

CREATING AUDA CIOUSLY

ON **AESTHETICS,**

ANGER, &

CALIBRATED HOPE

BY QUYNH VO

After his phenomenal debut, *The Sympathizer*, which reaped several prestigious awards—Pulitzer Prize, MacArthur, and others—Viet Thanh Nguyen has swiftly embarked on his new project that pursues the sympathizer’s journey to Paris. This sequel is an irresistible vocation, an ardor that drives Nguyen fervently in his moral imagination. What is the catalyst for this sequel? Is it a burden or a zeal? Viet Thanh Nguyen has never ceased to inspire us.



INTERVIEW WITH
VIET THANH NGUYEN



NGUYEN, with his flippancy, his elegance, and charisma, may at first beguile his jejune audience, seems worlds apart from the fiercely, politically polemic and didactic predilections that come to define his oeuvre. Nguyen does not hesitate to express his thrill of “mediocre” movies, like “Crazy Rich Asians,” nor does he take any umbrage at having his Pulitzer prize winning novel, *The Sympathizer*, sold in Costco (as he gracefully quipped in an interview with Seth Meyers,) as long as Asian Americans achieve what he calls “narrative plenitude” rather than inhabiting the economy of “narrative scarcity” where Asian Americans are either underrepresented on screen or must perform exceptionally to be seen.

NGUYEN BELIEVES that “the right to be mediocre and rewarded for it” is “one measure of equality.” When it comes to identity politics, Nguyen touts unsparingly, “Minorities must dissent from the terms that a regime of whiteness offers. They must call forth anger and rage, demand solidarity and revolution, critique whiteness, domination, power, and all the faces of the war machine.” But, then, how does a writer grace his work with rage without undermining his political agenda or remaining in bitter dark after displaying his violent interiority?

IN *THE SYMPATHIZER*, Nguyen smooths his inflammatory language into aesthetic philosophy. Hatred is mostly hostile to art, while anger—its tough, brooding kin—empowers writing and makes it sardonically alluring. If Tony Morrison exhibits her imperious difficulty in her writing, Nguyen displays his thrill of wrath in *The Sympathizer*. One of the marveling episodes is when the protagonist confronts the Hollywood Auteur in his movie, *Hamlet*, which portrays American white men as saviors to Vietnamese yellow victims. In his helplessness, the protagonist senses that “something new” would dominate the world, it is for the first time in history, “the most efficient propaganda machine ever created,” when the losers would write history instead of the victors. The spy’s irascible, haunting scream “AIEYAAHHH!!!” reverberates. This is where rage extends to literary art. That scream of fury is nonetheless soothed by the lure of Nguyen’s powerful craft. This is a kind of strategic appeal. If we are to follow outrageous narrator into his destructive vision, an intrinsic beauty goes a long way.

HIS FIERY WRITING reminds me of Kafka’s aphorism: “...we need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like

the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.” Nguyen’s oeuvre is that transcendent like a sentient apparition furiously haunting human consciousness.

WE TALKED recently when Nguyen came to the University of Hawaii at Manoa to present a keynote lecture on War, Refugees and Storytelling: From Representation to Decolonization.

QUYNH VO: *Leaving Vietnam as a little four-year old boy, how could you suture your fragmentary memories into such a vibrant and poignant narrative of the war time in Vietnam replete with guns and poetry and artillery and music? How could you read poetry by the revolutionary poet To Huu who created verses only in Vietnamese?*

VIET THANH NGUYEN: Well, I did read them in Vietnamese. I went to Vietnam to study Vietnamese formally at the Vietnam national universities. I’m pretty sure we read To Huu and then also read them in translation, too.

