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Gloria Pham April 3, 2020

A Vietnamese's Looking Glass for America:

Spectatorship & Representation in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*

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Abstract

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Given the monumental role that film and media have played in reshaping the global perspective of the Vietnam War, it is undeniable that the western gaze exerts an impact upon its subjects that renders them inhuman prior to any physical threat, thus justifying the ongoing function of the war machine. However, while acknowledging the disproportionate power of the American culture industry, it is also essential to recognize that spectatorship is not a one-way relation. This thesis examines how Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* subvert the paradigm of western voyeurism by critiquing representations of representations and employing the motif of dreams, illusions, and hallucinations. In so doing, both Nguyen and Cao restitute agency to the Vietnamese, whose subjecthood is so often effaced in American-produced narratives of the war.

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INTRODUCTION

Through the diligent documentation of combat journalists and war photographers, the well-preserved image of the war in Vietnam[1] has persisted in the American psyche for years, earning its moniker as "the first living room war." With unprecedented coverage, the public watched in rapture as the conflict unfolded across their television sets. Nearly half a century since then, such images have been reconstructed countless times in film, literature, memorials, and museum exhibits. As several critics and scholars have observed, these revisionings have come to represent a force as real as the war itself, transforming the global perception of Vietnam long after 1975. Vietnam, for America, is Hell, loss, humiliation, and the waning of Uncle Sam's liberating reach. It is a tropical playground to exhibit white masculinity, and the backdrop to a story about America's prolonged and failed effort to save a nation from the scourge of communism.

Such is the picture painted by American reproductions of the war, a picture which has become crucial to promoting American values, ideals, and perspectives abroad. In this way, the media and culture industry are as much an arm of the war machine and an apparatus for necropower as the hard power of bombs, tanks, and war planes that compose the military-industrial complex. After all, a meticulously constructed narrative can deprive certain groups of humanity and subjecthood just as much as a rifle can deprive those same people of life. As scholar and writer Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, "All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory" (Nguyen 4). In his 2016 book, *Nothing Ever Dies:*

[1] Rather than reinforce an American perspective by adhering to the nomination of the "Vietnam War," from this point forward I will refer to the conflict as "the War"

Vietnam and the Memory of War, Nguyen notes that although the Vietnamese won the war, for everyone outside the country, it is the American industry of memory that wins, either by foregrounding the loss and humanity of its own while forgetting others, or by "distracting the world's gaze" from the war entirely with the glorious spectacles and cinematic feats made possible by the triumph of capitalism (171). The use of the spectacle as weapon of authority is not, however, a phenomenon unique to the twentieth century. In fact, visuality has long been used by the dominant to reframe public perception of the other. As American scholar Paul Kramer notes in his own work on race and empire in the Philippines, re-presentation of the other is an inherent act of violence that endows the onlooker with authority while stripping the object of the viewer's gaze of humanity and agency. While the question of representation and the colonial gaze has been pertinent since the dawn of the colonial project, starting from the travelogues of European explorers and writers such as Marco Polo and Étienne de Flacourt, the "spectatorial economy" only became even more essential to the civilizing mission with the rise in popularity of expositions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Kramer 76). As Kramer writes:

> In a more Foucauldian variant, the disciplinary function of expositions— the world broken down into a rigid "order of things"—and the spectatorial economy at their center function to regulate the societies and bodies of the colonized. In each mode, power is both concentrated and total: empire is the machinery of exposition, exposition the dream world of empire. (Kramer 76)

Significantly, although today's spectatorial economy might not appear as overtly racist as the showcases at colonial exhibitions during the nineteenth century, the exposition of subaltern subjects continues to fuel imperialist policy and ideology. Whether through ethnographies,

documentaries, film, literature, photography, or news and media, hegemonic modes of vision persist and pervert the public imagination of the other. This much is acknowledged in Susan Sontag's *On Photography,* in which she writes that "to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge — and, therefore, like power" (Sontag 174). Sontag's proposition that one can confer power to oneself through the image of another is deeply troubling when considering postmodern theories of simulation. To construct the other, to believe to know the other, even if only through an image, is a proposition which is exemplified in Jean Baudrillard's claim that "the image can no longer imagine the real, because it is the real" (Baudrillard 275). Certainly, the implication that a concept or event is only so real as its reach and consequence is not to be entirely dismissed, for while the Vietnamese won the war, American national narratives trumped the Vietnamese version of events in the end. In many ways, then, vision and perception remain as integral to the neoimperialist endeavor as they had been during the onset of the colonial experiment. Sontag's evaluation of the photographer makes this clear. For Sontag:

> The photographer is supertourist, an extension of the anthropologist, visiting natives and bringing back news of their exotic doings and strange gear. The photographer is always trying to colonize new experiences or find a new way to look at familiar subjects. (Sontag 42).

Finding a new way to look at familiar subjects is exactly what the American culture industry has attempted (and continues) to do with the War, essentially re-writing history so that the reality of the war itself fades, becoming a mere phantom behind the shinier, more riveting adaptations of the conflict. For instance, in his essay, *The Demon of Images*, Baudrillard examines the

relationship between the War and images of the war, specifically from Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film, *Apocalypse Now,* writing:

> The real war was conducted by Coppola…the war in Vietnam "in itself" perhaps in fact never happened, it is a dream, a baroque dream of napalm and of the tropics, a psychotropic dream that had the goal neither of a victory nor of a policy trade, but rather, the sacrificial, excessive deployment of power already filming itself as the war unfolded, perhaps waiting for nothing but consecration by a superfilm, which completes the mass-spectacle effect of this war. (Baudrillard 17)

The film, of course, does not represent the reality of the Vietnamese, who, as far as Coppola is concerned, are merely mute extras in his own vision of the war. Eight years before Baudrillard reiterated the sentiment, Coppola himself boldly asserted at the 1979 Venice Film Festival that "[his] film is not a movie. [His] film is not about Vietnam. It is Vietnam." In this statement, Coppola appropriates the war, which continues to be a source of trauma for many, and reduces it to a fantasy of his own making. Although Baudrillard is correct in pointing to the film as a "deployment of power" comparable to the material mechanisms of war, he and Coppola discount the real human suffering experienced by those involved in the conflict by suggesting that the film carries more significant consequences than those battles fought in the humid jungles.

Vietnam war films are, of course, only one mode in which the country has been reduced to a spectacle, gutted of its identity and displayed for all the world to see. As Mike Silverman writes in *Vietnam: The Real War*, one might "say the word 'Vietnam' today to most people of a certain age," and "the image that rises is usually a photograph. An AP photograph." (Hamill 2013). The burning monk. The napalm girl. The execution of a Viet Cong officer, a gun cocked

at his head, face contorted in the rush of the moment. I mention such images not as an indictment of photojournalists, who, after all, documented atrocities being committed on both sides, but as part of an evaluation of the one-way relationship of looking. Ultimately, who gets the right to look? Such a question, of course, prompts an even larger one: who, in turn, gets to determine how a war, a country, and its people are perceived?

In this thesis, I hope not only to recuperate the Vietnamese perspective and restitute agency to those who have been rendered one-dimensional victims at best, or harbingers of "yellow peril" at worst, but also to examine the ways in which Vietnamese American authors engage with motifs of dreams, optical illusions, and the notion of artifice as a way to subvert the paradigm of western voyeurism. Especially given the way that films and photographs of the War have already reimagined the country as "a baroque dream of napalm and…the tropics," it is essential to examine how Vietnamese American authors break free from the colonial image which simultaneously calcifies and splinters their selfhood. As literary scholar Angelika Bammer writes in *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, "the native is not the defiled image and not *not* the defiled image" (Bammer 146). That is, although the representation of the colonial subject as the defiled image must be resisted, there is danger as well in entirely ignoring such an image in favor of a glorified nationalist version.

The careful balance between the "defiled image" and its nationalist antithesis is an inherently ambiguous position that is familiar to anyone wedged between opposing ideologies and cultures. In this sense, Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* are ideal texts with which to examine how the Vietnamese American reconciles herself with her condition as a split subject. The protagonists of the novels, being refugees in America, are burdened with seeing both sides, and thus, belong to neither. Of course, the notion of disjuncture

is not unfamiliar to Cao and Nguyen themselves, both of whom fled Vietnam after 1975 and now live in America as professors/authors. In their novels, Nguyen and Cao set the events after the fall of Saigon in 1975, and as such, are concerned not with the progression of the war, but rather, its aftermath. Although both *Monkey Bridge* and *The Sympathizer* detail the travails of their protagonists as they arrive in America following the end of the War, they are explored through opposing points of view. Mai, the protagonist in *Monkey Bridge*, speaks from the perspective of a pro-South Vietnamese refugee. A senior in high school, Mai gets ready to apply for college while mediating her mother's adjustment into American culture. Bedbound and sick, her mother, Thanh, falls in and out of dreams while calling out for her father, who remains in Vietnam after a rendezvous gone awry. As Mai confronts the struggles of daily life, she also uncovers dark secrets about her family's history during her quest to contact her grandfather. The unnamed narrator in *The Sympathizer*, on the other hand, is a double agent working as an assistant to a South Vietnamese general while maintaining clandestine communications with Man, his childhood friend, comrade, and superior with whom his true loyalties lie.

Notably, the difference in the way Nguyen and Cao approach the idea of split subjectivity extends far beyond the opposing perspectives of their narrators. A major part of the initial wave of Vietnamese American literature, Cao's 1997 semi-autobiographical novel is written as a memoir, the somber voice of Mai occasionally interrupted by her mother's own reflective diary entries. The memoir was a popular form for emerging Vietnamese American writers beginning in the 1960's who hoped to educate the American public about Vietnamese history (Janette 2018). However, "in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Vietnamese American literature diversified in both form and content," Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* being only one marked example of how Vietnamese American ingenuity has transformed the literary landscape (Janette 2018).

Unlike *Monkey Bridge, The Sympathizer* is a cross of many genres, encompassing espionage, satire, parody, and confessional while also remaining a refugee and war story.

Central to both texts are recurring motifs of delusion, illusion, hallucination, and fantasy, all of which function to dissolve the relationship between image and identity and offer an alternative to the visual discourse which has long been used to dehumanize the Vietnamese. Rather than accept the reality that has been shaped by the western gaze and the interests of the dominant, Mai and the unnamed narrator derive insight and empowerment from moments when they are *not* conscious or mentally grounded. That is, their dreams and hallucinations serve as methods of coping and conquering adversities, and are also clues to the inner lives they feel unable to exhibit to others. By offering an alternate plane of vision that does not abide by the colonial system which reduces their personhood into simplified images and narratives, *Monkey Bridge* and *The Sympathizer* demonstrate one way that Vietnamese American authors straddle reality and fantasy as well as imposed and self-constructed identities.

