section of the "Critical Refugee Studies Collective" website, the keyword *asylum*

can be applied, on the one hand, to the ways in which former colonial empires have granted asylum to immigrants and refugees and have welcomed them to their shores. On the other hand, for refugees and immigrants, the word asylum connotes something more sinister, that it may not be a sanctuary but a sanitarium.

That is to say, the word *asylum* could represent both the gratitude and trauma that exists simultaneously in the refugees' refuge in the host country. Thus, "[m]adness . . . depicts not the unhinging of one's mental state but expresses the rage that one feels in being displaced."⁹ Similarly, the description of bags in the novel seems to echo the

⁸ According to Karen Akoka in "France: Boat People Brought by Plane," the author explains that "rather than using Geneva Convention to select individuals [to be admitted to their host countries], criteria based around their [the refugees'] connection to France sat at the heart of the process" (49).

⁹ This description is from the "Critical Vocabularies" section of The Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CRSC), under *Asylum/Madness*; see <https://criticalrefugeestudies.com/resources/critical-vocabularies>.

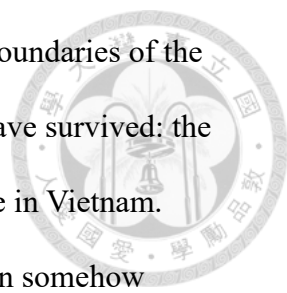
explanation provided by the CRSC on the word “baggage.” In the novel, the protagonist describes that they “barely had any material belongings, even if our [the refugees’] bags were packed with dreams and fantasies, trauma and pain, sorrow and loss, and of course ghosts. Since ghosts were weightless, we could carry an infinite number of them” (5). The CRSC website explains that

War is a baggage that refugees always have to carry. The refugee also becomes baggage for the nation-state. Baggage also simultaneously functions as trauma and resilience/survival . . . The baggage does not have to be full in order for it to be loaded, or visible for its impact to be felt.¹⁰

Thus, the description about the refugees’ baggage exposes the hidden and even invisible violence that they are forced to bear despite being offered shelter by first-world countries. In short, the double meaning of a host country as an asylum, along with the refugees’ baggage, sheds light on the remnants of the violence and trauma generated by war and empire.

As a fictional form of “critical juxtaposition” (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 21), Nguyen’s novel ties in and mentions different places in the protagonist’s route and the characters of different origin and descent. Doing so, the novel sheds light on the hidden links of violence that allow their lives and stories to intersect. In terms of locations, the protagonist describes their journey prior to their arrival in France and his identity as a three-time refugee. The protagonist describes: “We, Bon and I, arrived in the airport [in France] at night on a flight from Jakarta. Stepping out of the airplane, we were gripped by a sense of relief, for we had reached asylum, the fever dream of all refugees, especially those rendered refugees not just once or twice but

¹⁰ See <https://criticalrefugeestudies.com/resources/critical-vocabularies>.



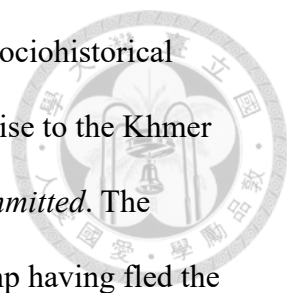
three times” (4). The description of the routes unsettles the spatial boundaries of the refugees and ties together the three different atrocities which they have survived: the Indochina War, the Vietnam War, and fleeing the Communist regime in Vietnam. Thus, tracing the perspectives, routes, and life stories of refugees can somehow uncover the connections between these events. Moreover, another description in the novel that shows other possible routes of the refugees is listed at the ending song of the filmed performances of *Fantasia*. The title of the song is called “Thank you, America.” Responding to the song, the protagonist says, with mixed feelings, that the refugees, “regardless of our exile, we apparently found at least some degree of gratitude for being taken in, leading to this appreciative, heartfelt ballad to all the countries that had welcomed us” (69). The protagonist then points out the other first-world countries thanked in the song includes Germany, Australia, Canada, and France (69). Not only is the song a narrative that emphasizes gratitude to the first-world countries that provided shelter to the refugees but also shows other possible routes of the refugees’ exile; it further broadens the spatial links that are tied to the violent incidents that brought about the refugees’ relocations.

In terms of the characters, in *The Committed* the protagonist meets people from or in some way connected to Indochina and beyond throughout his struggle to make a living in France. Settling on dealing drugs and entangled with a brothel called Heaven, the protagonist finds characters that are born in, or descendants of people from, Laos, Cambodia, and Algeria. The presence of these characters in Nguyen’s text sheds light on how the French colonial empire links them together. Likewise, following the life stories of the characters also shows how their histories intersect. The Ronin is described to have grown up in Vietnam with his father a plantation overseer. He introduces himself, “I am Corsican and French, but I am also

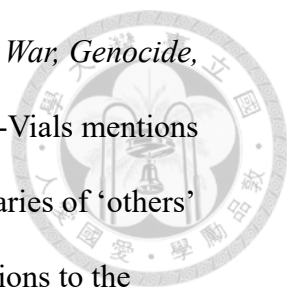
Indochinese, or Vietnamese, whichever term you prefer” (113). The background of the Ronin reveals the traces of French empire. Moreover, a conflict the protagonist encounters throughout the novel is when the former supplier of the drugs, a gang of men born in France but of Algerian descent, confront him that he stole his job.

