

War, Espionage, and the Construction of the Asian Transnational Subject in *The Sympathizer**

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[Abstract]

This essay examines the trope of the spy in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*, which weaves a complicated tale of espionage, wartime affairs, assassination, loyalty, and betrayal. Nguyen's narrator (who remains nameless in the novel) follows a long line of Asian spies that have made their mark in the American popular and literary imagination; not only has the trope of the "inscrutable Asian spy" been recycled in the American mainstream culture but many Asian American writers have also deployed this self-same figure to critique the social invisibility and disempowerment of Asian Americans. Even as Nguyen's spy protagonist alludes to the tradition of both conventional and ethnic spies, he is detachable from both. For one, the positioning of Nguyen's narrator as the conventional spy hero is rendered problematic because his racial affiliation would hardly qualify him as "the protector of [America's] established society." Moreover, reading him as an extension of such ethnic spies as Changrae Lee's Henry Park in *Native Speaker* also faces difficulty in

* This work was supported by the Sungshin Women's University Research Grant of 2018.

that unlike other ethnic spies, the narrator is not necessarily conflicted by his purported invisibility in the US. In fact, Nguyen's narrator (via his identity as a spy) rejects America's national, ideological, and cultural binary, which enables him to take a stand against the gatekeepers of mainstream America. Framed by a tale of warfare and espionage which italicizes the primacy of nation-states, I argue that *The Sympathizer* betrays the discourse of the nation in tracing the construction of an Asian transnational subjectivity. And the "double agency" (to borrow Tina Chen's term) that the Asian transnational wields enables him not only to articulate his selfhood but also to critique the American institutions that designate the Asian body as alien.

Key Words: Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, espionage literature, double agency, Asian transnational subject

I

Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015) begins with a confession: "I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds" (1). This confession leads into a complicated tale of espionage, wartime affairs, assassination, loyalty, and betrayal. *The Sympathizer* follows the story of a communist undercover agent who has been assigned to spy on the activities of the General of the South Vietnamese army during the Vietnam War and afterwards when the General and his family relocate to the US with other Vietnamese refugees. Disobeying the direct command of his handler, the unnamed narrator returns to Vietnam only to be sent to a communist prison camp to be violently re-educated.

Here, he recounts his past in Vietnam as well as the US as he is forced to write and rewrite his confession to the “dear Commandant” who is imprisoning him (1). Nguyen’s narrator follows a long line of Asian spies who have made their mark in the American popular and literary imagination; not only has the trope of the “inscrutable Asian spy” been recycled in the American mainstream culture but many Asian American writers have also deployed this self-same figure to critique the social invisibility and disempowerment of Asian Americans. Henry Park from Changrae Lee’s *Native Speaker* (1995) is perhaps the best known example but other Asian spies have surfaced in Don Lee’s *Country of Origin* (2004) and Susan Choi’s *Person of Interest* (2008), to name a few. As their presence manifests, “the trope of the Asian spy seems not only applicable, but inescapable” (Middleton 129).

In foregrounding the character of the Asian spy, *The Sympathizer* has been likened to the works of some of the greatest authors of the genre like John le Carré and Graham Greene whose works have been recognized to “embed the spy’s role in the larger context of his culture” (Slade 236); Nguyen gives a direct nod to Greene when the narrator thinks back to his senior thesis on *The Quiet American* (100). Nguyen shared in an interview with NPR that it was not only his love of espionage fiction which led him to write his debut novel from a spy’s point of view but that he was also inspired by historical accounts of spies during the Vietnam War, in particular that of Pham Xuan An who, like Nguyen’s protagonist, lived for a time in the US and worked as a correspondent for some of the top American news outlets, befriendng all the important American journalists who were clueless that An was a communist spy (n. pag).