Reading these two novels side by side, I will first focus on the narrators' respective experiences of looking at themselves being looked at, analyzing how the novels, written ten years apart, address the white gaze. While both Nguyen and Cao's protagonists are self-aware of their position as outsiders in America, Mai seeks to redress the unfair assumptions made of her whereas Nguyen's unnamed narrator accepts his predicament with bemusement. In so doing, Nguyen makes white America the target of his satire. Contrary to Nguyen, however, Cao's novel does not make any attempt to decenter, but rather, is markedly addressed to a white American audience. Despite both Nguyen and Cao critiquing the projection of the colonial gaze upon the subaltern subject, Cao *participates* in the power structure that sustains the gaze by acknowledging it, even if to speak back to it. Conversely, *The Sympathizer* adamantly dismantles

the West as center, leaving various passages of Vietnamese untranslated or cultural idiosyncrasies unexplained. Additionally, integral to the texts' engagement with the colonial gaze is their attention to film and media as modes of re-presenting the other. In this sense, Nguyen and Cao are particularly attentive to the historical role that visuality has played in the colonial enterprise. Notably, Nguyen and Cao also advance their critiques of visuality through a non-visual medium—that is, the novel. Evidently, both are aware that literature offers an examination of visual production that is not vulnerable to the pitfalls that film is, for neither text attempts to recreate the totalizing experience of film, but points instead at film's artificiality.

In the second half of chapter one, I also explore the narrators' own faculties of vision and perception. Both Mai, the primary narrator in *Monkey Bridge*, and the unnamed narrator in *The Sympathizer* exist in a state of postcolonial hybridity, Mai in that she has been transplanted from Vietnam to the U.S as a refugee, and the unnamed narrator in that he is a refugee, but also mixed-race, being the illegitimate son of a French priest and a Vietnamese peasant. Given this, both experience a kind of "double vision" that counters the visual frames they are presented with in the novels. Moreover, just as both protagonists are subject to the colonial gaze as part of the Vietnamese diaspora, so too do they observe their own communities as if outsiders. This creates a compelling dynamic in which a hierarchy of power exists within the Vietnamese community itself. However, although the narrator in *The Sympathizer* is able to commiserate with both the North and South Vietnamese, he watches them from a place of inferiority, being the bastard son of a white man. Mai, however, having a better grasp on English and being more assimilated compared to the rest of her community, observes her own people with a sense of disdain.

In the second chapter, I focus primarily on the function of dreams and illusions in *Monkey Bridge* and hallucinations in *The Sympathizer*. Rather than representing faulty vision,

both novels proffer dreams, illusions, and hallucinations as modes in which the characters are either empowered, enlightened, or confronted with a certain truth which is otherwise inaccessible to them in their lucid, daily lives. Especially because the colony has long been viewed as a *tabula rasa* for the colonial imagination, transformed by the exotification, eroticism, and cultural erasure inherent in European writings, images, and expositions, it is particularly intriguing that Nguyen and Cao adopt the imagination as the means by which the postcolonial subject breaks out of the mold designed to cage her in.

Finally, in the last chapter, I will evaluate the representation of representations in *The Sympathizer*, particularly how the role of artifice, ekphrasis, and the merging of forms breaks the frame of the story to underscore the construction of a narrative. Regarding form, *The Sympathizer* is written as the narrator's confession to his communist captors—a document he is ordered to write and continually revise as the first stage of his reeducation. In a 2016 interview with Terry Gross, Nguyen notes that the confession from "one Vietnamese person to another Vietnamese person" allowed him to "construct an implied audience of Vietnamese people," a decision which is pointedly outside of the norm for minority literature (NPR 2016). Evidently, then, the confession is yet another way that Nguyen circumvents the white, colonial gaze, for he establishes a dialectic in which neither party constitutes the Western perspective. Additionally, the middle section of the novel features an incisive parody of *Apocalypse Now* wherein the narrator serves as an authenticity expert on *The Hamlet*, a film about the War. By illustrating the artificiality of the set and the inaccuracy of the script, Nguyen reinforces the function of metanarrative in the text, positioning *The Hamlet* as a clear indictment of the wild fabrications of American-produced narratives about the war. In a radical gesture, Nguyen's caution against imbuing truth to representation extends beyond just representations produced by the dominant.

For instance, at the end of the novel, the text takes the form of a screenplay, hinting at the notion that his novel, too, is no more accurate or "authentic" than the representations he condemns. Especially given Nguyen's parody of *Apocalypse Now*, the move to adopt the form of a screenplay represents the same self-critique that the narrator undergoes as a requirement of his reeducation. As the narrator exclaims at the conclusion of his confession, "how dare a man of two minds think he could represent himself much less anyone else, including his own recalcitrant people?" (Nguyen 373). From this sentiment, it is clear that Nguyen seeks not some elusive representation of the "genuine," but instead forgoes realism in favor of the acerbic, powerful voice of the narrator. In this way, the narrator is a holistic, complicated portrait of a Vietnamese who is neither helpless victim nor selfless martyr. Even on a stylistic level, then, Nguyen embraces imagination as a response to the constraints typically imposed on authors who write about refugees and immigrants.

Significantly, by transforming the end of his text into a screenplay that mirrors the rape scene in the fictional movie, Nguyen also opens the notion of spectatorship to another type of gaze, that is, the male gaze that fetishizes the Vietnamese female body. While *The Sympathizer* and *Monkey Bridge* rely on the trope of woman as nation just as American war films and Vietnamese national narratives do, *The Sympathizer's* metaphorization of the woman's body to demonstrate Vietnamese complicity belies the painful fact that the native woman is doubly colonized: first by the foreigner, then by her own men. By putting *The Sympathizer* and *Monkey Bridge* in conversation with one another, I hope to unpack the myriad ways that spectatorship and representation function together to deprive its subject of personhood. At the same time, I also hope to reveal the way in which both these texts circumvent the gaze as it is imposed upon the narrators.

I. UNDER THE GAZE

Throughout both Nguyen and Cao's novels, multiple modes of spectatorship are in play. On an individual level, the protagonists both sense that they are outsiders, viewed as unwelcome foreigners who are unable to assimilate. However, no matter how much Mai and the unnamed narrator in *The Sympathizer* feel that they are specimen under the microscope of American scrutiny, they themselves observe and are observed by their own communities, often with the same anthropological eye that they are subjected to as a group. Just as white Americans view the Vietnamese with an "us vs. them" mindset, so too do Mai and the unnamed narrator set themselves apart from their brethren and subject them to their own expectations and judgements. They, like their onlookers, are cognizant subjects who discern, judge, and discriminate. The crucial difference, of course, is that neither Mai nor the unnamed narrator have at their disposal the resources or power to render their perspective the dominant one. This dominant perspective is determined by those who own the means of representation.

Visual culture production—the film and media industry—comprises only one means of representation, but it arguably one of the most powerful. Given the monumental role of film and media in shifting public perceptions of the war during and after the conflict, it is no surprise that Nguyen and Cao dedicate much of their novels to the impact that war images have had on Vietnamese refugees themselves. Rather than being seen as human beings whose lives are

valuable, film and media have transformed Vietnamese bodies into an abstract statistic measuring the number of war dead, their deaths brushed off as collateral damage. The disparity in which some lives are mourned and others are forgotten is what Judith Butler calls the unequal distribution of "precarity," wherein certain populations whose deaths "challenge the rationale of war" are rendered "insensate' and "ungrievable" by the state in order to permit the ongoing operation of the war machine (Butler xvi). The War, then, is a prime example of the ways in which "the matrix through which grievability is made possible" functions with the complicity of the culture industry (Butler xxi).

Monkey Bridge and *The Sympathizer,* by detailing the narrators' experiences of being observed by white America, draw a connection between the discourses which determine how Vietnamese refugees are perceived and the discrimination and exotification they suffer as a result. In this way, both texts highlight Butler's proposition that "the body is exposed to socially and politically articulated forces as well as to claims of sociality—including language, work, and desire—that make possible the body's persisting and flourishing" (Butler 3). In other words, that the onlooker's gaze upon the observed has the power to deprive the latter of life prior to any physical threat reveals the way in which recognizability/subjecthood is constituted through "categories, conventions, and norms" (Butler 3).

Such an idea is well established in the beginning of *Monkey Bridge.* For example, Mai's insight into how Americans view the Vietnamese underscore how refugees are not apprehended as lives worth protecting. Rather, they are "nomads," a "burden on the economy," and ultimately, "an awkward reminder of a war the whole country was trying to forget" (Cao 15). Throughout the novel, Mai's constant awareness of how she is perceived dictates many of her actions. Because she feels like she and her mother are "guests in this country," she believes they must

"go through the motions and float harmlessly as permanent guests, with no more impact on [their] surroundings than the mild, leisurely pace of ordinary life" (Cao 42). Mai's self-perception through American eyes is not merely that she is a foreigner, but an unwanted reminder of American defeat. For her, a "foreigner [i]s quaint, but [a] Vietnamese mean[s] trouble" since Vietnam is no longer "just a country" for Americans, but a name which carries with it connotations of "war" and "antipathies" (Cao 42). Knowing this, Mai feels she can only exist in America if she is "innocuous" and practically invisible (Cao 42). Of course, her daily interactions with Americans confirm this belief, for even a small request to their apartment manager elicits racial epithets like "Madame Nhu" or "Mamasan" (Cao 21, 23).

The effect of the white gaze on Mai becomes even more pronounced during her college interview with her evaluator, Amy Layton. From the start of their meeting, Mai can see in Layton "a strain [she has] seen in so many Americans, an undertone of ambivalence behind the cordial, easygoing façade" (Cao 126). Rather than discussing Mai's qualifications, Layton is interested in Mai's connection with the war, relating to her with an anecdote of her own veteran husband, whose legs were blown off during combat. Layton's perception of Mai is glaringly obvious—stripped of any other identification, Mai does not register as a precocious young girl, a promising student, or anything other than a Vietnamese refugee to the interviewer. Knowing this, Mai feels vulnerable and wants to "guard [her] weak points and keep them hidden from sight" (Cao 126). She wants to protect herself from Layton's gaze, which already regards her with preconceived notions about who she is. This, however, is something she cannot do, especially when Layton continues to ask her about the war and "hold[s] [her] hostage with her piercing eyes" (Cao 127). Overcome with the need to humanize herself to this woman, Mai desires to describe her home, neighborhood, food, and festivals, all to make Layton see that "it was not all

about rocket fires and body bags" (Cao 128). One look, however, and Mai cannot say a word, realizing that "the Vietnam delivered to America had truly passed beyond reclamation," that "it was no longer [hers] to explain" (Cao 128). Mai's silent understanding that Americans possess a view of Vietnam which is furnished solely by conjured visions of tropical jungles and violent warfare highlights the damaging function that imagined narratives of the marginalized have. Subjected to such a narrow understanding of who a Vietnamese can be, Mai is forced to choose between being seen as an out-of-place war refugee or being as invisible as possible.

