



## Individual trauma, collective memory, and counter-memory: Writing memory in *the Sympathizer*

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### Abstract

Vietnam War narratives constitute a battleground of competing representations, where multiple actors struggle to assert their versions of history. Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* interrogates dominant narratives of the Vietnam War through the confessional voice of its nameless, biracial narrator—a communist double agent embedded among South Vietnamese exiles in the United States. Through the lens of psychoanalysis, postcolonial theory, and memory studies, this paper argues that *The Sympathizer* exposes the limitations and ideological biases of dominant Vietnam War narratives by examining the interplay between personal trauma and collective memory. Through its confessional, ironic narrative mode, the novel performs an act of counter-memory that challenges official histories and re-centers marginalized Vietnamese voices. The analysis demonstrates that memory is not static or singular, but rather a dynamic, contested space shaped by power, identity, and resistance.

**Keywords:** *The Sympathizer*, Vietnam, war narratives, individual trauma, collective memory, counter-memory

### Introduction

Vietnam War narratives serve as a contested space of conflicting representations, where various voices compete to define and assert their interpretations of history. Federic Jameson believes that the Vietnam War is “the first terrible postmodernist war” (Chapman 28). For Jameson, the war was “terrible” not only for its violence but because it disrupted traditional ways of understanding truth, history, and identity. Published in 2015, Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* centers on a nameless narrator, a half-French, half-Vietnamese communist double agent, who escapes to the United States with the remnants of the South Vietnamese army and later became a Vietnamese refugee in the United States, covertly reporting to the North the anti-communist activities of South Vietnamese exiles in America. Sandra Kumamoto Stanley observes that *The Sympathizer* doesn't just tell a refugee story—it actively performs the complexity of refugee memory and identity. It engages the reader in ethical reflection and challenges boundaries “between the individual self and revolutionary self, between the ‘I’ as self and the ‘we’ as a collective other, between the writer and the reader, between the reader and character” (297). Structured as a confession addressed to an unnamed commandant, the narrative weaves together themes of identity, betrayal, memory, and ideology. Through satire, metafiction, and political commentary, Nguyen dismantles dominant American narratives of the Vietnam War, offering instead a complex, subversive account told from a marginalized perspective.

Judith Butler in *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Points out that dominant political and media frameworks condition us to grieve certain lives—typically those aligned with national or imperial interests—while others are systematically dehumanized or excluded from the sphere of mournable life. Butler claims that “Forms of racism instituted and active at the level of perception tend to produce iconic versions of populations who are eminently grievable, and others whose loss is no loss, and who remain ungrievable.” (24)

*The Sympathizer* dramatizes this process and exposes how both American and Vietnamese revolutionary discourses deny subjectivity to the Vietnamese civilian majority, especially those who do not fit heroic or sacrificial molds. The novel challenges binary notions of East and West, victor and victim, while exposing the moral ambiguities and psychological toll of war, exile, and divided loyalties.

In *The Sympathizer*, Viet Thanh Nguyen crafts a narrative that foregrounds memory not merely as recollection but as a battleground for identity, ideology, and historical truth. In the narratives of the Vietnam War, different cultures and ideologies compete for discursive dominance, reshaping war memory through forms of epistemological violence. Roberta Wolfson notes that the novel criticizes “unethical memory campaigns run by the major parties involved in the war (specifically the United States, South Vietnam, and North Vietnam), all of whom manipulate language and storytelling to justify their inhumane actions as morally righteous” (58). Memory is a central thematic and structural element in the Vietnam War and Vietnamese American novels. Boasman points out that there has been renewed “emphasis on the role of memory and on questions of how to mourn the dead, remember the missing, and consider the place of survivors in Vietnamese American literature about the Vietnam War.” (Bosman, 4)