Despite the fact that *The Sympathizer* engages itself with narratives of espionage, some of its thematic aspects appear to clash with the conventions of the genre. Interestingly, Changrae Lee’s *Native Speaker* received similar criticism from its

reviewers: “Mr. Lee ... is no spy novelist. His interest lies in language, culture and identity” (Cooper 24). Likewise, Bart Eekhout observes a “structural contradiction” in Lee’s novel that “borrows the mechanics of a political thriller or spy story, seeking to combine the seductions of a popular or ‘low’ genre with those of the elitist or ‘high’ tradition of *belles lettres*” (251). If Changrae Lee has been suspected of deploying the frame of espionage fiction to render his novel more accessible to general readership, Nguyen readily admits that he chose the genre specifically because he “wanted to write a novel that was actually entertaining, that people would actually want to read because [he] knew that [he] would also be dealing with a lot of very serious political and literary matters” (“NPR Interview” n. pag). Nguyen’s decision to narrate his tale of “very serious political and literary matters” in the form of a spy novel invites further critical inquiry; for one, the genre of espionage fiction places great emphasis on “entertainment” (as Graham Greene is known to have consistently called his espionage stories) and for this reason, the form is often dismissed as “escape literature or ‘airport fiction’” (Slade 226). More relevant to the discussion at hand, many literary critics observe that espionage literature tends to prioritize the integrity of a nation and reaffirm its sovereignty and ideologies: “Spies do not work for money but for the nation” (Slade 234). Historically, the spy novel began as a literary response to the public concern over “national vulnerability” within the “changing contours of [international] alignments and alliances” (Stafford 496, 498). According to Kimberly S. Middleton, the spy novel, “from its inception ... has taken for its topic the plight of the nation. ... Firmly and uniquely tied to the development of a national sensibility, the spy genre helped to form a patriotic communalism in the ... public, in large part by evoking the specter of the dangerous outsider” (109-10). In this way, the genre draws a clear line between inside and outside, and thus evokes concepts of nationhood and issues of national identity.

Moreover, the narrative arc of (conventional) espionage literature gestures towards assurance and certitude as it ultimately illuminates the stability of the nation-state by the accomplishment of the spy protagonist who successfully eliminates the enemy that threatens national security.

Read against this context, the positioning of Nguyen's narrator becomes highly problematic; even as *The Sympathizer* embraces the figure of the spy, it seems to reject the discourse of the nation which he embodies. Like the ethnic spies that have come before him, Nguyen's narrator may be met with some resistance in situating him as the "protector of [America's] established society" due to the (mis)conception of Asian Americans as "essentially assimilable [yet] principally external to America and American institutions" (Stafford 492, Li 9-10). In fact, it may be much easier to cast him as the "sinister agents of the orient" that try to infiltrate American borders and pose a threat to the nation; standing in opposition to the gentleman secret agent, the legitimate protector of the State, the foreign spy's main objective is to erode the nation-state and its cultural values (Palumbo-Liu 58). Yet again, his linguistic fluency and cultural literacy as an (Asian) American subject in the making disturb the facile installation of Nguyen's narrator as the "unassimilable" other. Moreover, the narrator refuses to follow the customary path of other ethnic spies. According to Tina Chen, spying for an ethnic spy is a "metaphor about his uneasy position as [an Asian American] struggling to figure out his place in American society" (153). Nguyen's narrator, however, is not necessarily conflicted by his purported invisibility in the US. His identity as a spy ironically enables him to reject the national, ideological, and cultural binary and enables the narrator to take a stand against the gatekeepers of mainstream America, thereby exposing white cultural myopia and "tone-deafness" as well as its culpability of war crimes in Vietnam. Ultimately, Nguyen's spy protagonist disturbs the notion of a monolithic white America by demanding the

social visibility of his fellow Asian Americans (“Books” n. pag).

As Julian Symons explains:

It is right, I think, to see two traditions in the spy story. ... The first is conservative, supporting authority, making the implicit assertion that agents are fighting to protect something valuable in society. The second is radical, critical of authority, claiming that agents perpetuate, and even create, false barriers between “Us” and “Them.” Fleming belongs to the first tradition, le Carré’s early work to the second. (247)

As a figure that consistently transcends the binary, the narrator of *The Sympathizer* cannot be designated to either tradition; even as he subverts American authority in its flawed imagination of Asian/Americans, he also endeavors to bring down the cultural and ethnic barriers within and beyond the US.