The violence of the gaze is only made more emphatic by the end of the novel, when Mai reads some of her mother's personal letters detailing how the Americans devastated the land with Agent Orange. Her mother writes:

> They trampled our rice crops, ripping through the village with what we called their thousand-meter stare—scanning one thousand meters into the distant horizon for each footstep taken—their eyes checking every bush, monitoring the fields in front and the fields behind, turning their heads to the left, then the right, before putting one foot before the other. They stared so hard we thought they could shoot fire and burn the shrubs and carve a trail with their eyes alone. And of course they could. (Cao 241).

Thanh's association of the physical destruction of the land with the soldiers' "thousand-meter stare" is no coincidence, for this new group of soldiers differs from the last in that they do not bow to the elders or accept the natives' offerings of food; in other words, they do not see these Vietnamese as fellow human beings and cannot distinguish between the Northerners and Southerners (the enemy vs. the ally). This inability to recognize the other is perhaps what enables them to scan the fields in such a systematic way, not pausing to think of the impact on the villagers before spraying large swaths of the land with Agent Orange. Furthermore, the violence

of the gaze becomes quite literal here. While American representations of the Vietnamese doubtlessly morph how the Vietnamese are perceived, the act by which U.S military surveyed the country from above and administered Agent Orange over the land *physically* morphed the Vietnamese themselves, who suffer (and continue to suffer) from various cancers, autoimmune diseases, and "offspring with deformities and horrific illnesses" (Nguyen 2017). Today, the legacy of Agent Orange is exhibited in Vietnamese bodies themselves—babies with hydrocephalic heads, people with "birdlike limbs and patches of scaly skin," bodies "locked in gnarled deformity—damning evidence that impact of "the thousand-meter stare" is not merely figurative (Nguyen 2017).

Like Mai, the unnamed narrator in *The Sympathizer* is hyperconscious about the way that Americans expect him to think, behave, and act. For instance, early in the text, the narrator thinks that:

> In this jackfruit republic that served as a franchise of the United States, Americans expected [him] to be like those millions who spoke no English, pidgin English, or accented English. [He] resented their expectation. That was why [he] was always eager to demonstrate, in both spoken and written word, [his] mastery of their language. (Nguyen 7).

Although both Mai and the unnamed narrator seek to escape the expectations of white Americans by presenting themselves in ways which would subvert such stereotypes, they also both conform to the way that Americans think they *should* act. While Mai does this in an attempt to assimilate and lead an easier life, the narrator does so not because he craves American acceptance, but because he is mocking the caricature they have painted of him. In a sense, then, he is merely "playing along." After arriving in America, for example, the narrator gets a temporary clerical

job as the assistant to the Department Chair of Oriental Studies at a San Diego university. The professor with whom he works doubtlessly has a fetishistic fascination with "oriental" culture and language, something the narrator acknowledges by humorously commenting that he "ha[d] hung an elaborate Oriental rug on his wall, in lieu, [the narrator] suppose[ed], of an actual Oriental" (Nguyen 62). As the professor delivers a trite speech about how the narrator "embod[ies] the symbiosis of Orient and Occident," the narrator struggles "to keep a straight face" (Nguyen 65). Feigning innocence, the narrator responds to the professor's suggestion to "reconcile" his "opposing sides" by asking if this balance is like "yin and yang" (Nguyen 65). While the professor is clueless to the fact that he is being made fun of, the narrator capitalizes from the professor's ignorance to amuse himself. In this way, humor is another means by which Nguyen undermines the authority of the white gaze—by laughing at it square in the face.

Just as the narrator pays no mind to the professor's limited views, he also accords no merit to the prejudice of the American public. Fully aware that he and his countrymen are seen as exotic and alien at best and leeches of government aid at worst, the narrator takes these farcical impressions of the Vietnamese in stride, even boldly embracing certain stereotypes in jest. In one passage, the narrator remarks:

> The majority of Americans regarded us with ambivalence if not outright distaste… We were strange aliens rumored to have a predilection for *Fido Americanus*, the domestic canine on whom was lavished more per capita than the annual income of a starving Bangladeshi family…While some of us indeed had been known to sup on the brethren of Rin Tin Tin and Lassie, we did not do so in the Neanderthalesque way imagined by the average American, with a club, a roast, and some salt, but with a gourmand's depth of ingenuity and creativity, our chefs able to cook canids seven different virility-enhancing

> ways, from extracting the marrow to grilling and boiling, as well as sausage making, stewing, and a few varieties of frying and steaming—yum! (Nguyen 117-118).

Clearly, the clever, satirical voice of the narrator underlines the way that American perceptions have trapped the Vietnamese in a space of ambiguity and foreignness. More so, however, the narrator does not disavow all accusations made of the Vietnamese, but rather, confidently claims them, insisting that their cultural preferences—however misunderstood to Americans—are not without refined taste and skill. If anything, the narrator suggests that while Americans frown upon Asians' culinary interest in dogs, so too are Asians perplexed by Americans' relationship with man's best friend, with whom they pamper with such opulence as to suggest equal status. In another ode to a Vietnamese culinary staple, the narrator again juxtaposes the Americans' perception of the Vietnamese with the implication that the Vietnamese, too, exert a gaze upon their onlookers. In a letter to his aunt, he writes:

> Oh fish sauce! How we missed it…This pungent liquid condiment of the darkest sepia hue was much denigrated by foreigners for its supposedly horrendous reek, lending new meaning to the phrase "there's something fishy around here," for we were the fishy ones. We used fish sauce the way Transylvanian villagers wore cloves of garlic to ward off vampires, in our case to establish a perimeter with those Westerners who could never understand that what was truly fishy was the nauseating stench of cheese. What was fermented fish compared to curdled milk? (Nguyen 70).

Contrasted with Mai from *Monkey Bridge*, the narrator does not wish to surrender to the American imagination which renders him foreign and strange, for he refuses to live quietly without causing the least disturbance. Instead, while he is aware that he and his countrymen "are the fishy ones," he rejects the notion that it is the Vietnamese who are ostracized and avoided as

a result of Americans' evaluation of them (Nguyen 70). Rather, he insists that these Vietnamese, too, observe and scrutinize American customs and practices, *choosing* to "establish a perimeter" which separates them from Americans rather than the other way around (Nguyen 70). Moreover, the narrator's condemnation of the "nauseating stench of cheese" functions to destabilize the white gaze by yielding to senses outside of vision alone, highlighting how visual perception is particularly vulnerable to illusions and deceptions in a way that the other senses are not (Nguyen 70).

The proverbial gaze of the dominant is, of course, represented in various other ways throughout *The Sympathizer*, the anticommunist manual which the narrator receives as a gift being one of the most prominent. The manual, written by the fictional English scholar Richard Hedd, is titled "Asian Communism and the Oriental Mode of Destruction: On Understanding and Defeating the Marxist Threat to Asia" and becomes the text on which the narrator decodes his clandestine communications with Man, his communist conspirator. Hidden in the unremarkable letters to his aunt in France are messages from Man written in "an invisible ink concocted from rice starch" which the narrator reveals by making "a solution of iodine in water that [he] would brush onto the letter" (Nguyen 68). These messages are always "a series of numbers in purple ink" which refer "to page, line, and word" of Hedd's text (Nguyen 68). Rather than lend any authority to the imperialist writings of Dr. Hedd, the narrator literally appropriates the text for himself and transforms it into a tool to further his own objectives.

Interspersed throughout *The Sympathizer* are passages from Hedd's fictional manual which point to the way that conceptions of the "oriental" are fabricated. One passage, for instance, claims that "The Vietnamese peasant will not object to the use of airpower, for he is apolitical, interested only in feeding himself and his family" (Nguyen 142). This portrait of the

simple Vietnamese peasant can be directly contrasted with the figure of Thanh from Cao's text. A daughter of farmers, Thanh is nevertheless concerned with philosophy, art and politics as much as she is about feeding her family. With her husband Binh, Thanh passionately discusses Molière, Verlaine, Baudelaire, Diderot, Montesquieu, and Voltaire. This contrast between Thanh's life and Hedd's description of a Vietnamese peasant highlights how the limiting portrait of the other robs her of any complexity or subjecthood. Furthermore, the idea of the "apolitical Asian" espoused by Hedd is also made doubly ironic by the fact that the narrator is a double agent working to undermine "the enemy's propaganda" and support the revolution (Nguyen 142).

In one scene, the narrator comes face to face with Dr. Hedd himself, when he and the General are invited to a country club dinner in support of the General's reconnaissance mission. Dr. Hedd's function in the novel as the emblematic figure of the white gaze is made transparent as he watches the narrator through bespectacled eyes, for the narrator feels as though "[he] [i]s being examined by four eyes, not two" (Nguyen 254). As Hedd's "quadriscopic vision turn[s] on" the narrator, he finds "those dual eyes and dual lenses unsettling," especially since he knows Dr. Hedd has already deduced who he is and what he stands for based on his face alone (Nguyen 254). Here, the significance of the narrator watching himself being examined reveals itself, for as "Dr. Hedd scrutinize[s] [him]," the narrator suspects "that what he s[ees] [i]s not that [the narrator] [i]s a book but that [he] [i]s a sheet, easily read and easily mastered," a suspicion which motives the narrator to "prove him wrong" (Nguyen 252). Eventually, the narrator does prove him wrong when, by the end of the dinner, Hedd asks to employ a turn of phrase the narrator had used in his next novel: "while life is only valuable to [the Oriental]…life is *in*valuable to the Westerner" (Nguyen 261). Although the narrator affirms Hedd's declaration that "life is

plentiful, life is cheap in the orient" and that "the Oriental does not put the same high price on life as the Westerner," he does this not to pander to Hedd, but to force Hedd to acknowledge that he is his equal in intelligence and wit (Nguyen 260-261). Ultimately, the few times the narrator does submit to Westerners' constructed image of the "oriental," it is only with a personal, ulterior motive or to maintain his cover as a South Vietnamese officer.

While *The Sympathizer* features several more passages like Hedd's, including a few from another fictional text titled "Fodor's Southeast Asia," which paints the East as "a woven spell to enchant the West" and an "inexhaustible source of riches and wonder," these are not the only manifestations of the white gaze in the novel (Nguyen 147). In fact, the medium of U.S power politics and spectatorship that the novel is most critical of is film. From chapters eight through twelve, the narrator works as an authenticity expert on the set of movie about the War called *The Hamlet*, a biting parody of Francis Ford Coppola's film, *Apocalypse Now.* From the start of the narrator's meeting with the Auteur's assistant, Violet, the narrator is conscious of Violet's abrupt and brisk manner as she speaks to him "without deigning to make eye contact," her words dripping with "condescension and disdain" (Nguyen 126). Already, the narrator knows that she "s[ees] right through [him], or perhaps someone else instead of [him], her retinas burned with the images of all the castrati dreamed up by Hollywood to steal the place of real Asian men" (Nguyen 127). Indeed, although Violet must have only seen his "yellowness, [his] slightly smaller eyes, and the shadow cast by the ill fame of Oriental's genitals," this vision could perhaps never come to fruition with such vividness without the help of "those cartoons named Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan, Number One Son, Hop Sing…and the bucktoothed, bespectacled Jap not so much played as mocked by Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*" (Nguyen 127). Violet's

retinas, seared with these images, no doubt represent the altered vision with which Americans as a whole regard Asians.