The United States exemplifies a nation that employs unjust memory by downplaying its role in the Vietnam War and presenting its actions as a moral stand against communism. In 1977, Jimmy Carter described U.S. intervention in Vietnam as heroic, insisting the destruction was mutual and that the U.S. had no intention of conquest, but aimed to protect South Vietnamese freedom. In 1980, Ronald Reagan labeled the national reluctance to engage in future wars as “Vietnam Syndrome,” a mistaken belief that the war was driven by imperialism, and reimagined it as a humanitarian mission. In 1990, George H. W. Bush echoed this view, comparing U.S. actions in Iraq and Vietnam as necessary for defending human rights. Andrew Priest argues that “The wide range of literature on the Vietnam syndrome demonstrates a continued fascination with the war in the

United States and its impact on the conduct of US foreign policy. While the ‘lessons’ of Vietnam remain contested, it is striking that the rhetoric politicians have used to discuss the war is highly consistent. With few exceptions, all presidents from Gerald Ford to George W. Bush have framed the war as a ‘noble cause.’” (Priest 169)

When discussing Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer*, Stanley argues that “At the heart of his work, Nguyen is searching for the concept of a just memory, exploring how one mourns for one’s own losses and those suffered by others (including the enemy), how one recognizes one’s own humanity and inhumanity, and how memory can be weaponized in the industrialization of memory” (Stanley 283). In *The Sympathizer*, Viet Thanh Nguyen intricately weaves together individual trauma, collective memory, and counter-memory to critique dominant historical narratives of the Vietnam War. The narrator’s personal trauma—rooted in war, exile, and fractured identity—manifests in his divided consciousness as a spy who belongs simultaneously to both sides and neither. He was both a subordinate to a South Vietnamese general and a spy sent by the North, and this in-between identity filled him with both fear and unease. At the same time, the novel interrogates collective memory, which constructed a selective, self-centered narrative that centers American experiences while marginalizing or erasing Vietnamese voices. As Chattarji notes, memories of the Vietnam War have, for the most part, been dominated by white American male voices (Chattarji 416).

Nguyen challenges this hegemonic narrative through metafictional strategies and biting satire, exposing how the Vietnamese experience is often erased or silenced in mainstream discourse. This paper argues that *The Sympathizer* reveals the limitations and biases of dominant Vietnam War narratives by exploring the intersection of personal trauma and collective memory. Through its confessional and ironic mode, the novel enacts counter-memory that challenges official histories and reclaims Vietnamese voices. The analysis shows that memory is not a fixed entity but a dynamic and contested space shaped by identity, power, and resistance.

### **The Rupture of Individual Defense Mechanisms: The Narrator’s Individual Trauma**

Defense mechanisms are unconscious psychological strategies used by individuals to protect themselves from anxiety, internal conflicts, or distressing thoughts and emotions. They are defined by the American Psychiatric Association as “automatic psychological mechanisms that mediate the individual’s reaction to emotional conflicts and to internal or external stressors”(Di Giuseppe 2) Originally developed in psychoanalytic theory, especially by Sigmund Freud and later expanded by his daughter Anna Freud, these mechanisms such as repression, denial, displacement and identification help the mind cope with reality and maintain a stable sense of self.

Allan Young believes that “The concept of pain has two components. One is associated with physical, biological response, the other is associated with psychological or spiritual angst. The word trauma has become linked with both of these states of pain, and how they are processed in the memory.” (245) The narrator’s psychological fragmentation in *The Sympathizer* emerges from the rupture of his defense mechanisms, revealing how trauma distorts memory, identity, and moral reasoning.

Individual trauma refers to the psychological and emotional response of a person to a deeply distressing or disturbing experience that overwhelms their ability to cope. It is marked by a rupture in the person’s sense of safety, identity, or meaning, often leaving lasting effects on memory, behavior, and emotional regulation. Repression is a central concept in Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. It refers to the unconscious process by which the mind pushes distressing memories, thoughts, or desires out of conscious awareness in order to protect the individual from psychological harm. However, repression does not erase these experiences—they remain active in the unconsciousness and may resurface in disguised or distorted forms. Freud argued that what is repressed often returns—what he famously called the “return of the repressed.” This return can manifest through: dreams, neurotic symptoms (e.g., anxiety, compulsions), slips of the tongue, etc.

Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), builds on psychoanalytic theory (especially Freud) to explore how trauma resists full representation and creates a crisis in understanding, memory, and language. According to Caruth, “In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11) Caruth argues that trauma is not fully experienced at the moment it occurs. The mind is overwhelmed and cannot process the event consciously, so the trauma is only known belatedly, through its recurrence in flashbacks, nightmares, or compulsive repetitions. She holds that traumatic events are often “unclaimed”—they remain unresolved in the psyche and return involuntarily. This makes trauma unavailable to direct narration or memory, yet it demands expression. Caruth emphasizes that trauma speaks through gaps, silences, and indirect forms, not through straightforward storytelling. Literature, in her view, is a powerful medium because it can give form to the unspeakable through metaphor, fragmentation, and narrative disjunction.

At the beginning of *The Sympathizer*, the protagonist has already revealed his split identity as a double agent. “I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces” (1). His “double consciousness” is represented in his double identity. In the novel, at the heart of the narrator’s trauma is his fractured identity: he is a man of mixed race (half-French, half-Vietnamese), a “bastard”, a cultural hybrid, and a political double agent. As a US professor comments on his origins, “Mixing native flora with a foreign plant oftentimes has tragic consequences, as your own experience may have taught you” (Nguyen 63).

This Orientalist and essentialist view of identity makes the narrator feel trapped in the cocoon of his dual identity, unable to find a way out. The narrator struggles throughout his life between these two identities but ultimately fails to find liberation. His dual allegiances—to the South Vietnamese army in exile and to the North Vietnamese communists—produce a constant state of inner conflicts. He is never fully at home in either ideological camp, nor fully accepted by either side. This hybrid identity leads to his tragic childhood. “My mother was native, my father was foreign, and strangers and acquaintances had enjoyed reminding me of this ever since my childhood, spitting on me and calling me bastard, although sometimes, for variety,

they called me bastard before they spit on me” (25). The narrator remembers that during the New Year holiday, he is excluded from the tradition of children receiving red envelopes, a rejection underscored by his cousin’s harsh declaration: “[he’s] a bastard” (141), which produces a profound psychological toll.

In *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Nguyen observes that “all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory” (4). By this, Nguyen suggests that memory is itself a battlefield, and that wars live on through the ways people remember, forget, or retell them—often with political, cultural, and emotional implications.

The narrator’s journey as a refugee was likewise filled with traumatic memories. The end of the Vietnam War brought about one of the largest refugee crises of the late 20th century. The narrator recalls his perilous journey of escape. As he and the General were preparing to board the last flight to the United States, they were caught in a horrific attack at the airport. His friend Bon lost his wife and son in the explosion that killed them instantly, leaving him to carry a lifetime of grief. Bon’s experience also represents the difficult path to survival faced by countless refugees.

Postwar Vietnam faced numerous hardships, including extreme poverty, massive unemployment, limited food supplies, and political corruption. These conditions drove many to risk their lives crossing the sea to reach developed Western countries with the help of human smugglers. Beginning in 1975, over the next two decades, more than three million people fled Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, many of them by boat, and died on the way.

If those refugees are fortunate enough to arrive in the United States, they still faced the painful life of refugee camps. The trauma of being a refugee in a camp is profound and multifaceted, often marked by physical deprivation, emotional dislocation, and a deep sense of uncertainty about the future. Without a homeland, identity, or sense of belonging, they lost their freedom and independence in the camps, forced to live a life of humiliation and without privacy. Even those fortunate enough to leave the camps carried the deep stigma of their refugee status, facing discrimination from others in job hunting and everyday life. Giorgio Agamben, particularly in his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995) proposes the concept of a homo sacer as a person who is a legal and political outcast, living in a zone of abandonment, which is similar to refugee’s position in a refugee camp. “He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather abandoned by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable.” (Agamben 28) The narrator, the General, and other South Vietnamese officers suffered inhumane treatment in the refugee camp, where they had no freedom or privacy and were frequently humiliated by other refugees. As the narrator in the novel critiques the refugee experience and the myth of the American Dream in an ironic manner:

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 onto Camp Pendleton in San Diego, California, this time via an airliner where I sat in a real seat with areal window. Awaiting us was another refugee camp, its higher grade of amenities evidence that we

were already profiting from the upward mobility of the American Dream. (73)

The narrator’s trauma also stems from the discrimination he faces as a diasporic individual. When he finds a menial job in the Department of Oriental Studies at a university, the department chair despises him because of his background and believes that “East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” (84). In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng argues that racial identity in the United States is often formed through a process of internalized loss. This loss is not just about exclusion or victimization, but also about the desire for inclusion, which paradoxically requires the subject to abandon parts of the self in order to be assimilated.

As Anne Anlin Cheng states that “An understanding of melancholia as experienced by the raced subject must extend beyond a superficial or merely affective description of sadness to a deep sense of how that sadness—as a kind of ambulatory despair or manic euphoria—conditions life for the disenfranchised and, indeed, constitutes their identity and shapes their subjectivity.” (23-24). Racial melancholia is a pervasive, identity-forming condition, not just a passing emotional state. It’s a psychic response to being structurally excluded while simultaneously pressured to assimilate. The narrator in *The Sympathizer* embodies this condition through his divided self, caught between loyalty to his Vietnamese heritage and his desire for acceptance within American society. His melancholia is not simply personal but political, shaped by colonial histories, war, and racialized displacement, making him a vivid illustration of how assimilation demands psychic fragmentation and the continual mourning of an impossible wholeness.

### Reconstructing the Collective Memory of the Vietnam War

Collective memory refers to the shared pool of knowledge, ideas, images, and narratives about the past that is held by a group of people—such as a nation, community, or cultural group—and passed down across generations. “It is a form of memory that transcends individuals and is shared by a group.” (Wertsch 318) Unlike individual memory, which resides in a single person’s mind, collective memory is socially constructed, shaped through language, rituals, institutions, education, and cultural production (e.g., literature, film, monuments, museums).

Like individual memory, collective memory is inherently selective. Wertsch argues that “In collective remembering, the past is tied interpretatively to the present, and if necessary, part of an account of the past may be deleted or distorted in the service of present needs” (320). It is a “shared” memory deliberately crafted to serve the community, involving the reinterpretation and reshaping of knowledge, events, experiences, and values associated with the past.

In *The Sympathizer*, Viet Thanh Nguyen vividly dramatizes this dynamic by showing how memory is not only filtered through ideological lenses but also used as a political tool. The narrator, a Vietnamese communist spy embedded within the South Vietnamese diaspora in the United States, navigates multiple and conflicting collective memory frameworks. He is caught between the triumphant narrative of American exceptionalism—manifested in Hollywood war films that erase or marginalize Vietnamese perspectives –

and the exilic nostalgia of South Vietnamese refugees who idealize the lost republic. Both groups construct selective memories that serve their present needs and identities, illustrating Halbwachs's point that memory links the present and future of a group to a strategically shaped past. Through the narrator's fragmented consciousness and shifting allegiances, Nguyen exposes how collective memory is not a passive inheritance, but an active, often contested, reconstruction that serves political, cultural, and psychological ends.

Pierre Nora introduced the concept of "sites of memory" to describe physical or symbolic elements—such as monuments, museums, texts, rituals—that serve as anchors for collective memory in modern societies where lived memory is fading.

"Lieux de memoire (sites of memory) are complex things. At once natural and artificial, simple and ambiguous, concrete and abstract, they are lieux—places, sites, causes—in three senses: material, symbolic, and functional." (14) He distinguishes between memory (living, embodied, emotional, and collective) and history (the academic, critical, and often fragmented reconstruction of the past). He believes that memory is always socially constructed and contingent, tied to identity and political power. It is often mobilized for particular cultural or national purposes.