The Sympathizer thus demonstrates the narrator’s multiple allegiances in claiming a cultural as well as a (trans)national subjectivity; he is a “double agent” (to borrow Chen’s term) that is afforded with the capacity to refuse the binary logic of loyalty/betrayal, Asian/American, and exclusion/inclusion. Framed by a tale of warfare and espionage which italicize the primacy of nation-states, I argue that *The Sympathizer* betrays the discourse of the nation in tracing the construction of an Asian transnational subjectivity. By presenting a protagonist who begins his tale as a spy and ends it as one of the “boat people” that traverses cultural, linguistic, national, and ideological boundaries, Nguyen’s novel captures what Aihwa Ong terms the “flexible citizenship” of a transnational Asian subject who has multiple cultural literacies at his disposal (6). Bound to the nation-state and its cultural constraints, the Asian *immigrant* subject charts a narrative of a “linear developmental model of identity, plotted from immigrant entry to successful integration, with points of

conflict, reversals, epiphanies, and so forth along the narrative route” (italics mine, Lim et al. 3). If the immigrant subject position is made undesirable by its inclination to “become the Other in the Manichean division to formulate the (Asian) American Self,” Nguyen’s narrator as offers an alternative in his capacity to dislodge himself from cultural emplacement and ensuing racial/ethnic stereotypes; the right to claim that “dislocation is my location” becomes his as the narrator authors himself as an Asian *transnational* subject (Ma 1, Nguyen “Dislocation” 433).

II

David Seed observes that one of the main appeals of spy fiction is its promise to provide the reader with “access to processes taking place behind official history ... ‘that secret history of a nation which is so much more intimate and interesting than its public chronicles’” (117). Indeed *The Sympathizer* portrays a man conflicted about where his sympathies lie in a world divided by warring nations, dueling ideologies, conflicting beliefs, secrets, and betrayal. The novel begins with the narrator’s imprisonment at a communist re-education camp where he is forced to write his confession for his captors. His narrative begins around the time Saigon is about to fall and American troops are withdrawing from Vietnam, despite the desperate pleas from the South Vietnamese people to stay. The narrator lives with the General whom he has been assigned to spy on. When the General decides it is time to leave Vietnam, the narrator’s handler, Man, who is also one of his most trusted childhood friend, orders the narrator to follow the General. The narrator’s two best friends, Man and Bon, are politically divided as Man is a communist (as is the narrator) and Bon is a patriot and assassin with the CIA’s Phoenix program. Bon hates the communists

and is unaware that his two best friends, his blood brothers, are on the side of his enemy. The evacuees suffer inhuman treatment from their “savior,” the Americans, as they are simply loaded into the plane like “human cargo” (41); even though the narrator and Bon make it onto the plane, Bon’s young wife and baby boy become collateral damage as they are tragically shot and killed just before they board. Devastated by his loss, Bon loses all will to live and becomes a ghost of his former self: “I was a son and a husband and a soldier, and now I’m none of that. I’m not a man, and when a man isn’t a man he’s nobody” (98). Once political big shots, military leaders, and wartime heroes of an “American-determined war” (66), the refugees now take whatever menial jobs (and charity in the form of welfare assistance) America has to offer; Bon works for the General and his wife, Madame, who have become “small business owners ... selling liquor to drunks and blacks and Mexicans and the homeless and addicts” (87). The narrator is offered clerical work in the Department of Oriental Studies at a university and begins a casual sexual relationship with a Japanese American secretary, Ms. Mori, even as he feels attraction to Lana, the General’s American-educated daughter. The General receives intelligence that there might be a spy among the Vietnamese refugees. In order to keep his cover, the narrator offers up the crapulent major whom he and Bon are then sent to assassinate. While the narrator is deeply troubled by the role he played in the murder of an “innocent” man, Bon is buoyed by the killing.