Reflecting on their fights which cause injury from both gangs, the protagonist ponders: “Was it their fault because they had not sought an alliance or even chat with their colonized comrades” (117)? Through this rumination, the protagonist points to the traces not only of the French colonial empire in Indochina but also in Algeria. What these characters have in common, however, is that they struggle to survive and gather a fortune in France by doing work that is of lower social status, which even involves illegal activities such as selling drugs.

A violence that is folded in the novel as an incident alongside the refugee protagonist’s exile in France is the mass killing conducted by the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. The protagonist first heard of the news in France through a Cambodian prostitute named Madeline who wept over a newspaper article. The headline writes: “MASS GRAVE IN CAMBODIA” (118). Moreover, the protagonist is also accused by Madeleine as she says to him: “You Vietnamese...*You* invaded Cambodia” (118). Connecting the Vietnam War centered in *The Sympathizer* to the mass killings of the Khmer Rouge regime mentioned in *The Committed* illustrates how violence and their aftermaths influence each other, and how forms of violence are tied. Nguyen’s folding in the violence of the Khmer Rouge through the refugees’ and Cambodian’s viewpoints echoes with Khatharya Um’s concern in *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora*, where she stresses the importance of contextualization (3), or, understanding the mass killings within its historical background and conditions. Hence, Um stresses the importance of



“understand[ing] genocidal violence . . . [by] locating it within the sociohistorical contexts that produced it” (3). The historical background that gave rise to the Khmer Rouge mass killings is also discussed by the protagonist in *The Committed*. The protagonist notes hearing of the news while he was in a refugee camp having fled the communist regime in Vietnam. He recalls: “The article confirmed the news I had heard in the refugee camp on Pulau Galang, relayed by the aid workers and my language teacher. He was an earnest, sweaty young man from Bordeaux who had come to the camp to help refugees who were destined for our homeland, France” (119). When the protagonist confronts his French teacher by saying that the Khmer Rouge leaders studied in Paris, the teacher replies: “They did not understand what they read . . . They corrupted what they were taught. They took things too far” (119). At this, the protagonist, displeased with such explanation, thinks to himself: “If the French had not gone too far in exploiting the Cambodians, would the Khmer Rouge even exist? . . . Wasn’t the student supposed to do what the teacher did, not just follow what the teacher said” (120)? Placing the possible roots of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia’s colonial background, Nguyen’s narrative seems to echo Um’s argument about the mass killings being “embedded in the sociohistorical conditions from which the movement [of the forces of the Khmer Rouge] emerged that not only informed the desire for totalistic change but also accounted for the trajectories toward radical solutions and the permissibility of unbridled violence” (3). Moreover, Um mentions that the Khmer Rouge acted as “the vehicle of change” in face of “the compounded traumas of colonization, territorial loss, and betrayal [which] fostered an intense longing for national revival” (4). By situating the incident in a broader historical background and providing additional ties to Indochinese characters in France, Nguyen expands our understanding of the effects of the French colonial



empire in Cambodia. In terms of how this atrocity is represented, in *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work*, Cathy J. Schlund-Vials mentions that “American subjects are in amnesiac fashion, the tragic beneficiaries of ‘others’ politics,’ despite their intimate political, social, and cultural connections to the interventionist nation state” (75). Although Schlund-Vials focuses on American narratives, this idea could also be seen in narratives of other first-world countries that condemn the atrocity, yet ignore the underlying links their country has to the incident. For instance, in *The Committed*, while in a refugee camp in Indonesia, the French teachers asks the refugees to repeat in French: “Khmer Rouge” and “Pol Pot is evil” (119), which the protagonist later challenges by pointing out the regime’s ties to France. As a whole, by tracing the refugees’ routes and following the protagonist’s steps from the refugee camp to France, and hearing about the atrocities in Cambodia, Nguyen folds in multiple incidents and cases of violence experienced or heard by refugees. In addition, by tying in narratives and conversations about the Khmer Rouge, the novel can be seen as a text that contests other texts about the Khmer Rouge that seem to be written in “amnesiac fashion,” which sever the close historical links between countries (Schlund-Vials 75). This contestation makes *The Committed* a powerful criticism of violence, specifically of the French colonial empire.

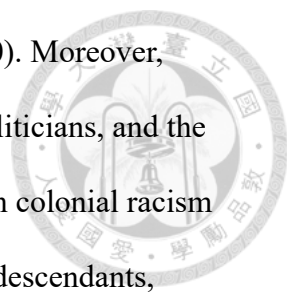
The Committed further follows the method of “critical juxtaposition” by illustrating that the places and events, and even the people involved are “fluid rather than static and need to be understood in *relation* to each other” (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 21). *The Committed* continues *The Sympathizer*’s plot in tracing the refugee protagonist’s route throughout his exile and along his journey in France. Following the protagonist’s perspective, the narrative intertwines criticism towards war violence, problematic representation, and the Khmer Rouge atrocities linked to the French

colonial empire. Moreover, the novel shows how these forms of violence are connected to one another as well as how trauma continues long after the official ends of incidents which are often erased with narratives of gratitude. Nguyen's novel not only disrupts the spatial and temporal boundaries of the Vietnam War, but also the violence of the communist regimes in Vietnam and in Cambodia and through the French colonial empire. The remnants of this violence show the long influence on individuals who still exist in the margins of the world. The protagonist's perspective re-centers the lives of people impacted by these forms of violence while also shedding light on links that may be glossed over or forgotten.