QUYNH VO: *Revolutionary poets like To Huu wrote rosy paeans to the Communist Party, which seem worlds apart from the grim and melancholic stories about Vietnam that you’ve created. The Sympathizer pulls the reader into a visceral war, dark with violence, destruction, and emptiness. Is that what you expect the reader to feel? Is there any hope emanating from such darkness?*

VIET THANH NGUYEN: Well, I’m of two minds as a narrator of my novel, which is on the one hand, I just want people to enjoy the book, which is meant to be entertaining. So that’s one dimension. Yeah. But the other dimension is that it’s a political novel and political in a couple of different ways at least, I mean it’s explicitly about communism and revolution and capitalism, but it’s political in the sense of trying to provoke the reader, whether it’s a Vietnamese reader or an American reader or Vietnamese-American reader. The book is designed, because of the way it’s told, the way it’s constructed to challenge the dominant ideologies that people have from different sides. So in fact, if the book works, it’s meant to make people uncomfortable, which as someone who’s a scholar and a critic, I don’t think it’s a bad thing. I think some of my best learning experiences have come from being made uncomfortable.

QUYNH VO: *Yeah, I enjoyed the dark humor of your narrative. And I really appreciate your idea of juxtaposing aesthetics with politics, it’s truly amazing!*

VIET THANH NGUYEN: Yeah. And if anything, that interest in aesthetics and politics actually comes from being Vietnamese. Like being aware that in Vietnam, aesthetics and politics have historically, at least in the decolonizing period, been brought together by communist revolutionaries in Vietnam in a way that I thought was fascinating. But I think the intersection of aesthetics and politics is necessary and fascinating. But I realize also that if I was in Vietnam, I would be on the losing side of that aesthetic and political debate, which is

why writing the re-education camp scene at the end was my way of working through that. So being inspired by the Vietnamese revolution, I also went in a completely different direction than what the revolution itself would want.

QUYNH VO: But is there any hope emanating from that grim story, in your book? It is not total despair, is it?

VIET THANH NGUYEN: No, not total despair. When I finished *The Sympathizer*, right at the very end, I thought, "Oh, I have to give people some hope" as I was writing the last pages. And so the last few pages are supposed to be hopeful, but hope has to be calibrated. It can't just be sentimental.

So the hope is there, the narrator has hope, but it's only a ray of light in all this darkness. And so yes, the overwhelming mood is all these terrible things that happened, but he has enough light, enough hope to still continue. Is it a foolish hope? I think back to all those people, like you were saying, who fled the country as refugees, half of them didn't make it. They didn't live. So what do we make out of that? The ones who lived, they had hope, they survived. But the hope has been measured against the degree of danger and darkness that awaits him and everybody else on that boat.

QUYNH VO: Well, I'm deeply affected by your books, not only because they are very beautiful and amusing and haunting, but also because they challenge our moral imagination. The title of your novel, for example,

like the protagonist in your narrative, seems treacherous. The sympathizer here is not about a communist sympathizer, as the symbolic color in the background of the cover might hint to the reader. He seems very politically ambivalent. So could you please elucidate your philosophy and literary preoccupations behind the entitling of this book?

VIET THANH NGUYEN: Well, one thing that's interesting is that there's a debate among Vietnamese people who read the book about "how do we translate *The Sympathizer*, the title itself, into Vietnamese?" And so that gets a little bit to the fact that, in English at least, *The Sympathizer* has a very particular meaning to be a sympathizer, it has a very particular meaning to obviously be someone who is sympathetic with communism, and then of course someone, in this case, who has the capacity to feel great sympathy. And really the novel at this emotional level is not so much concerned with sympathy as it is with empathy, our capacity to feel deeply for other people as other people, which is what he does.