In time, the General decides to send troops back to Vietnam, and Bon volunteers. The narrator decides to follow Bon to protect him, going against Man’s instructions to stay in the US. Upon their return to Vietnam, the two friends are captured and placed in a re-education camp. Bon asks to be shot by a firing squad but his request is refused. The narrator is forced to write and revise his confession, and although he writes more than two hundred pages, the commandant and the commissar are still not

satisfied. When the narrator finally confronts the commissar, he is surprised to learn that it is his old friend, Man, whose face has been disfigured by napalm. Upon Man's orders, the narrator is tortured so that he may remember what he has omitted from his confession: his betrayal of a female communist agent who was raped and tortured while the narrator simply watched in order to maintain his own cover. In the end, the narrator comes to realize that his activities as a spy and his revolutionary ideals have been meaningless because the two sides rivaling for his allegiance are equally corrupt. After making a confession of his own — that he had the narrator's father killed years ago — Man releases his friends from the camp, and Bon and the narrator join the boat people as they leave Vietnam for the last time.

The “secret history” disclosed within the pages of *The Sympathizer* portrays America as a “democracy destroying another country in order to save it” (61). It counters America's version of the Vietnam War (and their role in it) as the novel's portrayal of the war and its victims “disrupts the US-centered narrative of the Vietnam War ... and challenges the savior image of the US by re-historicizing Vietnamese memories of the Vietnam War” (Lee 459). Not only does it disclose the heinous war crimes perpetrated by America, but Nguyen's account of the war deconstructs the muted representation of the Vietnamese refugee as a “passive object of sympathy” and re-presents him as a transnational subject with narrative authority and most importantly, the capacity to sympathize (Espiritu 412). This ability of the narrator's is significant in that it functions as a metaphor for his double agency which enables him to break down the racial, ideological, and cultural binaries. At face value, a sympathizer denotes a person who identifies with the enemy cause. But Nguyen extends it to mean someone who “can see any issue from both sides” (1). So while the narrator is dedicated to his revolutionary communist ideals, he still cannot help but feel moved by the “plight of the poor people” suffering from the

aftermath of war or “identify with the southern soldiers and evacuees on whom [he] was sent to spy” even though it was “not correct, politically speaking, for [him] to feel sympathy for them” (3, 36). The narrator notes that his ability to sympathize has “much to do with [his] status as a bastard”; he is of “muddled heritage” as the illegitimate offspring of an underage Vietnamese girl and a French Catholic priest (21, 36). The narrator credits his mother for teaching him that “blurring the lines between us and them can be a worthy behavior,” and while he, at times, calls his double vision of the world a “weakness,” a “hazard,” the narrator understands that his “talent” to sympathize is a “virtue” which has come out of his biracial heritage and has enabled him to assimilate into very different worlds (1, 36).

The narrator’s identity is further complicated by his (albeit partial) Americanization; born and raised in Vietnam, the narrator is sent by Man, his handler, to the US as a “part scholarship student, part spy-in-training” in order to become “an expert in all manners of American studies” and to prepare for a psychological warfare against their capitalist enemy (12). At Occidental College, he “read[s] American history and literature, perfect[s] his grammar and absorb[s] the slang, smoke[s] pot and [loses his] virginity”; in this way, he gains full fluency in American culture and language (12):

I could discuss baseball standings, the awfulness of Jane Fonda, or the merits of the Rolling Stones versus the Beatles. If an American closed his eyes to hear me speak, he would think I was one of his kind. Indeed, on the phone, I was easily mistaken for an American. On meeting in person, my interlocutor was invariably astonished at my appearance. ... Americans expected me to be like those millions who spoke no English, pidgin English, or accented English. I resented their expectation. That was why I was always eager to demonstrate, in both spoken and written word, my mastery of their language. (7)

Even though learning the American way was a strategic necessity for war, the narrator is also seduced by and is transformed as a result of it. Reminiscing about the first time he read the words of American philosopher Ralph Emerson, the image that he recalls — of a “lawn by an iridescent grove of jacaranda trees” intersected with that of “exotic tawny co-eds in halter tops and shorts, sunning themselves on the beds of June grass” — is distinctly American and yet, even in this moment, the narrator coalesces Asian/Vietnamese and American when he comes to realize that Emerson’s words — “consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds” — ring true not only for America but also for his motherland “where we are nothing if not inconsistent” (12).