II. Dominant Narratives in France

In *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Nguyen focuses on the key idea of creating a "just memory" (12), a key term I have also discussed earlier in this thesis. More specifically, Nguyen argues that "[j]ust memory is only possible when the weak, the poor, the marginalized, the different, and the demonized, or their advocates can influence or even seize the industry of memory" (18). Although Nguyen's study aims to analyze the clash between the two main sides of the Vietnam War, the same idea can be used to discuss not only asymmetric representations of France and its inhabitants of Vietnamese descent but also among the Vietnamese in France. Building on the asymmetric relationships between the U.S. narratives and Vietnamese refugees discussed in the previous chapter, this section will dive into French narratives of immigrants and refugees that are dominant against the voices and narratives of the marginalized.

In his classic text *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon discusses his experience of being mistaken for an Arab. At this, he declares that "European civilization and its



agents of the highest caliber are responsible for colonial racism” (70). Moreover, Fanon contends that “colonialism is the work of adventurers and politicians, and the ‘best representatives’ keep themselves above the fray” (71-72). Such colonial racism and dominant attitude affect the lives of Arab immigrants and their descendants, possibly as well as people of different origins from throughout the French colonial empire. One such example lies in the names of immigrants, their descendants, and refugees. Names seem to represent, in a dominant French perspective, whether one is considered French or accepted as a member to be taken seriously by French society. For instance, immediately at the beginning of *The Committed* when the protagonist first arrived in France, he explains that his father is French and his name is Vo Danh. The officials respond: “No . . . you . . . are . . . definitely . . . not . . . French. Not . . . with . . . a . . . name . . . like . . . this” (4). Likewise, a character of Algerian descent named Said, who is an ex-drug dealer, is also faced with such an issue.¹¹ The Maoist PhD explains to the protagonist: “Said never could get a job with a name like Said . . . A meaningful job, that is. And he wouldn’t do something so simple as change his name” (58). In this case, Said’s name is not approved by the common French society. In other words, it would seem that the French disapprove of the narrative—implied by a name--of the immigrants’ descent. The French control the narrative of what names are acceptable and condemn foreign sounding names by depriving these individuals of opportunities to get jobs of higher social status. The same is later revealed about Said’s brother, who is the main rival and enemy of the protagonist. The character, nicknamed the Mona Lisa by the protagonist, explains why he wants to pursue the job of being a drug dealer: “I can speak fluent French. I was born here. But I could hear

¹¹ This character’s name is an apparent reference to the critic Edward Said, whose work I have discussed earlier in Chapter Two and whose work I will return to soon.

how their voices over the phone changed or see the look on their faces when they said my name, if I got that far. Moussa. That's not a French name, they would say, like they gave me the interview just to tell me that to my face" (240). Hence, the characters whose past is linked to the French colonial empire struggle to fit in the French society when they keep their names.

Another case where dominant narratives can be observed is from the newspaper or other narratives of the refugees that are controlled and produced by the French, and also expressed by the French characters. According to Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*, "[n]arrative itself is the representation of power, and its technology is associated with the global role of the West" (273). For instance, in the newspaper *L'Humanité*, the protagonist in *The Committed* is displeased with the photograph of the boat-people framing them as unfortunate and helpless. Accordingly, he argues that the same can be said about the pilgrims, who would likely appear very similar in their circumstances. The protagonist reasons that "[t]hose refugees [English Pilgrims] just happened to be fortunate that the soon-to-be-hapless natives did not have a camera to record them as foul-smelling, half-starved, unshaven, and lice-ridden lot that they were. In contrast, our misery was forever recorded in *L'Humanité*, where we were seen as anything but human" (35). Thus, a dominant representation of the refugees circulated in the photograph published by the newspaper, which describes them as objects needing rescue and as new arrivals needing resources from France. The protagonist continues to challenge the framing of the refugees as victims by reasoning that

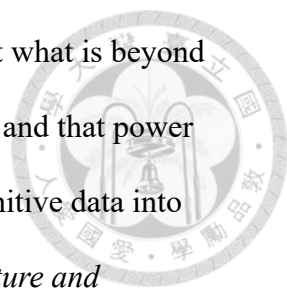
the boat people were not human, they did not get the benefit of some romantic painter casting them in oils, standing boldly on the prow of their sinking ships, facing the monstrous elements with the nobility of Greek heroes, . . . No, boat

people were victims, objects of pity fixed forever in newspaper photographs. (36)

By comparing the framing of pilgrims in portraits and refugees depicted in the photograph, the protagonist exposes the problematic representation that is controlled by first world countries such as France in producing and circulating these images and their framed meanings. The protagonist notices that “BFD held it [*L’Humanité*] up and pointed to the headline about *les boat-people* and a photograph of a trawler floating in the ocean, as crowded with my countrymen as a metro train at rush hour” (35). While the photo in the newspaper shows the singular image of the refugees crammed together like “objects of rescue” (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 10), it fails to tell the story of what the refugees experienced from their points of view, as subjects, on their water expedition. The protagonist responds to the image by thinking to himself that

while a rider endures the train’s conditions for only a number of minutes, my countrymen endured their conditions for days and weeks, under full exposure to the sun, wind, and rain, pirates dropping in periodically to select the most succulent parts of the cargo and sharks swimming alongside to window-shop, gazing longingly at the fresh cuts of meat on display. (35)