Nguyen's compelling indictment of film as the site of violent re-creation of the other is only intensified by the narrator's interactions with the Auteur. This is accomplished through his employment of dreamlike diction to describe the process of filmmaking, ultimately equating film to a "fantasyland" that bears no resemblance to reality (Nguyen 123). For example, upon meeting the narrator, the Auteur claims that he is the first Vietnamese he has ever met, for there are none of them in Hollywood. Although he acknowledges that "authenticity's important," he qualifies that statement by adding that authenticity does not "[beat] imagination," for the "story still comes first" (Nguyen 129). The Auteur's privileging of his particular vision over representing the Vietnamese in a humane way is evident as soon as the narrator begins to make valid critiques of the Auteur's mistakes. Attempting to add speaking parts to the roles of the Vietnamese characters, the narrator even argues that the screams in the script are all wrong. Confronting the Auteur, the narrator tells him, "you have my people scream the following way: AIIIEEEEE!!!," but that "this is not how they scream" (Nguyen 131). Remembering the torture of a Viet Cong agent at the hands of his captain, the narrator feels shame at his inability to save the man, but recalls his scream, and scribbles "AAHHH!!!" across the Auteur's writing pad (Nguyen 131). The initial scream as written by the Auteur invokes the name of the 1974 book *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, a cornerstone text which helped establish the field of Asian American literature (Nguyen 131). Perhaps, Nguyen's allusion to the anthology is a subtle nod to the notion that whether white or Asian, no individual or group has the license to represent an entire demographic who in themselves are not some homogenous monolith which can be represented in the first place.

The narrator's frustration with the Auteur comes to a head when he finally realizes that "no one gives a shit" about accuracy, whereupon he laments his guilelessness, stating that:

> [He] naively believed that [he] could divert the Hollywood organism from its goal, the simultaneous lobotomization and pickpocketing of the world's audiences. The ancillary benefit [i]s strip-mining history, leaving the real history in the tunnels along with the dead…Hollywood did not just make horror movie monsters, it was its own horror movie monster, smashing [him] under its foot…[He] pitie[s] the French for their naïveté in believing they had to visit a country in order to exploit it. Hollywood was much more efficient, imagining the countries it wanted to exploit. [He] [is] maddened by [his] helplessness before the Auteur's imagination and machinations…In this forthcoming Hollywood trompe l'oeil, all the Vietnamese of any side would come out poorly. (Nguyen 133-134).

Here, the narrator's defeated tone underscores the futility he feels in the battle against the imaginary, for regardless of the fact that the Auteur's film is blatantly unrealistic and biased, it is nevertheless a "trompe l'oeil" that the global audience falls for (Nguyen 134). Indeed, the narrator's proposition that one does not have to "visit a country in order to exploit it" highlights how the "imagination and machinations" of imperialist nations are exponentially more powerful than the infantry they deploy abroad (Nguyen 134). While one can dodge a bullet or recover from battle, how can one fight off the lens through which she is seen? The lens that deems her and all her progeny less than human?

For his part, the narrator is aware of the film's shortcomings, but despite his disillusionment, the narrator remains on the set by convincing himself he is "an infiltrator into a work of propaganda," no doubt to soothe his concern that he is "helping to exploit [his] fellow

countrymen and refugees" by aiding "a white man like" the Auteur (Nguyen 153, 163, 172). After failing to persuade the Auteur to cut out the rape scene of a South Vietnamese woman, however, the narrator becomes less sure of his effectiveness, and all the more worried by the power of the artist. For him, "the depiction of Mai's rape" does not seem "simply figurative," but rather, is "a brutal act of the imagination" (Nguyen 164). The notion that the imaginary can inflict pain beyond the figurative is only bolstered by the Auteur's own arrogance when claims that "making this movie is going to war itself," for "a great work of art is as real as reality itself," and sometimes even "more real than the real" (Nguyen 178). Such a statement echoes the same claim made by Francis Ford Coppola at the 1979 Venice film festival insisting that *Apocalypse Now* "is Vietnam." No doubt, the narrator's assertion that Hollywood is the launcher of the intercontinental ballistic missile of Americanization" cannot be truer, especially in light of his observation that "art eventually survives war" (Nguyen 178-179). In other words, North Vietnamese victory stands no chance against the wealth and breadth of America's culture industry, so as Vietnamese state-sponsored narratives only exist within the borders of the nation, the American perspective is the one that dominates worldwide.

Despite the narrator's acknowledgement of this truth, he resists how "the Auteur's egomaniacal imagination" positions his film as "more important than the three or four or six million dead who composed the real meaning of the war" (Nguyen 179). Instead, he condemns the film as a piece of propaganda rather than "seeing [the] Movie purely as art," claiming that:

> Movies [are] America's way of softening up the rest of the world, Hollywood relentlessly assaulting the mental defenses of audiences with the hit, the spectacle, the blockbuster, and yes, even the box office bomb. It mattered not what story these audiences watched. The point was that it was the American story they watched and loved, up until the day

> that they themselves might be bombed by the planes they had seen in American movies. (Nguyen 172).

In the passage above, the narrator's evaluation of the way that Hollywood "softens" and "assaults" the world's "mental defenses" before the final death blow suggests that film is only the first stage in exterminating the other (Nguyen 172). In this sense, the social, political, and economic interests of the U.S are, as Adorno would argue, embedded in popular culture and spread elsewhere as a tool of mass passivity. The necropolitics which underlie the operations of the culture industry are laid bare with the narrator's observation that "not to own the means of production can lead to a premature death, but not to own the means of representation is also a kind of death," for "if [one is] represented by others, might they not, one day, hose [one's] death off memory's laminated floor?" (Nguyen 194). Such an observation seems especially prophetic when the narrator finally does see the movie upon its release. At the end of the movie, expecting to see his name in the film credits, the narrator is deflated to see that the Auteur has erased any role he had in the making of the film, angerly realizing that while "failing to do away with [him] in real life, [the Auteur] had succeeded in murdering [him] in fiction, obliterating [him] utterly" (Nguyen 289).

Although it is true that the narrator and by extension, the North Vietnamese do not possess the power of representation comparable to that of the American culture industry, they, too, are guilty in the act of re-imagining the other. For example, after imprisoning a watchman who specialized in creating "wristwatches as triggering devices for…improvised bombs," the narrator attempts to get information from the Watchman by blackmailing him (Nguyen 188). To do so, he writes a false confession in the Watchman's name, making him out to be a gay man who "betrayed the revolution so [he] could save the man [he] loved" (Nguyen 191). Knowing

that he would be condemned by his revolutionary comrades and disowned by his family, the Watchman is reduced into "a man who sacrificed everything for nothing" and kills himself (Nguyen 191).

The scene in which the narrator interrogates the Watchman and tortures him with the false confession foregrounds his own complicity in representing others, especially since Nguyen positions the narrator in the same role as the Auteur, writing:

> [the narrator] watched [him]self watch the Watchman as he stared at his confession, knowing he was out of time, a character in a movie, as it were, that Claude produced and [the narrator] had directed. The Watchman could not represent himself; [the narrator] had represented him. (Nguyen 192).

Just as the West studies, gazes, and frames the East into a definite image that closes off all other possibilities, so too does the Auteur and the narrator himself participate in the act of spectatorship and representation. The narrator's awareness that he is equally as guilty as the Auteur is hinted at when he watches himself watching the Watchman, noting that he "could see that other room with utter clarity from [his] own, [his] eye peering through a camera into the corner, watching Claude and [him]self standing over the Watchman" (Nguyen 193). How different, after all, can the Watchman's dead body be from the erasure of Vietnamese voices, or the omission of the narrator's name from the credits, especially since these are all consequences of someone else owning the means of representation?

The narrator's complicity in re-presenting the Watchman also points to another key element in the web of spectatorial relations in both *Monkey Bridge* and *The Sympathizer*. As much as the unnamed narrator and Mai are subject to the white gaze, it is worthwhile to mention

that they, too, judge and are judged by their own communities. By acknowledging this dynamic, Nguyen and Cao recover the agency of the Vietnamese subject by illustrating how she exists beyond the receiving end of Western voyeurism. For instance, Mai notes that "on certain occasions, [she] could adopt the anthropologist's eye and develop an academic interest in the familiar," that she "could take a step back and watch with a degree of detachment the habits and manners of Little Saigon" (Cao 146). Her observations reveal that while Mai feels like she does not belong in America, neither does she fit in among her own people, noting that:

> Detached, [she] could see this community as a riot of adolescents, obstreperous, awkward, out of sync with the subscribed norms of American life, and beyond the reach of any authority. [She] could feel for them, their sad shuffles and anachronistic modes of behavior, the peculiar and timid ways they held their bodies and occupied physical space, the unfailing well-manneredness with which they conducted themselves in public—their foreigners' ragged edges…They had never managed, nor had the desire to manage, the eye-blinking, arm-folding maneuvers needed for a makeover…they continued to present themselves as reproductions from the tropics. (Cao 146).

Here, Mai inspects and scrutinizes her people as though she is an authority over them, and in many ways, she is, since her English is superior to that of the older refugees. She remarks that "inside [her] new tongue… [is] an astonishing new power," for she has become "the keeper of the word" for her mother and their neighbors (Cao 37). Because the "right to name" means "to stand guard over language and the right to claim unadulterated authority," Mai is her mother's only conduit to the outside world (Cao 37). Taking advantage of this, Mai mistranslates what her mother tells her to say to others as well as their responses, wielding the ultimate control of how her mother sees and is seen by those around her. Moreover, although she feels sympathy for her

fellow Vietnamese, as a younger refugee who has spent more time in the U.S, Mai regards her people with frustration and resignation, wishing they could alter their habits and mannerisms to better blend into American society. As her own mother writes:

> Mai is under the illusion of freedom. Unless you create your own circumstances, make your own luck, determine your own fate, forge your own path through uncharted territory, you're not free in her eyes. That is why she wants to leave home to go to college. So she can have a new beginning unrestricted by a past life. There, her eyes will always be glued to the horizon. (Cao 169).

The imposition of Mai's gaze upon her fellow Vietnamese is clearly one that is shrouded by the allure of the American dream. Because of this, she does not recognize that "creating [one's] own circumstances" is not so easily done as a refugee in a new country and culture (Cao 169). Instead, Mai has already been inundated with American media about what Vietnamese life might look like. In another of Thanh's personal journal entries, she writes that:

> [Her] daughter, like the American accustomed to hearing about the savagery of foreign lands, might expect much more drama from a life in a country back there. Where's the cruel mother-in-law, where's the rape, the floggings, the bandits and the cannibals, the savage dismemberments? she would ask. What she wants to see is a good exciting movie of adventure set in a foreign land where people are as capable of inflicting brutalities—of the kind no one here could be accused of inflicting—as they are of enduring them. (Cao 191).