The narrator’s ability to parley both Asian and American demonstrates what Tina Chen terms “double agency”; noting that Asian American performances have often been “misinterpreted ... as acts of betrayal rather than those of multiple allegiance,” Chen maintains that “double agency” is a strategy undertaken by Asian American subjects to “resist the binary logic of loyalty/disloyalty, real/fake, and Asian/American” (xvii). Chen suggests that one might understand double agency “not as a mark of a spy’s betrayal or compromised loyalty but as a sign of the multiple allegiances that Asian Americans have maintained in order to construct themselves as agents capable of self-articulation and –determination” (xviii). Most relevant to our reading of Nguyen’s narrator is Chen’s discerning claim that “double agency” allows Asian American subjects to “establish [their] own claims to a U.S. American identity and to critique the American institutions that have designated them as ‘aliens’” (xix). The narrator indeed levels criticism against three authority figures that stand in for America, and articulate and reinforce its majoritarian discourse: the Chair, the Congressman, and the Auteur. Satirizing the dehumanizing ways in which Asian/Americans have been pigeonholed wholesale into racially/ethnically slurred

categories, the narrator deploys his “double agency” to undermine their authority and expose the fallacy in their imagination of Asian/Americans.

When the narrator’s undergraduate advisor finds him clerical work at the Department of Oriental Studies, he takes the job because he needs the minimum wage as well as an American sponsor. The department Chair takes special interest in him because “no one on the faculty possessed any knowledge” of Vietnam (62). Although the narrator is disparaging of the Chair’s comments which border on senile, he performs his role perfectly as “an Uncle Tom-a-san ... with his inscrutable Oriental smile, nodding and wrinkling [his] brow sympathetically, letting people go on, thinking [he is] perfectly in agreement with everything they say” (75). As the two engage in long conversations about Vietnamese culture and language, the narrator observes that the Chair is a voracious consumer of all things oriental; the Chair’s office is filled with oriental decor and a picture of the elderly Chair beaming next to his young oriental wife in “her scarlet cheongsam” and their young son is proudly displayed on his desk (62). Chairing a department with an archaic name, this career academic who has devoted a lifetime to the study of the Orient is shown to have a skewed orientalist perception of Asia.

During one of their meetings, he gives the narrator a “homework assignment” to make a list of his “Oriental and Occidental qualities” (63). Under the columns marked “Orient” and “Occident,” the narrator lists qualities which he believes will correspond to the Chair’s misreckoning about the diametric opposition between East and West. Just as he expects, he receives praises from the Chair for his ridiculous answers and despite himself, the narrator feels proud because “like all good students, I yearned for nothing but approval, even from fools” (64). This elderly scholar is unable to understand the sarcasm behind the narrator’s “yin and yang” comment as well as see through the narrator’s performance as an “Uncle Tom-a-san” which

demonstrates how the Chair is invested in an outdated system of dividing up humanity into groupings empty of meaning in an increasingly multicultural and global world.

Though unintentional, the Chair's comments about his wife and their biracial son perpetuate racial stereotypes; observing that the features of their boy takes more after those of his mother's, the Chair describes his wife's genes as a "foreign weed [that has] choked to death our native foliage," which, the Chair seems to believe, is somehow a tragedy (63). The Chair does not appear to be conscious of his racism and even mistakenly believes that he himself is an aficionado of the Orient, its people, and its culture when he earnestly adds that though Amerasians were once regarded as "a monstrosity," America has come to accept them as "ideal translator between two sides, a goodwill ambassador to bring opposing nations to peace" (65). Still, the Chair's inadvertent dismissal of Asia and Asian America connotes the staying power of an orientalist discourse in mainstream America which the narrator aims to sabotage with veiled remarks of contempt.