The boat-people’s harsh and painful experiences as subjects of the journey appear to have been simplified and framed as objects yearning the support of first-world countries like France. To add to the narrative of the image on the newspaper’s portrayal, the BFD says to the protagonist: “Very sad . . . You, too. A boat person. Like them. Verrry saaad. They have nothing. We have everything. We must help them. We must help you” (35). The BFD’s comment also seems to center on the needs of the refugees rather than discussions on the violence that caused their exile and the struggles that the refugees endured. Such a comment echoes Edward Said’s



observation that “the power even in casual conversation to represent what is beyond metropolitan borders derives from the power of an imperial society, and that power takes the discursive form of reshaping or reordering of ‘raw’ or primitive data into local conventions of European narrative and formal utterance” (*Culture and Imperialism* 99). Furthermore, in a conversation between the French characters the BFD and the Maoist PhD, the idea of the French rescuing the helpless refugees is also brought up as the protagonist notices that “their [BFD and Maoist PhD’s] affirmation that France must continue to be a country of hospitality for immigrants and asylum for refugees, like those from Indochina” (126). Thus, it seems that the French are dominant in presenting themselves as the generous heroes that the refugees must rely on. The refugees, on the other hand, lack the resources and the influence to change this portrayal. As Edward Said observes, “[t]he power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them” (*Culture and Imperialism* xiii).

Uneven representation can also appear within the Vietnamese in France, divided between the two contesting Vietnamese political communities: the pro-Hanoi faction and the anticommunist faction. Such division is scrutinized in Gisele L. Bousquet’s *Behind the Bamboo Hedge: The Impact of Homeland Politics in the Parisian Vietnamese Community*. Bousquet contends that “Vietnamese immigrants and refugees arrived in their host countries already distinct as a culturally and politically self-identified ethnic group” (169). In terms of the difference in the goals of the two sides, Bousquet explains that, “[t]he UGVF [Union Générale des Vietnamiens en France] members, in the pro-Hanoi faction, stress integrating the Vietnamese into French society, maintaining Vietnamese cultural identity, and creating a community to

support the Hanoi government” (174). In *The Committed*, the protagonist and his friend Bon joins the Union with the secret aim of corrupting the communist members. In their participation of the Union, they performed representations of Vietnam. As for the other side, Bousquet notes:

The anticommunist organizations’ members, on the other hand, focus on competing with the UGVF for political power in the Parisian Vietnamese community by trying to gain support among newly arrived refugees . . . They also want the refugees to believe that they will be able to return to Vietnam after an overthrow of the communist Hanoi regime. (174)

The anticommunist organization appears in *The Committed* when members of the Association for Free Vietnamese people are protesting outside the Tet show hosted by the Union. Accordingly, by incorporating the conflicts of the two groups, the novel not only reveals the issue of dominant narratives produced and represented by the French media via newspapers but also the uneven opportunities to represent their positions between the divided groups. The Union of the Advancement of Vietnamese Culture in the novel stresses the importance of “promoting the learning of Vietnamese language, celebrating Vietnamese culture, advocating for the Vietnamese community’s interest in France” (60-61), thus arranging and rehearsing performances to represent their vision of Vietnamese culture and Vietnam. However, this representation is opposed by the Association for Free Vietnamese People, who are protesting outside the venue of the Tet show. Bon explains that “[t]he Association for Free Vietnamese People. They’ve decided they’re not going to let the communists of the Union speak for all Vietnamese people” (185). In other words, the Tet cultural show produced by one side holds a form of representation while there are other Vietnamese who hold different viewpoints that are not acknowledged in this form of representation and

refuse to be silenced.

Overall, *The Committed* sheds light on events of asymmetric or unequal opportunities of representation in France. It seems that those who hold the means of representation whether it is through newspapers or cultural performances are able to frame history and incidents in particular ways that fits the groups' interest. Nguyen's novel may also read as a reminder of the complexity of historical incidents and that there are other attitudes, narratives, and potential struggles that remain inadequately acknowledged. The issue of the asymmetric relations of groups leading to the asymmetric representation of refugees and Indochina is, thus, unveiled through the displeased and critical eyes of the protagonist.

III. Representations of Empire

In *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Nguyen maintains that a good war story is determined based on "both the content of a war story and how it is told" (223). According to Nguyen, "[a] true war story should not tell only of the soldier but also what happened to her or him after war's end. A true war story should also tell of the civilian, the refugee, the enemy, and most importantly, the war machine that encompasses them all" (224). The above-mentioned features are also displayed in *The Committed* as it depicts the French colonial empire through a refugee narrator as he witnesses the representations of the events he has experienced. To better understand the issues and limitations of representation, this section focuses on some of the problematic representations depicted in *The Committed*. While the representations in the previous chapter center on the narrative of the Vietnam War and its refugees, this section will draw attention to representations of the boat-people, Vietnamese immigrants in France, and the French colonial empire displayed in the novel. The

discrepancy between the shown representations and the protagonist's comments or experiences help to illuminate how the complexity of historical events may often "be stamped flat" (Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* 30).