Like Nguyen, Cao is attentive to the role of film as a distorting lens upon the world. Here, however, it is Mai herself who succumbs to the narratives that have been presented to her. In so

doing, she becomes a spectator of her own community. In this role, even Mai's mother sees her as "volatile and unreliable, an outsider with insider information—someone whose tongue ha[s] to be perpetually checked and contained" (Cao 41). In other words, Mai is between worlds, for while she will always be Vietnamese, her mother sees that she is also irretrievably American.

Just as Mai is simultaneously an outsider and a member of the community, so too is the unnamed narrator in *The Sympathizer*, though doubly so, for in addition to being a double agent, he is also mixed-race. In this way, Mai and the unnamed narrator seem to mirror each other. For example, Mai's dilemma is that in "seeing both sides to everything, [she] belong[s] to neither," a predicament which is not unlike the unnamed narrator's claim that he is "a man of two minds" who is "simply able to see any issue from both sides" (Cao 87; Nguyen 1). Though not a spy herself, Mai can "see in [her]self the ability…to apply makeup, to conceal and disguise" in the same way that the narrator compares himself to an actor who spends more time with a mask on than off (Cao 91; Nguyen 136). The ambiguous space that the two protagonists occupy brings into relief the fact that they judge and are judged by their own communities.

Whereas Mai is, for the most part, the one who observes her community with slight disdain, the unnamed narrator is the one ostracized for being a "bastard." Throughout the novel, the narrator recalls several times how he "had been force-fed so much hate:" his childhood playmates compare him to the union of a dog and cat, low-ranking marines taunt him, and by the end of the novel, even the commandant tells him that his destiny is to be a bastard (Nguyen 300). While he is othered and exotified in America, the narrator is not free from scrutiny in his own community either. Of course, despite his loyalty to the revolution, even he slowly realizes that his comrades are not without fault. At the end of the novel, the narrator recalls how Claude forced him to watch the rape of a North Vietnamese woman by their fellow Southern policemen.

The assault takes place in an abandoned movie theater, a setting which underscores the narrator's complicity in making a spectacle of this rape. As he watches his peers violate the woman, the narrator is overcome with "fury and shame" as he sees the Vietnamese committing atrocities against their own (Nguyen 349). Such a scene evokes a comment the narrator had heard while on the set of *The Hamlet*, when one of the extras stated that "before the communists won, foreigners were victimizing and terrorizing and humiliating [them]," but "now it's [their] own people victimizing and terrorizing and humiliating [them]" (Nguyen 152). As imperative as it is to acknowledge the cruelties committed by the West in the East, true subjecthood cannot exist if the oppressed remain one-dimensional victims. By unveiling the virtues as well as the vices of the Vietnamese, Nguyen reminds his audience that a byproduct of the colonial gaze is the urge of the colonized to view themselves only as the oppressed, not as agents who, in turn, oppress others.

In addition to highlighting the gaze imposed on the Vietnamese by their own, Nguyen also turns the model of spectatorship on its head by noting that the Vietnamese look back at their observers. For instance, at the country club dinner with the General, the narrator notes how the General carefully tiptoes around Dr. Hedd, artfully using the points in Hedd's own book to further his argument in favor of continuing the fight in South Vietnam. The narrator thinks to himself that:

> The General was deeply familiar with the nature, nuances, and internal differences of white people, as was every nonwhite person who had lived here a good number of years. We ate their food, we watched their movies, we observed their lives and psyche via television and in everyday contact, we learned their language, we absorbed their subtle cues…We were the greatest anthropologists ever of the American people… we probably

> did know white people better than they knew themselves, and we certainly knew white people better than they knew us. (Nguyen 258).

The narrator's testimonial to the Vietnamese' diligent observation of their American hosts illustrates how they *return* the gaze imposed upon them. This act of reciprocating the gaze is what Homi Bhabha describes as the "process by which the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed" (Bhabha 129). In other words, the image imposed upon the observed, while powerful, is not a stable one, for spectatorship is not a one-way relation. As Bhabha writes, "in the objectification of the scopic drive, there is always the threatened return of the look; in the identification of the Imaginary relation there is always the alienating other (or mirror) which crucially returns its image to the subject" (Bhabha 81). Bhabha's scopic drive could not be better illustrated than when the narrator is asked by Dr. Hedd why he reads Hedd's book on Asian communism if he is a student of the American character. The narrator responds, saying that "it seems to [him] that one way to understand a person's character is to understand what he thinks of others, especially those like oneself" (Nguyen 250). Evidently, while Hedd's novel initially seems to represent the Western gaze, the narrator's use of it as a cipher and portal into the American mind insists that such a gaze is not one-sided.

Certainly, just as integral to recognizing that power is meted out through visuality is the need to see through the eyes of the Vietnamese themselves, to understand how their own perspective is morphed and distorted as a consequence of war and the compounding ways that their lives have become an exhibition of "communist cruelty" and "American goodwill." In both texts, for instance, the protagonists often cannot distinguish between dreams and reality, a symptom which is only made more severe by their being inundated with the hyperreal visions of

the cinematic world. That descriptions of cinema in *Monkey Bridge*, in particular, are couched in the language of dreams and fantasy is no coincidence, for it underscores the disorienting effect of the camera/gaze upon the subject.

Early in Cao's novel, Mai's conflation of her dreams/memories with reality highlights how her faculties of perception have become distorted since fleeing the war. For example, while visiting her mother at Arlington hospital, Mai must remind herself that she is not, in fact, in a Saigon military hospital, but safe in America. As she reflects on a terrible scene she had witnessed in Vietnam, she thinks to herself that "the calm of Saigon had always been unreliable, narcotically unreal," for no one "could have known before the man was cut up that an unexploded grenade, fired from a launcher—not a dead bullet—had lodged in the hollowness of his stomach" (Cao 2). Due to the spontaneity and unpredictability of war, Mai develops a mistrust of her perceptions, never knowing whether the placid appearance of her surroundings conceals a hidden threat. Already, her experience as a war refugee sets her apart from those around her, for unlike them, she possesses a parallel vision of reality and possibility that makes her hypervigilant about any potential dangers. As she waits with her friend Bobbie in the hospital for her mother, Thanh, to wake up, she notes that "Bobbie ha[s] no subverted interior and would never see the things [she] s[ees]" (Cao 2). Indeed, this subverted interior world is so intense that Mai frequently endures hallucinatory-like experiences. As she attempts to cross the Canadian border with Bobbie to locate her grandfather by telephone, for example, Mai does not see just the road in front of her, but also imagines leftover imprints of the war from which she fled. Mai notes that:

> Through the blue-tinted glass, [she] could almost see the giant caterpillar treads a convoy of tanks must have made on the road, emitting gusts of red heat [her] father warned could

> blister the skin. The stretch ahead look[s] difficult, an eerie topography of misshapen memories and warped psychological space trapped in [her] mind that night. (Cao 16)

Mai's visions underline the way in which the mind itself becomes conquered terrain in wartime, for it is not only the earth which becomes riddled with the detritus of battle (bullets, bombs, grenades, and the vestiges of chemical warfare)—but also the psychological ground, which harbors trauma and repressed memories like unexploded grenades nestled in the land. The liminality of the space Mai occupies, one between reality and hallucination, keeps her on edge every waking second. This is clear when she remarks that at any instant, she "could feel the world slip from [her] sight, slowly liquefying into the same dreams and shifting shadows [she] had learned to expect, even accommodate" (Cao 28). Recalling one incident, Mai recounts one of her hallucinations while out with Bobbie:

> [They] were once in a music store, one among a wealth of stores in the mall. As Bobbie's fingers played an experimental tune on the Steinway, her finger, her index finger—her right-hand trigger finger, to be precise—was turning into a blanched, pulpy stump of gauze and bandages that moved spastically like the severed remnant of a lizard's tail. (Cao 28).

Without a doubt, the vivid visions Mai sees are a product not just of her direct experiences in Vietnam, but also of the inescapable images of warfare being projected onto television screens and splashed across newspapers. The power that these images hold over Mai is foregrounded by the fact that she suffers from these disturbing dreams and delusions even despite her relative safety and physical distance from combat. In one scene, while watching the news with her mother, Mai notes that:

> …the picture continued to be played and replayed, glowering from the curved glass pane of the television set… In the rectangle of a room where the television stood… [she and her mother] watched the slow-motion disintegration of [their] country through the ice-white lens of an American camera…Even through the glass screen of the television set, [they] were not immune from the infection that accompanied the imminence of doom. The sad, savage end was in sight, played and replayed slowly, with the pace and rhythm of a second hand, brooding notch by notch across the stark face of the impassive screen. (Cao 43).

Despite the stretch of both time and distance, Mai and her mother are confronted with the nonstop deluge of imagery and punditry for which the war is an endless source. It is almost a tortuous experience that the two cannot turn away from watching the war being "dissected" and studied under "the ice-white lens of an American camera" (Cao 43). For them, the "curved glass pane of the television set" is not enough of a barrier to shield themselves from the trauma of seeing their motherland fall to the communists, for even as they are on the other side of the globe, "a silent rage" still threads itself into the "darkness of [their] new lives" (Cao 43). If anything, rather than putting space between them and the conflict, the "stark" and "impassive screen" of the television set seems to occupy the role of torturer, forcing mother and daughter to witness the excruciating, "sad, savage end" over and over, with the slow "pace of a second hand" (Cao 43). Thus, not only does the white gaze determine how the Vietnamese are seen, it also affects the Vietnamese' own sense of sight. Mai's inability to distinguish between hallucinations and reality foregrounds the extent that constant exposure to America's image of Vietnam has, for even in her mundane, daily life, she cannot unsee apparitions of blood and gore.

Of course, Mai and her mother are not the only ones to witness the slow demise of South Vietnam. When she first comes to the U.S and to stay with her sponsor family, Uncle Michael and Aunt Mary, Mai diligently keeps up with the nightly news, remarking that:

> All eyes across the world must also have been on the television set that April of 1975. We had all been transfixed by the sight of it, and although some of us… had tried to avert our eyes, we all ended up staring at it, as if we were passerby caught among the accumulated wreckage, the blunders and pileup by the roadside. It was on TV, a luminous color origami cut from the dark of night, that I witnessed my own untranslatable world unfold to Americans half a globe away" (Cao 97-98).

Although Mai herself is an unwilling witness to the failing war effort, she maintains a constant awareness of an American audience which also has access to her "untranslatable world" vis-à-vis television (Cao 98). Her awareness that "the rest of America" vigilantly watches the war only makes her realize that she and her mother are the refugees of a war no one had wanted, remnants of a past that the nation's collective memory seeks to erase. Thus, if the television set torments its audience with the "slow-motion disintegration" of Vietnam, then Vietnam is the figurative prisoner of war that inspires the onlooker to put her out of her misery (Cao 43). As Mai notes, "just about every city in the United States had wanted the tragedy to end. It was as if all of America was.. waiting for a diseased body, ravaged and fatigued… to let go. Death must be nudged, hurried, if only it could be" (Cao 98).