But The "Empathizer" doesn't exist in the English language, so *The Sympathizer* had to do. And I just felt that bringing together, in English, bringing together these two meanings of a sympathizer as someone who is politically sympathetic with someone who feels emotional and is sympathetic with other people, would allow me to deal with what I see as the central problem of revolutionary politics. Which is we feel sympathy for a cause and for people, and then that motivates us to action, and then when we take action, we have to be unsympathetic to people. So whenever I looked

back at Vietnamese history, this was a thing that I couldn't get around, that it was such a terrible situation that the Vietnamese people found themselves in, of this time, because there was, for those who were involved in the politics, there was no way out of this dilemma. That feeling for other people and then having to not feel for other people in order to carry out a revolution or to fight a war. And in the aftermath of 1975, that problem never went away. And that was a big mistake, because you can make that excuse during war time, but peace time, they really chose the wrong path.

QUYNH VO: That's how we can't sympathize with one another and reach a radical conciliation.

VIET THANH NGUYEN: Yeah.

QUYNH VO: Contamination or anything impure could never exist in communist consciousness, as the commandant in *The Sympathizer* reminds the protagonist, that "people like you must be purged because you bear contamination that can destroy the revolution's purity." So why do you still construct that man of contaminated mind, and even more audaciously, a biracial spy in your novel?

VIET THANH NGUYEN: I wanted to write a political novel and in the context of the United States it's hard to do that because in this country, unlike Vietnam, politics and art are not supposed to be brought together. We think that's a communist idea and

there has been a tradition of political literature in the United States and I've read some of that. I can see that the easiest weakness or the easiest trap to fall into was to write a novel in which the politics weren't clear. In terms of cause, we're going to stand on the side of the good cause and that's what the political novel's about. That's not very interesting, because literature is best when it deals with the ambiguities, moral ambiguities and the ambiguity of our actions and their consequences.

So I had to create a character and a plot that would allow me to engage in ambiguity even as the whole topic of the novel is about politics. And so making him biracial was fundamental to that for a number of different reasons. I could just work from a very easy stereotype that people who are of mixed race, Eurasians in this case, are somehow inherently divided between themselves, between their two different cultures. That's a stereotype. So one of the dangerous things that the novel does is that it goes really close to stereotype and then hopefully does not fall into stereotype. But by making him biracial, then logically in the plot, I could bring up all kinds of conflicts and contradictions. So the other problem with political novels is oftentimes the, the writer will impose her or his political vision onto the story.

VIET THANH NGUYEN: And as a reader you can always see that happening. There is a point that novel wants to make and the novelist is going to drive the novel in that direction. So I didn't want to have that happen with *The Sympathizer*. The events of the novel had to proceed naturally. And so the fact that he's biracial means that he of course will feel conflicted, not because he's

inherently conflicted, but because biracial people in Vietnam are subjected to racism from both the Vietnamese and the colonizer, the French in this case. So it was because of these historical reasons that he would feel this conflict within himself. And then as a writer, all I had to do was show that these conflicts were happening and to point out where they were taking place. And that in and of itself would be an indictment of this colonial system of racism, which the Vietnamese themselves agreed with.

QUYNH VO: *At the core of the narrator's disillusion is an amalgam of triumph and calamity and anger and lunacy. By the way, you don't look as outraged as you sound in the novel, which is intriguing. Is there any redemption after the narrator's excruciating confession in the cell or, in your strategic agenda, is there a "just memory" after the torture?*

VIET THANH NGUYEN: Well I think that like my narrator, I am good at having masks. So the fact that I don't seem angry, it doesn't mean I'm not angry, but you have to wear different masks in different situations. Writers do that all the time and so do public speakers and so do spies. Anger is, to me, a good motivation for writing. It can't be the only motivation and you can't really just let the anger exist, you have to do something with it. So in the novel, hopefully I'd do something with it by couching it in political critique and humor and satire and making it-

QUYNH VO: *Absolutely, your anger is quite infectious.*

VIET THANH NGUYEN: Especially when it is not alleviated by other emotions like humor or self awareness or satire. [...]

So in the sequel it's about, "Well, redemption is not about that version of the revolution, redemption has to be about revolution, but in a different way. What shape does that take?"