A case of problematic representation is displayed in Nguyen's novel in one of the songs at the end of *Fantasia*. While the ending song to *Fantasia* is about expressing gratitude to host countries, the protagonist disapproves of such a mode of representation by challenging "the endless, schmaltzy gratitude that host countries demanded for refugees who came from countries raped and bombed by the host countries" (70). The song expresses only gratitude without acknowledging the sources of violence. If according to Mimi Thi Nguyen, "the refugee patriot is an imperial figure who is rescued from an outside to incarnate the continuous histories of liberal war that claim to produce . . . the structures and sensibilities of freedom" (135), perhaps the same can be said about the narratives of gratitude which overlook the violence of war and colonialism. Moreover, the story of the song also presents an optimistic tale of refugees and immigrants who have sought refuge in the U.S. In the story, as the man flees the war to reunite with his wife in America, he "escaped on a refugee boat--no, not a boat, a 'vessel,' . . . Surviving that odyssey, he made it to America. Here he was reunited with his wife, who wore a very flattering miniskirt, and his boy and girls, who were impossibly cute and talented, playing the piano and violin, respectively, as their parents embraced" (70). The optimistic refugee exile experience creates a stark contrast with Bon's experience of losing both his wife and son along with his exile. The tragic accident of their deaths while fleeing Vietnam is depicted in *The Sympathizer*.

Another discrepancy appears between the representation of rural Vietnam presented through the culture show's performance and the narrator's memory and

comments about it. According to Said in *Culture and Imperialism*, “representation of what lay beyond insular or metropolitan boundaries came, almost from the start, to confirm European power” (106). In a similar way, the culture show depicted in *The Committed* focuses on farm life of Vietnam over other aspects of Vietnamese culture.

The protagonist observes that the performance included an idealistic farm lifestyle, different from the actual scenery in Vietnam. Yet, he exclaims: “[n]o matter! The mission of the culture show was to compete with the charms of French life by showing the charms of Vietnamese life” (73). The juxtaposition of the content of the show and the real-life circumstances witnessed by the protagonist exposes how the culture shows portrays an idealized and glorified version of life in Vietnam. This comparison also acts as a criticism to artistic representations that may be used as propaganda to direct attention to the positive aspects while glossing over imperfect realities. Moreover, the Chairman’s speech of gratitude towards France seems to represent only part of the influences and sentiments of the Vietnamese to France, ignoring the Vietnamese that are outside protesting. The protagonist comments that the Chairman “[has] recounted the Union’s history, the importance of Vietnamese culture, and the gratitude of the Vietnamese to France, although he [the Chairman] mentioned nothing about the Association protesting outside” (189). In other words, the speech from the Chairman is only a selected representation of Vietnamese attitudes towards France. In terms of the issue of French colonization of Vietnam that is addressed in the cultural show, the BFD says in his speech that

[a]s regrettable as French colonization was, we never committed the horrors the Americans did. And we left behind culture . . . We came to Indochina with noble intentions. We brought liberty, equality, and fraternity. [applause] We built roads. We built canals and drained swamps. We built Saigon . . . Your presence in

France shows us that we can put the past behind us. (191-92)

The BFD's speech stresses the positive aspects of France colonialism in Vietnam. By stressing these aspects, his speech omits the complex nature of colonialism, the violence, and the remnants of empire that follow. Noticing that the BFD's speech seems to be approved by the Vietnamese French in the Union, the protagonist challenges that "these revolutionaries became the indigestible Vietnamese, the ones who could not swallow France and who could not be swallowed. As for the Vietnamese who stayed in France, French culture had chewed on them since they were in Vietnam" (192). The speech fails to include the struggles, the traumas of some, that exist because of this history.

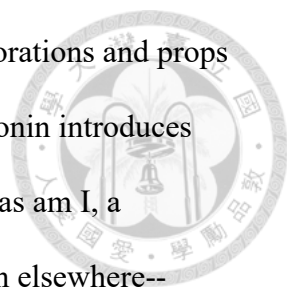
Another problematic representation that presents a singular and biased point of view is the performance of the culture show that is scripted by the Chairman. The story behind the performance, as the protagonist describes, is about a poor Vietnamese man who

by dint of hard work and the benevolent French educational system, wins a scholarship to France, where by dint of hard work and the benevolent French culture, he becomes a doctor, who, by dint of hard work and the benevolence of a French family, wins the love of a winsome French (white) girl who, . . . raising two lovely French children, who have absolutely no problems in being French despite their mixed heritage. (192-93)

The narrative of this story is simply everything positive about life offered by France. It portrays a stereotypical positive representation of an immigrant's success in life, omitting the struggles of becoming a part of France thanks to French colonization. To challenge this rosy representation of the French empire in Vietnam, the protagonist describes the story of his mother and the traumatic great famine that almost killed her.

While such atrocity affected a million people it was “such a paradoxically forgettable event. They died without the benefit of having their picture taken so that the world, or even just the Vietnamese, might remember” (193). Such juxtaposition shows that the more gruesome aspects of colonial history are forgotten and glossed over by focusing on the good deeds of the French colonizers. This description also shows how a side of history lacks photographs, and perhaps also narratives, that could detail this famine. Instead, without proper records of this past, such atrocity appears to be lost and forgotten with time, while only one side of colonization becomes familiar to future generations.