The act of watching her motherland fall and knowing that the whole country watches alongside her, longing to abandon the cause, is no doubt an isolating one, especially since she is "s[eeing] [her] future unfold on television" all the while (Cao 97). Watching the news with the MacMahons and realizing that she will never be able to return home, Mai experiences the

footage as though it were a dream sequence, describing the scene of helicopters escaping the U.S Embassy as an "imaginary world" (Cao 98). Here, the distinction between what Mai actually sees and what she imagines becomes blurry even for the reader, who is thrust into a memory that rises in Mai's mind while viewing the program:

> Tibetan legend, [her] mother had once said, describes dreams as recollections by the human soul of its nightly wanderings. Attached to the belly button, the key knot and one true threshold through which life itself was once imparted, is an invisible silver thread that ties the soul to the body. Without this retractable umbilical cord, the soul would be utterly lost in the chaos of its dreams. In the MacMahons' family room…[Mai] listen[s] to the rasp of sounds coming from the early-morning news and watche[s] [her]self slip from the silver cord into the ancient frontier of dreams. In this imaginary world, a helicopter skitter[s] on the edge of the U.S Embassy …Operation Frequent Wind, they called it…[She] liked the sound of it in [her] mouth. It was a sound strange enough for a Tibetan dream (Cao 99)

Evidently, just as Mai's everyday vision is blemished with traumatic hallucinations of blown up soldiers, military tanks, and bloodied fingers, she also confounds reality and imagination when she is exposed to images which seem too extreme, absurd, or dramatic to be real. Dreamlike language saturates the entirety of the novel, but given the pointed scenes which make cinematic imagery nearly synonymous with hallucination, one cannot help but wonder if Mai's vivid visions are, to some extent, a product of the media she is exposed to. For instance, four years after her arrival in the U.S, Mai watches a Vietnam war film with Uncle Michael. The description of the film resembles many of Mai's own nightmares and phantasmagoric fantasies. In the movie, Mai watches as:

> A succession of hypnotic scenes played on the giant movie screen—dreary American steel mills, tropical jungles, prisoners of war in bamboo cages in low-slung, unprosperous Saigon buildings where disillusioned GIs newly addicted to war came to play Russian Roulette…In one hallucinatory scene after another…the roulettelike spin of a gun as arbitrary and senseless as Vietnam would dictate the life and death of American innocence. (Cao 101).

These "hypnotic" and "hallucinatory" scenes are so entrancing that "the movie [becomes] [the] momentum" for Mai to probe Uncle Michael about his years fighting in Vietnam (Cao 101). Usually guarded about his Vietnam years, Uncle Michael unexpectedly shares a story with Mai. Initially, his descriptions of Vietnam, with its "beautiful rice fields" and "shadowed waters, emerald and turquoise" like a "magic mirror," seem no less hypnotic and mesmerizing than the images in the movie, and leave Mai with the impression of "how exotic and colorful" the country is (Cao 102). Of course, compared to this exotic sketch of Vietnam and the "familiar" delta she knows, the two images do not match up (Cao 102). Thinking to herself that "rice fields and unobstructed skies did not figure in [her] memories," Mai concludes that "Uncle Michael kn[ows] a Vietnam [she] do[es] not" (Cao 102). Here, it is clear that the film's representation of Vietnam promotes a limited, American perspective in which the Vietnam that is constructed is merely a fiction. The notion of the gaze as an act of violent re-creation is only foregrounded further when Uncle Michael recounts how he and his men witnessed the death of a little boy while in the jungle. Describing the body, Uncle Michael tells Mai that:

> …[they] couldn't help staring at it, at the sound that is purely and anatomically induced by this tiny little biological body as it prepares to let death take over permanently. It was a little bit grotesque and a little bit miraculous, but at the same time astonishingly stark

> and uncompromising…And [they] just stood there and watched—the stream of blood that continued to leak from a hole in the brain, the muscular reflex that made his eyes drift to the sides, the flutter of the eyelids, the bubbling in the nostrils, the toes curling inward…(Cao 105).

This passage hearkens back to the scene in which Mai and the McMahons are watching the news, and although they all try to "avert [their] eyes," they are "transfixed by the sight" and [end] up staring at it" (Cao 97-98). In the same way that they watch South Vietnam in its death throes, Uncle Michael and his fellow soldiers are "transfixed by… the little boy" as he lay dying (Cao 105). Especially given the way that the boy's body has been brutally butchered, the soldiers' reduction of him into a spectacle is doubtlessly a critique of how "the gaze" enacts material consequences. Although the boy is already dead by the time the soldiers arrive, as they watch him, they mistakenly perceive a reflex of his arm as launching a grenade, and shoot him with their machine guns. As a result, "the boy [dies] a second death" (Cao 105). Of course, the "second death" that he suffers is not the second round of gunfire that "shred[s] open" his body," but the way in which the system of altered perceptions in the soldiers' minds renders him—a defenseless, dying child—a threat (Cao 105). Notably, the thing that most haunts Uncle Michael about this episode is not the killing of the boy, but the woman who wails his name and emerges from the woods, silently walking with exaggerated dignity towards his torn-up body. As Uncle Michael recalls, "she just stared at [them], and [they] could see the hatred and sadness in her eyes. She looked at [them] again" for one last time, her eyes full of accusation, before leaving with the boy's limp corpse (Cao 106). As with the unnamed narrator in *The Sympathizer*, who observes and condemns Americans for their vices, the woman whose eyes remain in Uncle Michael's mind embodies the "threatened return of the look" (Bhabha 81). It is this look, then,

that is the counterweight to the reductive and dehumanizing power that western spectatorship exerts on its others.

Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to illuminate the ways in which the realm of the imaginary inflicts violence upon the bodies of those who do not own the means of representation. However, as much as it is a tool which strips humanity and complexity from the marginalized, so too can the imagination be a means to escape the confines of the Western gaze.

II. IMAGINING A WAY OUT

Having examined the western gaze and both the narrators' own perspectives of seeing and being observed, it significant now to question the ways in which *Monkey Bridge* and *The Sympathizer* resist this paradigm of looking and seeing. In both texts, dreams, hallucinations, and optical illusions are methods to overturn this one-way relationship. Here, a different kind of psychoanalytic work is in play, wherein the unconscious not only unearths what the protagonists cannot see, but also functions to destabilize the gaze exerted upon them. For the characters in the *Monkey Bridge*, presenting oneself as something she is not is at once a defense, survival, and coping mechanism. This, however, is a lesson Mai learns only later in the story. In the beginning of the novel, while she is in the hospital visiting her mother, who is recovering from a head injury, Mai remarks that her "philosophy [i]s simply this: if [she] [does not] see it at night, in nightmares or otherwise, it never happened" (Cao 11). Both aware and afraid of the untold truths which can enter into one's imagination at night, Mai routinely takes caffeine pills to stay awake, her "antidote to the sin of sleeping and the undomesticated world of dreams" (Cao 11). That Mai

privileges dreams as possessing more authority and consequence than the events that take place during her waking hours only points to the significance that fantasy and illusion have in the mental games she plays to negotiate her otherness as a Vietnamese refugee.

Even as she fears and avoids her dreams, Mai's avoidance of sleep suggests that she realizes the power of seeing and envisioning a reality outside of reality itself. This idea is reinforced by her mother, Thanh, to whom Mai is indebted to for this respect of the surreal. For instance, in the hospital, Mai's mother diligently watches The Bionic Woman on her television set, relishing in the superhuman powers of the main character, Jaimie Sommers. To Mai, her mother is so enraptured by Bionic Woman because like her, Thanh is endowed with an extraordinary feature that she believes shields her from misfortune. As Mai notes:

> The Bionic Woman delighted my mother. Jaime could very well materialize out of drawers, ceilings, and walls. They both shared bionic ears. Hers, my mother believed, empowered her to hear things no one else could. Like the Chinese, the Vietnamese believed a set of long ears was a sign of longevity and luck. (Cao 9)

Especially contrasted with Thanh's physical condition, having not yet fully recovered from her stroke, her deep identification with Bionic Woman underscores how her faith in the supernatural restitutes her sense of agency and strength even while confined to a hospital bed. When the nurses mention that "her muscles will dissolve" if she does not complete her exercises, Mai thinks to herself that such warnings do not scare her mother, for "how could they [know] it [is] not muscular but karmic movements and the collapse of Heaven that frightened [her] mother?" (Cao 8). Thanh accords more significance to the invisible workings of the supernatural, and this is undoubtedly a means for her to regain control where she has none. Her attempt at looking to

an authority beyond the grim diagnosis of her doctors is also a metaphor for how she imagines a way out of the painful predicament of her displacement, as is seen later in the novel.

Perhaps, too, the futuristic figure of Bionic Woman also symbolizes for Thanh a model of assimilation to which she aspires but struggles to achieve. After all, "the Bionic Woman [i]s a little bit of Shaolin kung fu mixed with American hardware, American know-how," a winning fusion of capabilities which prevents her from "making any move that would lead her down the wrong path" (Cao 10). In other words, the good karma of Thanh's long, auspicious ears function like Jaime's bionic body to defend her from harm, also signifying the hope that she might one day bridge the gulf of cultural difference between her daughter and herself. Indulging in the fantasy of the Bionic Woman, Thanh is able to find respite both from her physical condition and her condition as a refugee, imagining that some superhuman or karmic force will protect her just as Bionic Woman's extraordinary powers help her overcome her foes. Mai observes her mother watching the program on the hospital television set, noting that "a look of satisfaction register[s] on [her] mother's face. These were her sustaining sounds, the Dopplerized sound effects and metallic vibrations that signified Jaime's superhuman abilities (Cao 9). Significantly, Thanh clings to fantasies of the Bionic Woman and is sustained by her belief in karmic forces[2] because she has no other options or resources at her disposal. Facing countless predicaments in which her only resource is her own faith, Thanh's dependence on the otherworldly is no surprise. Physically disabled, deprived of her culture and language, and separated from her father, Thanh can rely only on her imagination and the "curses and countercurses" which her own daughter so spurns to give her the hope to keep living (Cao 21).

[2] Here, my conflation of Thanh's Buddhist beliefs with fantasy is not to dismiss it as irrational, but to underline how much significance she accords to the unempirical in the absence of power.