The Vietnam War remains one of the most contentious and emotionally charged conflicts of the twentieth century, and its legacy continues to reverberate across multiple national and cultural contexts. Long after it ended, the Vietnam War left the Vietnamese with trauma, pain, and loss. Alvey argues that "Vietnam was like a plague. If anyone touched it, your arm would rot away." (Alvey 54) Unlike official history, which often reflects dominant ideologies and state-sanctioned interpretations, the collective memory of the Vietnam War is fluid, fragmented, and shaped by diverse actors, including veterans, refugees, artists, historians, and communities affected by the war. In the United States, the collective memory of the Vietnam War has undergone significant transformation since the 1970s. Initially marked by shame, trauma, and the so-called "Vietnam Syndrome," American memory was dominated by narratives of national failure, political betrayal, and the psychological toll on returning veterans. American movies, including *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) began to reframe the war through a more introspective, often American-centered lens. These representations, while bringing attention to the war's horrors, also marginalized Vietnamese voices and reinforced a binary of American heroism versus victimhood.

The collective memory of the Vietnam War in the United States is, in essence, a manifestation of national will within the discourse of war memory. This collective memory functions normatively among the general public, guiding them to accept the state-sponsored narrative and to demonstrate a collective identification with it. Under this mode of memory reconstruction, the American public's individual recollections of the war are molded by the dominant national narrative in which ordinary Americans construct an ethical order in which the imagined collective identity of Americans as saviors of the Vietnamese legitimizes a binary of "savior" and "saved," "liberator" and "liberated." In doing so, they affirm a moral order that aligns with the national ethos and justifies the war retrospectively. When Yên Lê Espiritu and Diane Wolf

compare American memories of the Vietnam War and the Holocaust, they point out a significant difference: while Holocaust commemoration helps construct an image of American heroism, the moral and political divisions surrounding the Vietnam War often lead to the evasion of its memory.

More importantly, for our purpose, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the very site where American public memory of the Vietnam War is produced and debated, disallows any acknowledgement of the Vietnamese. Where the figure of the Jewish survivor solidifies the narrative of American heroism and sacrifice, the figure of the Vietnamese victim or ally disrupts, and might even implode, the painstakingly negotiated and carefully preserved truce about the divisive Vietnam War. In this context, the Vietnamese become invisible and unmentionable in Vietnam War memorials. (Espiritu 193)

In Vietnam, the state's official memory of the war has emphasized revolutionary heroism, national unification, and the defeat of imperialism. The collective memory of the Vietnamese may involve a sense of betrayal and exploitation in the war, feeling that they were used as tools by the United States in its fight against communism and its efforts to contain the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In the novel, when the General realizes that North Vietnam is about to be defeated and prepares to flee, he also comes to recognize America's abandonment and betrayal of Vietnam: the General "allowed himself to be querulous about how the Americans had promised us salvation from communism if we only did as we were told. They started this war, and now that they're tired of it, they've sold us out, he said, pouring me another drink. But who is there to blame but ourselves? We were foolish enough to think they would keep their word" (15).

In *The Sympathizer* (2015), Viet Thanh Nguyen intricately weaves the theme of collective memory to critique dominant historical narratives and foreground silenced voices, particularly those of Vietnamese refugees and South Vietnamese diasporic individuals. Collective memory in the novel functions as both a contested space and a political tool, shaping identity, ideology, and the way history is remembered—or forgotten. One of the central critiques in *The Sympathizer* is how the collective memory of the Vietnam War has been dominated by American perspectives, reducing the Vietnamese to background figures in their own history. The narrator recalls that after fleeing to the United States with the South Vietnamese general, he was, by a second stroke of chance, hired as a cultural consultant to assist Hollywood in making a film *The Hamlet* about the Vietnam War (a clear parody of *Apocalypse Now*), where Vietnamese characters are voiceless and disposable. When they speak, they utter "No words, just screams." (171)