Still another representation of the French colonial empire that is depicted in *The Committed* appears in the blackmail of rich, white men masked at an exotic party. In this party, the workers from the aforementioned Heaven serve as the waiters of this party, dressed as the colonized. Their roles are also part of the exotic theme to satisfy the colonial fantasies of the clients. Focusing on the colonial fantasies that are enjoyed by a group of French men, *The Committed* seems to echo Edward Said’s argument that “we must try to look carefully and integrally at the culture that nurtured the sentiment, rationale, and above all, the imagination of empire” (*Culture and Imperialism* 12). Regarding the props and decorations for the exotic party, the attires of the workers are detailed in the novel. To begin with, the bodyguard from Heaven, described by the narrator as the exchatological muscle, wears “only a white loincloth wrapped around his hips, an iron collar around his neck” (243). Hence, the bodyguard appears to be dressed as the submissive and colonized. The Ronin’s and the narrator’s outfits are also described, with them respectively as the stereotypical colonizer and the colonized: “The Ronin wore colonial casual: white linen suit, white linen shirt, and brown oxfords. My Vietnamese garb was a brown ao dai and black silk pants, topped



by a black fedora [hat]" (244). The workers are thus reduced as decorations and props to satisfy the clients' tastes and imaginations of the exotic. As the Ronin introduces the party by saying to the clients: "You are adventurers, gentlemen, as am I, a Frenchman born on Indochinese soil, as some of you have been born elsewhere-- Algerian, Morocco, New Caledonia. We are united here in our love of the foreign and our taste for the exotic" (249). Hence, the party is aimed at satisfying the nostalgic colonial fantasies of the clients. Playing on these stereotypes illuminates the problem of stereotypes for it, as Homi K. Bhabha contends, "is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, . . . constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject" (75). The representation of the colonial and the colonized displayed in the party is thus a problematic and reductive portrayal of the colonial past.

The Ronin, as the host of the party, introduces to the clients the objects of representation, the prostitutes that are dressed as the colonized. He describes to the guests that they

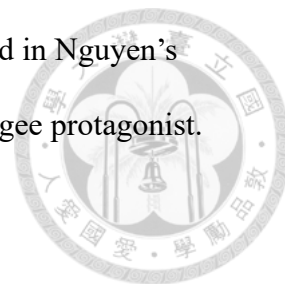
will return to the origins of the world--no, not the Congo or the Nile, but . . . between the voluptuous thighs of Princess Tam-Tam, in the Golden Triangle of the Dragon Lady, in the hothouse of this forbidden harem. Here you are the sultan, the despot, the colon, the white man exploring the dark continent with a whip in your hand. There are mysterious ladies to be conquered. (250)

The theme of the exotic party is displayed through the workers, the prostitutes, and also the clients themselves. The clients are dressed as the colonizers, or as some, described by the narrator, poor and stereotypical representations of the colonized or simply, wild. Such representations seem to be an example of what Edward Said describes: "the arts of narrative and observation about the accumulated, dominated,

and ruled territories whose inhabitants seem destined never to escape, to remain creatures of European will” (*Culture and Imperialism* 132). Observing the guests, the protagonist thinks: “A couple had me very concerned with their varieties of Oriental robes and turbans with some kind of Middle Eastern or North African origin. One of them even had his face blackened with what appeared to be shoe polish. . . I’m Aladdin, he said proudly” (246-47). These outfits are what the clients or guests wore to satisfy their exotic fantasies. As Bhabha argues, “colonial fantasy plays a crucial part in those everyday scenes of subjectification in a colonial society” (81). In this case, the exotic party recreates scenes and imaginations of various colonial societies and uses such representations to make the guests feel empowered. One problematic portrayal of the colonized is displayed as the narrator observes, “I tried not to be disturbed by the necklace of human ears around his neck, which on closer inspection were dried peaches” (253). The guests, in this case, seem to participate in a stereotypical role-play of the colonized and the exotic, presented here as a farce.

All in all, problematic representations are illustrated and critiqued in Nguyen’s text through the perspectives of the protagonist as he dwells among the Vietnamese immigrants, refugees, as well as immigrants and their descendants from Indochina and Arabia. Apart from the French, the people who find their lives intersected with one another through the French imperial past are displayed to play a role in both being represented and representing their pasts and themselves for a wide array of reasons, from being pressured by first-world countries to actively using representation to commit fraud and violence. By telling such stories, *The Committed* sheds light on the idea that representation can be used and abused in multiple situations not only by those from first-world countries, but also by immigrants, refugees, or descendants of people from Indochina or other former colonized parts of the world. The problems,

distortions, and erasures marking these representations are unraveled in Nguyen's novel through the observations and critiques of the Vietnamese refugee protagonist.



Chapter Four

Conclusion

This thesis has explored how Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* follow some of the key concepts of Critical Refugee Studies as the two novels not only expose the violence but also disrupt the temporal and spatial boundaries of the Vietnam War and the French colonial empire. These novels do so by tracing the routes and perspectives of a Vietnamese refugee protagonist and narrator through his exile to the U.S. and to France. By placing this Vietnamese narrator as the subject, another kind of narrative appears, one that can challenge some of the popular official narratives of first-world countries. The novels, following Critical Refugee Studies, can help "to expose the hidden violence behind the humanitarian term *refuge*, thus undercutting the rescue-and-liberation narrative that erases the U.S. role in inducing the refugee crisis in the first place" (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 48). Moreover, the novels, similar to the goal stated in Espiritu's *Body Counts*, "mark the broken trajectories as well as the moments of action as refugees search for and insist on their right to more" (14). When read together, the novels push the temporal and spatial boundaries of the Vietnam War to stitch together and critique other forms of violence such as those performed by the French colonial empire and the killings of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. In other words, these novels help to further broaden the scope in which the concepts of Critical Refugee Studies can be understood and applied.

This thesis has looked into the remnants of the Vietnam War and the French colonial empire as they are depicted in Nguyen's novels. It has argued that focusing on such depictions can not only challenge official narratives and representations of these histories but also unveil some of the struggles and traumas that continue to haunt individuals throughout their refuge in first-world countries. Hence, Nguyen's



novels provide other representations helping to show the complexities of atrocities and violent historical events that may otherwise have been embellished or glossed over. His works thereby shed light on other possible narratives and stories that have been too long neglected, marginalized, or erased.