Like the function of fantasy in the novel, illusion also serves as an alternative to reality, as a means of restoring power to oneself in a world where one is disenfranchised. This becomes particularly evident when Mai's mother, Thanh, relays accounts of the Vietnamese defending itself against encroaching enemies. "Even the Mongols," Thanh tells her daughter, "whose Golden Hordes…overran the vast Manchurian grassland to conquer Western Asia and Eastern Europe, had been decisively vanquished in Vietnam, with a little bit of clever thinking and manipulation of reality" (Cao 18). Mai's mother continues to tell the story of how the Vietnamese, realizing its army was too small and weak to face the Mongols head-on, "devised a plan" in which every citizen painted a message in honey on leaves, reading "*It is the will of Heaven. The invaders must leave*," whereupon caterpillars and ants would then eat the honey, searing the warning into the trees (Cao 18). Because the words appeared as "holy tablets wrought from the heart of the land itself," a "supernatural" edict from the forces of nature, the Mongols fled the country in fear (Cao 18). Outnumbered and under-armed, illusion is the last defense for the Vietnamese army in this story, just as it is for Thanh and her daughter. Such an idea is reinforced when Thanh recounts another story of Vietnamese victory against the Chinese. On the anniversary of the historic victory, Thanh explains to Mai how "the Chinese deployed a giant fleet of armored junks on [the] river," and the Vietnamese responded by:

> Dr[iving] iron-tipped spikes into the riverbed and lur[ing] the enemy convoy up the river at high tide, when the stakes were invisible. When the Chinese vessels, big and heavy like overbloated whales, were all upstream, [they] waited until the tide ebbed before [they] retreated… The more [the Vietnamese] retreated, the more [the Chinese] pursued, the more entrapped they became, impaled and immobilized, a perfect target for [the Vietnamese] troops. (Cao 56)

Schemes in which one is privy to clever maneuvers and machinations operating beyond the perceptions of the enemy is a method of survival for both Vietnam and Thanh, who is a metaphor for the country. These Vietnamese victories posit illusion as a means of undermining the enemy, who unquestioningly rely on their perceptions to advance their attack. In so doing, Cao hints at the idea that "the gaze" of the west is not so infallible, that it, too, can be deceived and conquered. Just as Vietnamese military victories deploy strategies based on illusion and remaining visible only to their own, Thanh depends on "the infinite, untouchable forces that ma[ke] up the hidden universe: hexes and curses, destiny and karma" (Cao 24). For her, it is "as if she could close her eyes and summon, from the murky darkness of her mind, a world only she c[an] see" (Cao 25). Only by "create[ing] alternate versions [of her life] that suit [her] imagination and heal [her] soul" is Thanh able to endure being displaced and away from her father (Cao 227).

Although Mai herself considers "her [mother's] eye [her] inheritance," she deems this unique capacity to meld the real and the fantastic a burden, "blam[ing [her] mother for [her] flawed eye" (Cao 20). In many ways, Mai is an outsider from her own community because of this reluctance to embrace illusion and fantasy. While she "str[ives] for the ability to realign [her] eyes," to fix the "flawed" vision she has inherited from her mother's paranoia, "Little Saigon," on the other hand, [maneuvers] to pull the experiment off," to build a new life with their "obsession with optical illusion" (Cao 20, 39). As Mai observes, it becomes "something of a community endeavor, the compulsion to deceive," since these refugees, coming to the U.S with no papers, are able to "rewrite the endings" of their past and give themselves new names, birthdays, or fictitious, respectable backgrounds (Cao 40). Although Mai notes that they all have "left too long a trail of history to erase," given that they come from "an inescapable history that

continue[s] to be dissected and remodeled" on TV and in the papers, she, too, begins to take refuge in daydreams and fantasies to endure her everyday pains (Cao 42).

For instance, when she fails to cross the Canadian border with Bobbie to find a means of contacting her grandfather, Baba Quan, Mai allows herself to indulge in a "wishful and magnanimous daydream" in which "Bobbie's Chevy [becomes] an elephant, and [she] a sword-wielding Trung sister, the greatest warrior of all Vietnamese warriors, fearlessly defying danger and death to lead a charging army against a brigade of Chinese invaders" (Cao 29). Faced with the harsh fact that she cannot help her mother find her grandfather, especially since she is "without the protection of American citizenship," Mai assuages herself by imagining that she is a fierce, empowered warrior, tackling obstacles that in real life she is unable to conquer (Cao 29).

This strategy is helpful to Mai even during her college interviews, which she views as another hurdle to navigate, especially when the meeting devolves into a conversation about the war rather than her eligibility for admission. Mai, before meeting the recruiter, thinks to herself:

> If the dreaded college interview [i]s to be a battle, and the interviewer my opponent, this would be the battlefield strategy…I would enter the realm that had delivered Vietnam into a history of brilliant battlefield maneuvers that I could imitate to win over the interviewer. (Cao 118)

Mai develops this fantasy from the "multitudes of stories" she has been told by her parents, who "were given to generous and creative revisions and would fill [their] world with different, more magnificent details with each retelling of each story" (Cao 118). In this extended vision of herself, Mai meets a tiger, but her "strategy [is] not to fight the tiger but to confound it"

by painting the blades of her swords bright orange and crossing and uncrossing them, "produc[ing] a mythical creature with a pitch-black coat carved from the night" (Cao 119). Even in her own reverie, perfecting the art of illusion is key to survival, as the "tiger [is] bewildered," "confusion in its eyes" (Cao 119). Not only does Mai, in her alter-ego as a Trung sister, master "the most bewitching of all [fighting] styles," she also "develop[s] an ability to see things before they [occur]" while remaining "invisible to enemy eyes" (Cao 121, 122). Her aim with the Mongols, as with the tiger, is "not to win every battle, but to confound the enemies and make them paranoid after every encounter," just as she hopes to give the responses "sharp enough to confound even the most experienced interviewer" (Cao 122). Evidently, in a world in which "visuality sutures authority to power," and is "a weapon *for* authority, not against it," the only way to counter this authority is to strike and confound the viewer herself by relying on optical illusion (Mirzoeff xiv).

Granted, while Mai voluntarily enters in and out of daydreams, she is ultimately anchored in reality, in her present and future in America. Her mother, on the other hand, is caught in the memory of life back in Vietnam and lies bedbound, suffering from "hallucinations and nightmares about a missing father" (Cao 11). Unlike her daughter, Thanh is "ready at any unpredictable moment to go in and out of yet another delirious dream" and has "so many nightmares" and "too many bad dreams" (Cao 89, 138-139). At one point, the nurse tells her: "You are in a dark space. There are rows and rows of chairs. People sit silently, faced forward towards a big screen. Now, where are you and what is this place called?" (Cao 135). Without answering, Mai's mother, it seems, cannot distinguish between life and film, dreams and reality. Her "sensory disorder" manifests in her constant "struggle to convert the brain's intention into

actual reality" (Cao 137). This contrast between Mai and her mother reveal the dual function of dreams in the novel as both woe and respite.

Although Thanh suffers the brunt of misfortune that dreams come to bear in *Monkey Bridge*, she, too, relies on self-constructed fantasies to soften the burden of harboring family secrets. For instance, much of the novel is premised upon Thanh's regret over her inability to bring back her father, Baba Quan, from Saigon, and Mai's attempt to find him for her. However, it is later revealed that Mai's mother had been lying to her, that this was only a story to hide the fact that Baba Quan was in fact, a Viet Cong acolyte and murderer who had asked his wife to prostitute herself to the rich landlord, Uncle Khan, when they could not produce any crop yields to him. When Thanh confesses this to her daughter, she justifies herself, saying that "in the lives [she] constructed for [Mai], Baba Quan was a devoted husband, a father dedicated to the uncomplicated life among the green terraced fields…with patience and dignity" so that he could become this figure in Thanh's own "fictional re-imaginings" (Cao 229).

Although the image of Baba Quan that Thanh paints for Mai is a salve for her knowledge of who he really was, Thanh cannot entirely escape that reality in her dreams. Instead, she desperately clings to this myth of Baba Quan and admits that she could not tell Mai the truth earlier, adding:

> How could I [tell the truth] when the false lives I had summoned and conjured were finally beginning to acquire a weight that could convince me that they were, imagination and all, mine to hold? (Cao 228).

Indeed, Thanh and her own parents, Mama Tuyet and Baba Quan, grasp onto dreams in order to ignore their shameful arrangement with Uncle Khan and the painful secret that Thanh is his

illegitimate daughter. Previously, Mai believed that Uncle and Auntie Khan unofficially adopted Thanh because Auntie Khan was unable to conceive. The story Thanh tells Mai purports that one night, Auntie Khan dreamed that an old man on a dragon boat proffered her a child, and "the face of the little baby girl in the dream…was [Thanh's] face" (Cao 175). Out of the "preordained dictates of his wife's dream," Uncle Khan immediately visited Baba Quan and Mama Tuyet, begging them to let he and his wife care for Thanh as their own (Cao 175). Clearly, "there was meaning in his wife's dream, and the obvious message it carried had to be heeded" (Cao 175). However, reading through her mother's private letters, Mai learns that the special care and attention Uncle and Auntie Khan paid to Thanh could not be solely attributed to "such random serendipity as a mere dream about a dragon boat and a wise old man," for the dream served only to conceal the unpalatable truth that Baba Quan was not, in fact, her father (Cao 232). So, while dreams haunt and torment both mother and daughter, when transformed into fantasies designed to their benefit, the realm of the imaginary is a protective buffer and source of self-assurance and solace for the pair.

The ambiguous space that dreams represent is also exemplified by the illusion of bliss and contentment that Thanh initially perceives in her marriage. Binh, Thanh's husband and Mai's father, was "the son of a rich landlord" who was able to woo Thanh with "his philosophical contemplations and…exceptional intelligence" (Cao 180). However, although he deemed himself "a modern man," he thrived on the idea of having "a very traditional wife" (Cao 189). Slowly seeing this side of her husband, Thanh realizes that Binh "had described the dream of dreams so beautifully, so convincingly, that [she] could not have possibly seen it for what it was: a dream that did not [include] her at all" (Cao 182). In the personal letters detailing Thanh's life in Vietnam, dreams are nearly synonymous with the idea of a façade or lure. Enchanted by

the person she thought Binh to be, Thanh is dismayed to find that this persona was merely an illusion. As Thanh concedes in her private journal entries, she "walked into that beautiful dream without suspecting in the least that it harbored as many goblins and demons as angels and other heavenly beings" (Cao 182). That is, Thanh could never have expected that her loving husband would be the one responsible for her confinement in her new home, condemning her to an exile within her own country.