For Americans, redemption in this context would be about someone who is disillusioned with communism, embracing American capitalism. That's the usual narrative in the United States. We have a whole genre of literature that deals with communist disillusionment. And the conclusion is always that the disillusioned communist decides that he or she in the end loves America or loves capitalism. And that's not the end of the novel. And so the sequel... And I think that when people say hope in the United States, at least in the context of this kind of politics, they're talking about this kind of hope in the American dream. So the sequel will try to take up this question of redemption and to do it without returning to either the communist revolution or the American revolution.

QUYNH VO: *That's really insightful. So does a "just memory" only arise after the torture in the isolation cell?*

VIET THANH NGUYEN: I think that I've talked about that in my book, *Nothing Ever Dies*, as the critical companion to *The Sympathizer*, which is true.

QUYNH VO: *I love that.*

VIET THANH NGUYEN: Oh thank you. But I don't think *The Sympathizer* has fully carried out the critical arguments of nothing ever dies. So I think at the end of *The Sympathizer*, he does reach this moment of ethical recognition where... Let me put it another way, he reaches a moment where he's forced to see this traumatic event, the rape of the communist agent, that he's always wanted to deny. So he's forced to see it. Has he recognized it? Has he fully dealt with it in the ethical way that my arguments about *Just Memory* say you have to do? I don't think so. There's just too much for him to absorb, which is why again, I think there's a sequel because he has to figure out how to ethically deal with what he has seen, but she has not yet fully understood.

QUYNH VO: You make me feel very curious about the sequel. What fascinates me the most is your brilliant construct of duality in *The Sympathizer*, which bears a perfect resemblance to dialectical materialism or a powerful synthesis of the thesis and the antithesis, which the commandant stresses as revolutionary consciousness. Every character in your book embraces this troubling dichotomy. Towards the end of the novel, the narrator finally realizes that, what he sacrificed his entire youth for, is nothing but a rotten fruit. So here I see an obvious disillusion or an apocalypse of idealism and allegiance. Do you deem revolution, in the end, a travesty of communist idealism?

VIET THANH NGUYEN: Well, I think that many revolutions start off with high ideals and hopes and harness the best of people, their idealisms or passions or convictions. I

think back to the history that the communist party celebrates in Vietnam. For example, all those young revolutionaries who were executed by the French, the famous ones in the 30's and '40s, they were devoted to a cause, right? There's a lot of martyrs in Vietnamese communist history. [...]

This is when the dialectic stops because they obviously don't understand it. But the point is not about holding power. The point is [also] about justice. That's what they fought the revolution for in the first place.

VIET THANH NGUYEN: For our narrator, his dialectic continues. So he's recognized that his revolution has gone from fighting against power and for justice to embodying injustice and holding on to power.

Now he has to figure out, now he's complicated in that. Now he has to figure out how to move away from that and it gets more complex because so much of the discussion around war, politics, violence, and so on, treat these things purely in political terms, but as he discovers with the rape at the end, it's not only about politics, it's also about sexual violence and masculinity and gender, which is always there but not acknowledged. So part of his... The movement of the dialectic has rendered this ethical recognition of any humanity is for him to try to figure out what that means now that he's seen it, now that he's seen this atrocity that reveals to him how much revolution is based on sexual violence or gender violence.

So his understanding of violence, of revolution just got a lot more complicated at the end of the novel and he's been forced to see that and now he has to deal with it. [...]

Quynh Vo

QUYNH VO: Thank you enormously for your inspiring and enlightening insights. May you always keep your fire for the art.



Đảng cộng sản muôn năm!





"A MAGNIFICENT FEAT OF STORYTELLING. THE SYMPATHIZER IS A
NOVEL OF LITERARY, HISTORICAL, AND POLITICAL IMPORTANCE."
—MAXINE HONG KIMESTON, AUTHOR OF THE FIFTH BIRD IS DEAD



THE SYMPATHIZER

AN NOVEL
VIET THANH NGUYEN