The Congressman is another figure whose authority the narrator challenges via his double agency. The Congressman, nicknamed "Napalm Ned or Knock-'em-Dead Ned or Nuke-'em-all Ned" is an anti-communist politician who welcomes the Vietnamese refugees but only for their votes. The Congressman spews multicultural sentiments in delivering a speech to his Vietnamese constituents, but he simultaneously labels them as immigrants and offers these previous members of the Vietnamese ruling class the empty promise of the American Dream. As he raises his arms to form a V, "presumably for Victory, or for Vietnam, or for Vote for me, or for something even more liminally suggestive," the Congressman shouts in the "most perfect Vietnamese, *Vietnam Muon Nam! Vietnam Muon Nam! Vietnam Muon Nam!*" and his Vietnamese audience parrots after the Congressman the refrain of Vietnam Forever! (119). The

vacuousness of the Congressman's speech is exposed by Ms. Mori, the narrator's colleague and casual sex partner: "It's the same slogan the Communist Party uses," she observes, "a slogan is just an empty suit. Anyone can wear it" (120). The Congressman's bigotry, as a public servant who purports to embrace a multicultural difference, is unmasked when he voices his distaste and distrust for the likes of hippies, Hollywood, and the record labels, and sanctions the monitoring, regulation, and censorship of these channels of different thought within America (123). The fraudulent nature of the Congressman is signaled by the location of his office in a strip mall, a dreadful example, says the narrator, of the "blandness of capitalist architecture"; it is here that the Congressman and the General exchange a furtive handshake as the Congressman agrees to support the General's plans to rebuild his army and return to Vietnam to fight the Communist and the General, in turn, guarantees future votes and the endorsement of the growing community of Vietnamese Americans (143). Restrained by his cover as the General's subordinate, the narrator cannot react directly to the Congressman's hypocrisy; however, as the narrator bears witness to this under-the-table dealing, the narrator levies criticism against the Congressman's corruption in the form of his recount.

The narrator angles his double agency most piercingly at the Auteur, a successful Hollywood screenwriter and director who has written *The Hamlet*, a film about the Vietnam War. As many a critic indicates, this character is based on Francis Ford Coppola who is the writer and director of the most (in)famous Vietnam War film, *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The Congressman and the General solicit the narrator to provide feedback on the screenplay which, even to the Congressman, seems too much like a "fantasy" that the Auteur has cooked up (123). Even though he is writing about a war in Vietnam and its people, the Auteur remarks to the narrator during their first meeting that "you're the first Vietnamese that I've ever met" (129).

All the while acknowledging the importance of his story's realism, the Auteur pronounces that "authenticity [cannot] beat imagination" (129). The narrator angers the Auteur by pointing out that he "didn't get the details right" and the irate Auteur aggressively defends his version of the war in a land that he admittedly knows nothing about, except for the tidbits he's gathered from a paltry research.

Destabilizing the stereotype of the silent Asian that populate the Auteur's screenplay, the narrator vociferously expresses his disapproval; he is especially outraged that "the lack of speaking parts of Vietnamese people in a movie set in Vietnam might be interpreted as cultural insensitivity" and even asks in exasperation "could you not even just have them speak a heavily accented English — you know what I mean, ching-chong English — just to pretend they are speaking in an Asian language that somehow American audiences can strangely understand?" (132). Shooting down the narrator's feedback as "cheap," the Auteur shuts him down with his [white] authority as an acclaimed artiste and sends the narrator off to the margins with the Others to be silenced. If he was able to remain somewhat impassive (albeit sarcastic and reproachful) to the sanctimonies of the Chair and the Congressman, the narrator is rendered downright furious by his "helplessness before the Auteur's imagination and machinations" wherein he and his countrymen are relegated as "raw material for an epic about white men saving good yellow people from bad yellow people" (134). The arrogance of the Auteur in lumping "all the Vietnamese of any side [to] come out poorly, herded into the roles of the poor, the innocent, the evil, or the corrupt" and bridling them with the fate "not to be merely mute, [but] to be struck dumb" enrages him to no end (134). The Auteur ends up inviting the narrator back and asking for his help in hiring Vietnamese extras. The narrator soon discovers that the Auteur has added three speaking parts for Vietnamese characters. Although he is still troubled by the Auteur's revised screenplay (and his casting of any