My meeting with the Auteur and Violet had gone on for a while longer, mostly in a more subdued fashion, with me pointing out that the lack of speaking parts for Vietnamese people in a movie set in Vietnam might be interpreted as cultural insensitivity. True, Violet interjected, but what it boils down to is who pays for the tickets and goes to the movies. Frankly, Vietnamese audiences aren't going to watch this movie, are they? (173)

Through this satire, Nguyen critiques how American collective memory of the war is constructed through

mythmaking and cinematic spectacle, perpetuating a narrative of American heroism while obscuring Vietnamese suffering and agency. The novel relentlessly critiques Hollywood-produced Vietnam War films, which often portray Vietnamese people as faceless enemies or helpless victims. The official media prioritizes American soldiers' PTSD and the "loss" of the war, neglecting the catastrophic suffering inflicted on the Vietnamese people and landscape. Collective memory is shown as inherently political, used to legitimize power, justify actions, create group identity, and exclude others. Victoria Aarons and Alan L. Berger argue that collective memory, especially when passed down across generations, functions as a powerful and even resistant act, particularly in the context of trauma and historical silences. As they note, collective memory "might be thought of as an act of defiance in the face of absent memory, in its transmission creating a collage of individual, collective, and historical memory, linking personal and collective identities within moments of traumatic history" (Aarons 45-46).

### Using the Third Space as a Counter-Memory

The concept of counter-memory originates from the work of Michel Foucault, who used the term to describe memories that challenge or resist dominant historical narratives imposed by institutions such as the state, media, or education. Counter-memory works against the grain of official memory by recovering suppressed voices, marginalized experiences, and alternative perspectives. Rather than reinforcing hegemonic understandings of the past, counter-memory seeks to destabilize historical "truths" and reveal the power relations embedded in collective remembrance. Foucault notes that counter-memory "is a way of resisting the official versions of history, of creating new spaces of remembrance from below." (Foucault 113)

The Third Space, according to Homi K. Bhabha, is a conceptual space that emerges between two or more hybrid, distinct cultural, social, or identity positions. Bhabha used it to describe how colonized or diasporic subjects negotiate and transform the cultures and identities imposed on them. According to him, hybridity is a defining feature of the Third Space. As a form of counter-memory, *The Sympathizer* resists linear, official histories by embracing the Third Space through narrative hybridity and genre-bending strategies. Roberta Wolfson points out that "Indeed, the novel remixes various conventions of historical fiction, confessional tale, environmental justice literature, epistolary narrative, espionage thriller, refugee testimonial, war story, and political satire to create a pastiche-like new category that further highlights the novel's 'fungible, flexible, and unresolvable multiplicity'" (59)

In literature, the hybrid text—through genre-blending, nonlinear temporality, or polyvocal narration—enacts this resistance by refusing to be pinned down by conventional categories. The novel engages in intertextuality with multiple writers in its narrative, creating a Bakhtinian carnivalesque of texts. In Chapter One, the author writes, "The month in question was April, the cruelest month" (1). This forms an intertextuality with T. S. Eliot's poetry, particularly with the opening line of *The Waste Land*: "April is the cruelest month." Whereas Eliot's April signifies a painful rebirth amid cultural decay, in *The Sympathizer*, April may symbolize a personal or historical trauma—perhaps the beginning of exile, loss, or disintegration of identity. The reference invites readers to

consider how literary memory shapes individual memory and how the weight of literary history can deepen the resonance of contemporary narratives.

The Vietnam War was a result of the United States' global competition with the Soviet Union and its Cold War strategy. The Americans came to Vietnam to orchestrate war, yet they claimed they were there to help develop tourism. Intertextuality enhances the novel's satirical effect. By blending these diverse genres, Viet Thanh Nguyen destabilizes traditional, linear storytelling associated with official histories of the Vietnam War. This fragmented and multifaceted approach reflects the fractured and contested nature of memory experienced by refugees and diasporic communities.