In addition, this thesis has also paid attention to Nguyen's critique of problematic representations of Indochinese people, particularly Vietnamese, and the intersections of their histories with varying forms of first-world support and violence. Thus, the title of this thesis--"Representing Remnants of War and Empire"--indicates the thesis's aim to discuss how the Vietnamese refugees' encounters with war and empire have been problematically represented and portrayed in certain narratives. In terms of representation, this thesis has emphasized the issue of who controls representation, especially the presence and phenomenon of asymmetric representation, and what is represented. Interestingly, Nguyen's novels not only address the asymmetrical representation of war and colonialism, but also how the Vietnamese in France have been divided by their political beliefs and have fought over how their history should be represented. Such conflicts further complicate the issue of how representation can be abused and controlled by a certain group, and not simply between the Indochinese and the U.S., or the formerly colonized and the colonizer. The discrepancies in the different narratives may lead one to think about the role and influence of such representations. Furthermore, in *The Committed*, Nguyen includes characters from other Indochinese countries and also North Africa and Arabia. These remnants of the French colonial empire meet in France and, through depictions of their interactions and perspectives, Nguyen not only places as subjects Vietnamese refugees but also other refugees, immigrants, and their descendants. Doing so allows the critique of the French empire developed in his work to be more nuanced and complex.

The main settings in Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*, namely the U.S. and France, are well-known host countries for Vietnamese refugees. Apart from these Western countries, there are also other refugee routes in Asia that are not often mentioned or discussed. To further broaden the scope of future scholarship, it is necessary to continue to trace other lesser-known routes that Vietnamese refugees have taken but which may have been marginalized or forgotten over time. Including these routes not only sheds light on more hidden refugee stories but also displays the relevance of Critical Refugee Studies elsewhere. One of these routes led refugees to Penghu, a site of increasing critical scrutiny.

For example, Asio Liu (劉吉雄), a Taiwanese film director who is currently working on illuminating the Penghu refugee camp whose history risks being forgotten due to the demolition of the refugee camp in 2003, has planned and partially completed a film trilogy: *Place of Exception: Penghu Vietnamese Refugee Camps in Taiwan Strait* (例外之地), *Chin-Liu-Tao* (金六刀), and *Refugee Boats to Penghu* (難民船). These films-in-progress focus on documenting the different refugee stories linked to the camp.¹² Moreover, in *Chin-Liu-Tao*, Liu also mentions the Khmer Rouge killings. In this case, Liu appears to be searching for and trying to make sense of the connections between these historical atrocities in Indochina and Taiwan. Similar to the idea of placing refugees as subjects and tracing their routes as developed by Critical Refugee Studies, Liu uses another form of knowledge production--documentary films--to illuminate more stories and narratives interlinking Vietnam, Cambodia, and Taiwan. In the podcast interview, "Film Chat--Vietnamese Refugee Camps in Penghu, with Director Asio Liu," hosted by Lara Momesso, Liu

¹² For more information and updates on Asio Liu's trilogy in progress, see <https://www.facebook.com/penghu.refugee.camps>.

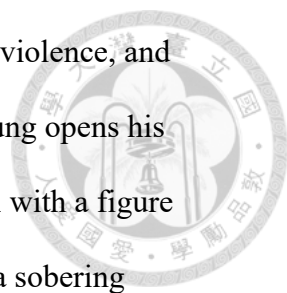
mentions that Taiwan's Indochinese refugee camps in Penghu are "not officially listed and included in the UN's records for the global refugees" (Momesso 6:35). Accordingly, Liu further explains that "even though we [Taiwan] have accommodated more than two thousand refugees during 1977 to 1988, those records are not officially included in the UN. So basically, stories of these refugee people during these twelve years are . . . forgotten by the world" (Momesso 6:50). By tracing and collecting limited resources and archival materials on this history, Liu uncovers an arguably forgotten history of the Penghu camp--at least in UN records--as part of a route taken by Vietnamese refugees after the Vietnam War. Liu's ambition is to "build . . . a museum virtually" (Momesso 23:10) through his film project "for [a] global audience to feel related or to reconnect with the life stories of the refugees of war" (Momesso 23:58). Once completed and released, Liu's work as a director may help to illuminate a broader map of the routes and stories of the boat-people. Just as Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* uncover the routes of the refugees and tell their stories by placing them as subjects, Liu's trilogy in progress seeks to present the narratives of refugees whose stories may disappear and be forgotten with time.

Most recently, *A Camp Unknown* (彼岸他方) (2023), a documentary produced by the Taiwanese film director Awei Liu (劉建偉) along with executive producer Asio Liu, introduces the history of the demolished Indochinese refugee camps in Penghu and its refugees currently living in Taiwan and abroad.¹³ This documentary folds in miscellaneous materials--including face-to-face interviews, online interviews, photographs, news clips, archival materials, and books--to piece together a history of refugee passage. While this film is similar to earlier works in following Critical

¹³ *A Camp Unknown* was aired on Taiwan Public Television Service (公共電視台) on 23 Feb. 2023. For more information on this documentary, see <https://www.pts.org.tw/ptsdocs2021/f19.html>.