Asian-looking actor for the Vietnamese speaking parts), the narrator recognizes that “movies were America’s way of softening up the rest of the world” and identifies himself as “an infiltrator into a work of propaganda” (172).

Certainly problematic, it is somewhat moot that the Auteur, in the end, decides to sacrifice historical accuracy and the integrity of a nation and its people for his artistic creation as his hubris only serves to illuminate the Auteur’s racism. Recognizing the danger that the narrator poses in destabilizing the racist stereotype that his movie invariably reinforces, the Auteur makes two unsuccessful attempts to kill off the narrator, once physically with an explosion on set, and the next metaphorically by excluding his name from the film’s credits; unfortunately, what the Auteur succeeds in is erasing the Vietnamese altogether from the telling of the Vietnam War by the production and the global distribution of his movie. Nevertheless, the narrator is not left defeated. He strikes back and humiliates the Auteur by comically portraying the Auteur in *his* confession/manuscript as someone who is completely oblivious of his racial insensitivity. The narrator may have failed in blocking the launching of the Auteur’s “intercontinental ballistic missile of Americanization” (172) inlayed into his film, but by letting his satiric gaze fall on the Auteur’s biases, he is in fact requiring the readers to further interrogate the authority (and authenticity) of all US-centered narratives of the war.

III

“The soul of the spy is somehow the model of our own;
his actions and his trappings fulfill our unsatisfied desires.”

— Jacque Barzun (1965)

In an interview with *Asia Society*, Nguyen commented that in writing *The Sympathizer*, his main objective was to depict the Vietnamese as “people with complex subjectivities and histories ... which allows them not only to be victimized but also speak about that victimization and to be victimizers and agents of injustice themselves, which is ... a role reserved only for the West” (n.pag). As such, *The Sympathizer* features a protagonist who is subjected to victimization due to his race as he subjects others to victimization in order to maintain his cover as a communist spy. Just as he feels that he does not belong in Vietnam, a land that he still feels beholden to as his motherland, he faces alienation in America, a land that he finds seductive nevertheless with its “supermarkets and superhighways, supersonic jets, and Superman, supercarriers and the Super Bowl! ... a land not only superconfident but also truly superpowerful” (29). As noted elsewhere, the narrator’s sense of unbelonging in both locations tempers the nationalist discourse evoked by the genre of espionage literature. When, in its final pages, the narrator is released from his role as a spy, the pressure of having to choose only one side is finally lifted from the shoulders of a man who has always possessed “two minds” and thus sympathized with “both sides” (1). It is then that the narrator aligns himself to the boat people who have the leeway to choose either to root themselves upon reaching “safe harbor” or to “turn our backs on the unwanted, human nature being what we know of it” (382). Though no longer a spy of suspect allegiance, the narrator continues with the writing of his confession, a manuscript now he calls it, because he realizes that his words are all that he has left of any value to give anyone, his “best attempt to represent [himself] against all those who sought to represent [him and his people]” (380).