Actually, Viet Thanh Nguyen wrote *The Sympathizer* with the intention of entering into a critical dialogue with existing American war literature. As he explains, "So *The Sympathizer* will, I hope, at the minimum be placed in conversation with the Vietnam War canon of writers like Tim O'Brien and Michael Herr, and films like *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Platoon* (1986). I've seen the novel compared to *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, so I hope it will be in conversation with larger bodies of war literature and satire, especially as I drew from those works." (Perlmutter 88)

The hybrid form allows the narrator to shift fluidly between personal confession, political critique, and spy thriller suspense, capturing the complexity of identity and allegiance in a postcolonial, transnational context. The pastiche-like narration creates space for multiple perspectives and voices, challenging hegemonic narratives that tend to marginalize or silence Vietnamese experiences. For example, the espionage thriller conventions enable exploration of espionage and betrayal not just as plot devices but as metaphors for divided loyalties and cultural hybridity. The refugee testimonial and war story aspects foreground the trauma and displacement central to the Vietnamese diasporic experience, providing emotional immediacy and authenticity. The hybrid narration style in *The Sympathizer* is a deliberate and powerful narrative strategy. It mirrors the fragmented realities of exile and identity, contests monolithic historical memories, and opens up a richly layered space for counter-memory and critical reflection.

In *The Sympathizer*, counter-memory disrupts the continuity of history constructed by dominant power structures, functioning as a form of resistance, recovery, and reclamation. It contests dominant histories, restores suppressed voices, challenges power, and fosters social and political transformation.

The role of counter-memory is fundamentally to give voice to the marginalized, the silenced, and the oppressed—those whose histories have been neglected or deliberately suppressed. It offers alternative perspectives that complicate and diversify collective memory, enabling a more nuanced understanding of the past. By reclaiming suppressed histories, counter-memory not only serves an ethical imperative to acknowledge injustice but also empowers communities to affirm their identities and experiences. In literature, counter-memory often manifests through narratives that recuperate forgotten or erased histories, challenge official mythologies, and resist dominant ideological frameworks. In *The Sympathizer*, this framework is crucial for understanding how the novel

recasts the memory of the Vietnam War from the vantage point of those excluded from mainstream historical discourse.

The confession format is employed as a countermemory to both the American narrative of the war and the Vietnamese revolutionary narrative. Joohee Seo interprets “confession as a critique on how memories of war are framed by heteronormative, masculinist nationalisms” (716), suggesting that confession—as a literary or rhetorical form—serves to challenge dominant national narratives of war. These narratives are shaped by heteronormative assumptions and masculinist ideologies, which privilege heterosexual, male-centered perspectives. In this context, confession offers a means of resisting and rewriting how war is remembered, opening space for more nuanced and marginalized voices. He points out that his “confession becomes a repository of memories that are woven by contradictory accounts, oscillating sympathies, and conflicting desires of national identity and belonging. This metatextual aspect of the novel reflects Nguyen’s own theoretical interests on war and memory.” (714) In *The Sympathizer*, confession functions as a narrative strategy through which the narrator stores and processes his complex, often conflicting memories of the Vietnam War and its aftermath. These memories are not unified or consistent; rather, they are marked by contradictions, shifting loyalties, and emotional ambivalence. The narrator expresses sympathy for both sides of the conflict—communist and anti-communist, Vietnamese and American—while also grappling with competing desires for national identity, belonging, and ideological commitment. This tension reflects the internal fragmentation of someone shaped by war, exile, and political betrayal.

The “confession” in the novel is not merely a tool for the narrator to account for his past to the regime, but also a form of irony and critique the narrator employs to highlight his imprisonment and psychological endurance. The narrator’s confession, filled with intellectual digressions, self-contradictions, and dark humor, undermines the moral certainty of both the Vietnamese Communist victors and their American adversaries. By exposing the hypocrisies, violence, and ideological rigidity of all parties involved in the war, the narrator transforms his forced confession into a countermemory—one that challenges official histories and nationalistic mythologies. Thus, the confessional form becomes a vehicle for ethical reflection and narrative resistance, revealing the complexities of identity, memory, and complicity in the aftermath of war.