Refugee Studies as it extends the boundaries of the Vietnam War from the refugee survivors' points of view, *A Camp Unknown* distinguishes itself by placing great emphasis on Taiwan's role in saving these refugees and of the refugees' gratitude. Similar to Nghia M. Vo's *The Vietnamese Boat People, 1954 and 1975-1992*, which was previously mentioned and discussed in the Introduction, Awei Liu's documentary acknowledges the routes of the refugees of the Vietnam War and the history behind the war, but nevertheless arguably places the refugee survivors as "objects of rescue" (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 10), focusing on presenting the refugees' gratitude, good memories in the Penghu refugee camp, how they received better care than the refugees in other camps in neighboring Asian countries.

In response to *A Camp Unknown*, Han Cheung in "Taiwan in Time: Refugee Haven in Penghu," briefly summarizes the documentary in three sections: "Destination Not Taiwan," "Rediscovery," and "Returning to Penghu." Cheung begins his article with the painting of the Thanh Phong vessel that brought Vietnamese refugees to Taiwan, a painting which was hung in the Penghu refugee camp. In "Destination not Taiwan," Cheung also notes the documentary's introduction of Taiwan's international situation during the Vietnam War and how "[t]he government later directed Taiwanese ships to rescue any refugees they found drifting in the ocean" in order for, in Caritas nun Lee Ling-Ling's (李玲玲) words, "'the Republic of China (ROC) to prove through humanitarian assistance that it's not a cold hearted country.'" Finally, in "Returning to Penghu," Cheung observes how "the documentary features a few [refugees born in the Penghu refugee camp] who returned recently to find their roots." By addressing these issues, Cheung's article sheds light not only on the significance of Awei Liu's documentary in tracing and uncovering a forgotten history



in Penghu, unfamiliar to even many locals, but also on the traumas, violence, and tragedies that were experienced by the survivors. For instance, Cheung opens his article by describing the painting of the Thanh Phong refugee vessel with a figure “hacking away at the head of a dead body.” This painting serves as a sobering reflection of the violence and tragedy on Vietnamese refugee vessels. Cheung also notes “the tragic events of the Thanh Phong [vessel]—where only 34 of 146 passengers survived 66 brutal days at sea in 1978,” with lives lost at sea due to “piracy, storms and accidents.” Cheung thereby emphasizes the tragic side of the history rather than on the refugees’ gratitude for Taiwan’s humanitarian aid. He closes his article with an interview with Ms. Le, a refugee and survivor from the Thanh Phong. The author points out that although there are good memories in Penghu for Ms. Le, “it [memories of the camp] reminded her of the tragic fate of her mother, sister and two brothers, who were among the 30 people who died on the rescue boat to Taiwan.”¹⁴

If the refugees’ routes from Vietnam to the U.S. and to France have not been consistently remembered and recognized by the public, the routes of the refugees to Penghu are even more marginal. In this case, it is important to consider the narrative elsewhere in addition to focusing on the links between Vietnam and the U.S. and France. Considering more possible routes and narratives will help to broaden the map of how the Vietnam War has influenced people and how many countries have been entangled with its impact and its remnants. As part of this broader project, Asio Liu’s

¹⁴ For further clarification on the number of refugees that lost their lives, the article previously mentions that only 34 of 146 people from the Thanh Phong vessel survived, which would mean that 112 people lost their lives at sea. In the interview with Ms. Le, she said that her family is among the 30 people who lost their lives on the rescue boat to Taiwan. Presumably, out of the 112 people who lost their lives, 30 of them lost their lives while on the rescue boat. The rescue boat mentioned above is not the same as the Thanh Phong.

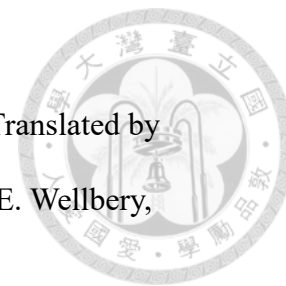
and Awei Liu's films shed light on some of the complexities and entanglements that were involved. Such features in these works echo art's potential role in "just memory" as discussed in Nguyen's in *Nothing Ever Dies* (12). As Nguyen stresses, "after the official memos and speeches are forgotten, the history books ignored, and the powerful are dust, art remains" (12). Hence, Asio Liu's and Awei Liu's projects--despite their shortcomings--exemplify how marginalized histories can be excavated and acknowledged.

Conducting this research--that is, discussing Viet Thanh Nguyen's two novels, *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*, and the broader implications of representing the Vietnam War and the French colonial empire--in a Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures in Taiwan can help to illuminate some of the links and connections that Taiwan has with the Vietnam War and refugees. More specifically, the fuller implications of Critical Refugee Studies can allow us to reflect on how Taiwan and Taiwanese texts can be part of the discussion on the Vietnam War. This research also has the potential to strengthen our understanding of the connections between Taiwan and Southeast Asian countries, which are not often discussed in departments of foreign languages and literatures in Taiwan. By turning to the Indochinese refugee camps in Penghu, this thesis hopes to call attention to some additional complexities and hidden links Taiwan has with the Vietnam War, showing not only the widespread influence of a war, but also bringing to light more stories that have not circulated widely. There are, nevertheless, limitations to this research. My research on representations of refugees, for example, lacks sources that are written in Vietnamese, which may provide other perspectives that this research fails to cover. The limitations in this research may be developed into future projects that fold in more narratives that are not written or told in English or in Chinese. My research hopes to pave the way

for more discussion about Critical Refugee Studies, *The Sympathizer*, and *The Committed*, not only centered in the U.S. or composed in English but also linking other places such as Taiwan, places with stories waiting to be heard.



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