Extricated from the discourse of the nation, the narrator exercises his double agency and authors himself as an Asian transnational subject who, like the boat

people, claim no national affiliation. The narrator is troubled by the name of boat people as it “smacks of anthropological condescension, evoking some forgotten branch of the human family, some lost tribe of amphibians emerging from the ocean mist, crowned with seaweed” (382). However, the narrator comes to realize that his removal from the nationalist discourse (afforded him by his new affiliation) means he can disassociate himself from the reductive stereotypes incurred by the nation’s binary logic of inclusion/exclusion, national self/alien other, ally/enemy. He rejects the negative connotations attached to the name of boat people in declaring that “we are not primitives, and we are not to be pitied” (283) and in so doing, the narrator “redefines the Vietnamese refugees as ‘the most hopeful of creatures’ because they will not be forgotten but stay revolutionary by owning and narrating their stories” (Lee 471). Detaching himself from the nation-state, the narrator gains freedom to construct his authentic self, that of an Asian transnational subject, and his sense of self expands to include his fellow travelers on the boat. As he transitions from a definition of self as an individual “I” to a collective and communal “we,” the narrator completely explodes the self/other binary which is central to the discourse of the nation. As Lee observes, in claiming the collective “we,” the narrator ensures that the Asian transnational subject will “keep building their communities and writing their stories so that they will never be silenced or misrepresented” (473).

As noted earlier, the genre of espionage literature spotlights national stability which is mainly achieved by the elimination of the enemy spy. In *The Sympathizer*, the spy is expunged not from the American body politics but from the body of the narrator and as such, it establishes stability not within the nation-state but in the selfhood of the protagonist who, as the transnational subject, is no longer torn asunder by allegiance to conflicting national, ideological positions. As the transnational subject, the narrator, encompassing the desires of “thousands [who] must be staring into the

darkness like us, gripped by scandalous thoughts, extravagant hopes, and forbidden plots,” voices the universal truth: the will of the human race to live.

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국문초록

비엣 탄 응웬의 『동조자』에 재현된 아시아계 스파이와 초국가적 아시아계 주체의 문제

정혜연

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본고는 비엣 탄 응웬의 『동조자』에 재현된 아시아계 스파이 주인공에 대한 분석을 통해 초국가적 아시아계 주체의 형성과정을 살펴보고자 한다. 아시아계 미국문학 연구 분야에서 저명한 비평가로 인정받는 응웬은 자신의 데뷔 소설인 『동조자』의 집필 의도를 다음과 같이 설명하고 있다: 베트남인을 단순한 피해자로, 공산주의자를 무조건 악인으로 이분화하고 단면적인 고정관념으로 전락시키는 미국의 사회역사적 주요 담론을 반박하고, 이들을 더 복합적인 주체와 역사를 가진 이들로 재현하고자 하였다. 응웬은 자신의 주인공을 공산주의와 동조하지만 미국사회를 선망하는 스파이로 설정한다. 즉 베트남인이 표방하는 공산주의 그리고 미국이 표방하는 민주주의 사이에서 어느 사회, 어느 이데올로기에 충성해야 할지 딜레마에 빠진 주인공을 제시하여 베트남인의 평면적 재현을 극복하고자 하였다. 주인공을 스파이로 설정한 이 작품은 스파이 소설의 장르 관습을 환기한다; 스파이 소설은 대체적으로 국가의 안전을 위협하는 외부인의 침입을 차단하는 (백인)주인공을 등장시키는데, 이러한 구조는 “국가”를 강조하는 효과를 가져온다. 하지만 응웬의 주인공은 미국의 민주주의 대 베트남의 공산주의, 아시아 대 미국, 동조자 대 배신자 등 여러 주체적 지위를 넘나들면서 경계의 견고함, 특히 국가적 경계의 중요성을 축소시킨다. 이렇듯 『동조자』는 주인공을 아시아계 이주 미국인이 아닌 국가적 경계를 극복한 아시아계 초국가적 미국인으로 제시하여 국가적 담론에서 파생되어 나온 인종적 고정관념을 타개해 나갈 수 있는 새로

운 주체적 지위를 제시하고자 한다.

주제어: 비엠탄응웬, 『동조자』, 스파이 문학, 아시아계 초국가적 주체, 이중첩자/이중역량

논문접수일: 2022.01.21

심사완료일: 2022.02.10

게재확정일: 2022.02.25

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