The narrator’s Third-Space position and mixed identity reflect the fragmented memory of war, one that resists a singular version of the past. His mixed identities represent countermemory by refusing to align with any single, dominant historical narrative of the Vietnam War. Through its dialogue with various texts, the novel deconstructs the dominant American narrative that frames the Vietnam War as a noble effort to “liberate” the Vietnamese people from communism and tyranny. The novel illustrates that American involvement was less about altruistic liberation and more about geopolitical dominance and Cold War paranoia. The narrator’s insider view reveals how South Vietnamese elites, propped up by American support, were often corrupt and disconnected from the realities of ordinary Vietnamese lives. By questioning the “American exceptionalism” narrative, the novel invites readers to

critically examine how the U.S. justified its intervention with lofty ideals while ignoring the devastating human costs inflicted on the Vietnamese people. Meanwhile, the novel also reveals violence and hypocrisy behind official narratives, exposing the brutal consequences of the war, including violence inflicted not only by communists but also by American forces and their South Vietnamese allies, which are often sanitized or omitted in official U.S. histories.

Norman W. Spaulding points out that some memorials and survivor testimonies from the Holocaust during World War II can serve as acts of resistance against the memory of violence being erased, confronting “the danger of denial and forgetting” (133) and thus achieving the justice of counter-memory. By giving voice to a narrator who is both a participant and victim, betrayer and betrayed, Nguyen destabilizes the binaries of hero/villain, victim/perpetrator, and worthy/unworthy life. In doing so, the novel asks readers to reconsider which lives have been excluded from historical mourning—and why. As Yu-yen Liu observes, the novel’s return to the wounds of the Vietnam War “is also significant in its relation to a widespread response to the American war in Asia, and the more currently “war” on terror. Moreover, a revisit of the Vietnam War generates a reflection on both bellicose cause and effect, on the frame of war, and an inspiration to affirm peace.”(Yu-yen Liu 549) The novel, then, not only disrupts dominant war narratives but also prompts ethical reflection on the enduring consequences of militarism and the necessity of inclusive remembrance.

## Conclusion

In *The Sympathizer*, Viet Thanh Nguyen intricately interlaces the motifs of individual trauma, collective memory, and counter-memory to interrogate and subvert hegemonic narratives of the Vietnam War. Through the narrator’s psychological fragmentation, the novel foregrounds the enduring repercussions of both personal and political violence, demonstrating how trauma disrupts coherent identity formation and necessitates narrative as a means of survival and meaning-making. Simultaneously, Nguyen challenges institutionalized memories of the war—particularly those legitimized by American and South Vietnamese ideological frameworks—by recuperating silenced voices and occluded histories.

The official memory of the Vietnam War simplifies a deeply complex, violent, and morally fraught history. By foregrounding American loss and silencing Vietnamese voices, it sustains imperial myths and hinders historical accountability. Through counter-memory, the novel challenges dominant narratives of the Vietnam War and gives voice to the marginalized who are vulnerable in the sense as Butler describes as “fixed in a political position of powerlessness and lack of agency” (24). This is important because it disrupts the historical silencing imposed by imperial and nationalist discourses, allowing alternative perspectives—often excluded from official histories—to emerge.

Through inhabiting what Homi Bhabha conceptualizes as the “Third Space,” the novel establishes a liminal site of resistance in which oppositional discourses converge and subaltern subjectivities are reconstituted. In this way, *The Sympathizer* not only exposes the mechanisms of imperial memory production but also reclaims remembrance as a

radical, ethical, and politically charged act. Ultimately, the novel demonstrates literature's capacity to function as a critical medium for witnessing, contestation, and the reimagining of both individual and collective histories. As Arundhati Roy aptly says, "There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless.' There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard."

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