Of course, dreams in Monkey Bridge also refer to the American dream, and it is meaningful that although Thanh struggles to adapt to life in the U.S as quickly as her daughter, both strive to be absorbed into their adopted country. Thanh and Mai implicitly understand, however, that such assimilation could never be complete, that their American dream must necessarily retain a strain of difference which holds them forever apart from white Americans. For instance, after Thanh is released from the hospital and slowly regains her strength and energy, Mai notes that "[her] mother could be seduced into the American Dream, into becoming the modern version of [their] Trung sisters" (Cao 144). Seeing her mother rejuvenated thus, Mai notes that "there is no denying the beauty of new dreams" (Cao 222). Clearly, each step that Thanh takes in her journey towards achieving the American Dream is intertwined with this recurring fantasy of the Trung sisters, a fantasy based on a piece of national history which is endemic to the Vietnamese identity. Although the fantasy of the Trung sisters is an anchor which ties Thanh to her motherland amid the process of assimilation, for Mai at least, fantasy plays the reverse role. When Mai observes her own community, which seems ever so unassimilable given that they are "obstreperous, awkward," and "out of sync with the subscribed norms of American life," she "picture[s] more palatable possibilities—sultans and genies flying out of bottles and lamps, flamboyant turbans of paisley and silk like the ones in *The Arabian Nights* or *Ali Baba*

and the Forty Thieves" (Cao 146-147). For her, even these absurd, orientalized fantasies seem more compatible with the American dream than the reality of the "foreigners' ragged clothes" and drabby cotton towels" which the elderly Vietnamese don upon their heads (Cao 146-147). Mai even thinks to herself that "if [one] ha[s] to be different, [she] ha[s] to be acceptably different," that "stereotypes aren't [her] enemy, as long as [she] tinker[s] with them in a way that strikes an American chord" (Cao 147). Ultimately, living the American Dream, for Mai, means conforming to American fantasies of the other, something she is not hesitant to do, for she habitually "imagine[s] tight kimonos, vulnerable shuffles, and decorative combs," a world in which Vietnamese-Americans "would still be different, but they would be American-palatable and exotic" (Cao 147). Here again, her daydreams about the "more palatable possibilities" of who she could be softens the malaise she feels when she sees her own community and their "sad shuffles and anachronistic modes of behavior" (Cao 146).

Assimilable or not, daydreams, fantasies, and the American Dream itself still serve as symbol of hope for Thanh and Mai. For example, motivated to start a baking business with their neighbor, Mrs. Bay, Thanh becomes animated by the "weekly infusion of furious, manic activities and the intravenous rush of real life and real dreams" that "were giving [their] home a new sense of hope" (Cao 143). Seeing this, Mai realizes that "no expenditure of logic or interjection of reality would alter her mother's newly minted optimism" (Cao 151). Though Cao employs the language of dreams and illusion throughout the novel in various ways, here, her fanciful diction underlines how her mother's motivation to overcome her illness is indebted to her refusal to acknowledge reality. Rather, than remain burdened with everyday troubles and painful memories of Vietnam, Thanh finds comfort in imagining how the new business can transform her life.

Like Thanh, the Vietnamese community as a whole survives by daring to dream of something better. For instance, inspired by their budding business venture, Mrs. Bay and Thanh invite a fortune-teller to their home who is also a member of the Cao Dai sect. Supposedly "blessed with the all-knowing Cao Dai eye," the fortune teller possesses "supernatural vision" which allows her to "see through the illusion" of "human frailty" (Cao 147-148). With this supernatural vision, the fortune teller predicts that "the communists will destroy each other" and they will all have a new future (Cao 149). This prediction is so bold that it allows Mai to finally understand "the implicit motivation behind [the] seemingly hapless ritual," that motivation being to allow "Little Saigon [to resurrect] hope from dead space" and "restitch the fabric of history" (Cao 149). Here again, the fortune teller's "dreamlike suggestion that pass[es] as reality" is the easier idea to swallow, a dream to ameliorate the harshness of their daily lives away from home (Cao 150). Just as film and media reconstruct the selfhood of the Vietnamese in an endless procession of "hallucinatory" and "hypnotic scenes," so too do the Vietnamese in Cao's novel capitalize on imagination and fantasy to reconstruct the reality of their predicament (Cao 100). Confronted with a visual discourse which seeks to erase or dehumanize them, the Vietnamese in Cao's novel lay claim to a power which can never truly be wrested from them—their capacity to *dream* a way out of the confines of the colonial imagination. The final scene in the novel establishes this well. Wanting "to protect [Mai] from the phantoms and apparitions that come" with their hidden past, Thanh kills herself by swallowing a handful of sleeping pills, "follow[ing] [Mai's] grandmother into that phantom world" of the afterlife (Cao 228). Notably, Thanh is not the only one in Mai's family to have been the victim of dreams. After "the nightmare" of Agent Orange ravage[s] their land, Thanh's mother "g[ives] up the will to live" and dies, just as the deadly chemical "denude[s] [their] land, maul[s] [their] trees, and turn[s] the green of [their] rice

fields into the dead brown of stone" (Cao 244, 246). Thanh, too, succumbs to the nightmare of a past she cannot escape when she kills herself in an effort to give Mai a blank slate, breaking the karmic cycle carrying the sins of their family. Although the double deaths of Thanh and Mama Tuyet seem to imply that dreams are a menace and a threat, the final passages of the novel complicate the already ambivalent function of dreams in the text. For instance, the night before Mai begins college, she experiences "a new dream—not the three-o'clock-in-the-morning dream [she] had learned to expect, but a different dream" (Cao 258). Through she "brac[es] for the worst," "ke[eping] [her] eyes closed" and "squeezing the blanket," the vision she sees is angelic and comforting (Cao 258). In it, she sees:

> …a beautiful ladder, the same one [her] mother had described to [her] many times before, guarded by a secret creature with an inner light glowing through its skin, a light as faint and dormant as the faint flame of a candle glowing through a screen of silk. The creature, [her] mother once said, always lies with its head cradled on the first rung, waiting for a human soul to pass by to infuse it with an inner life. As the passerby makes her way up the rungs, the creature would slowly stir, following the passerby the way it has followed hundreds upon hundreds of pilgrims generations and generations before, its translucent skin becoming more and more luminous the higher it and the passerby get, making their way each step. The creature would approximate perfection, its skin would turn lustrous, its light would shine the closer it gets to the top, but only at the very top would it achieve perfection; only at the very top of the ladder would the climber cast no shadows and achieve what every seeker seeks through all the ages to achieve: nirvana itself…According to [her] mother, the creature had made it up to the top only once. In

> [her] dream, it would make it up a second time, with [her] mother leading the way, step by step, into perfection. (Cao 258-259).

The two times this dreamlike creature makes it to the top of the ladder can be read as the souls of Thanh and Mama Tuyet ascending "toward Heaven," toward some place far beyond the realm of lies and nightmares (Cao 259). Thus, although the dark past of their family's secrets reemerge to haunt Mai and Thanh in the form of nightmares, they do derive hope, encouragement, and consolation from the occasionally comforting dream, or the fantasies they conjure in their own minds.

In the same way that dreams and illusions are a source of empowerment, enlightenment, or insight for Mai and her mother, the unnamed narrator in *The Sympathizer* experiences visions and hallucinations throughout the novel which speak to a truth he tries to ignore in his waking life. For instance, after the General is informed that there is a mole among their ranks, he orders the narrator to kill a major who the narrator knows to be innocent, since he himself is the double-agent. With no other choice than to murder the major in order to protect himself, the narrator and his friend, Bon, make quick work of their task and shoot the major in the head just outside his apartment building. Afterwards, however, the narrator cannot get the image of the major's death out of his head. When returning from the killing, the narrator:

> …lay[s] down on [his] bunk, close[s] [his] eyes….and shudder[s] at what [he] s[ees]. [He] open[s] [his] eyes but it ma[kes] no difference. No matter whether [his] eyes were open or shut, [he] could still see it, the crapulent major's third eye, weeping because of what it could see about [him]. (Nguyen 110)

Evidently, the narrator's visions about his victim represent the inescapability of his own guilt. Thus, rather than functioning as a salve for truth, as they do in *Monkey Bridge*, mental apparitions in *The Sympathizer* bear the truth itself. Despite this inverse relationship, however, both texts exhibit a hyper-awareness about seeing and being seen. In the preceding passage, for instance, the bullet hole in the crapulent major's head is a "third eye" which sees the narrator for who he really is (Nguyen 110). This is one of the few moments in the novel where the reader is cognizant of the narrator's vulnerability. Always hiding behind his cover as an assistant to the General, always justifying his crimes as necessary to his mission, the narrator rarely confronts himself and his own identity. With the blank stare of his victim freshly seared in his mind, however, he cannot ignore the gravity of what he has done. This is shown again when, at a wedding reception, the narrator has a hallucination of the crapulent major, "his severed head serving as the table's centerpiece" which still delivers cynical jokes despite its decapitated state (Nguyen 113). This apparition, as the narrator later notes himself, haunts him as a reminder of his own moral disorientation.

The motif of eyes reappears each time the narrator is preparing to kill, and phantasms of his victims follow him wherever he goes. In the car with the General, for instance, the hallucination of the crapulent major returns to pester the narrator when he gets the premonition that he must kill again. His premonitions are correct, for Sonny, the polemical, left-leaning journalist who publishes a defamatory article suggesting that the General is either unable to fund the Movement or "wallowing in ill-gotten lucre," does not write without consequences (Nguyen 247). Amid the swirl of rumor that the article causes, the General orders for Sonny's assassination. Even before his next execution, however, the narrator does not recover from his

complicity in the killing of the crapulent major, whose fat body he envisions is "spilling over the edges of the bucket seat next to [him]" (Nguyen 248). Fearful of this apparition, the narrator:

> …dare[s] not turn [his] head to look, although from the corner of [his] eye [he] s[ees] [the crapulent major] facing [him,] all three of his eyes surely wide open. [He] had not drilled the hole into his head that had given him that third eye, but [he] had come up with the plot that led to his fate. Now it was this third eye that allowed [the crapulent major] to continue watching [him] even though he was dead, a spectator and not just a specter. (Nguyen 248).

The effect that the gaze has on the narrator, whether or not the eyes which view him can actually see him, is nevertheless a powerful one, for no matter how tormented, subjugated, or humiliated his victim might be, it is the gaze, the indictment delivered by those ever-condemning eyes, which the narrator can never escape. Before his mission, Bon advises the narrator, saying that "people like to play dead" and the way "to tell if someone's really dead" is to "press [one's] finger on his eyeball. If he's alive, he'll move. If he's dead, he won't" (Nguyen 267). The narrator keeps this advice in mind, and after shooting Sonny a few times in the hand, back, and head, he "g[ets] on [his] knees, lowering [his] face to look Sonny in his one exposed eye," which "[i]s lusterless and blank" (Nguyen 278). Determined to check that Sonny is truly dead, he:

> …reach[es] forth [his] index finger, slowly, closer and closer to that eye, which move[s] not at all. [His] finger hover[s] an inch before the eye, then a few millimeters…then [his] finger touche[s] that soft, rubbery eye, the texture of a peeled quail egg, and [Sonny] blink[s]. [The narrator] jump[s] back as [Sonny's] body shudder[s]" (Nguyen 278).

Eyes remain the last and final indication of one's consciousness, and even past death seem to pass judgement upon the living. It is Sonny's judgement, indeed his recognition, which the narrator craves just before killing him. Moments before the murder, the narrator desperately confesses to Sonny that he is a double agent working for the opposition, somehow hoping that if Sonny confesses his allegiance to the revolution, the narrator might not have to kill him. He thinks to himself that:

> …[he] do[es] not know what brought [him] to make [his] confession to [Sonny]. Or rather, [he] did not know then, but perhaps [he] [does] now. [He] had worn [his] mask for so long, and here was [his] opportunity to take it off, safely. [He] had stumbled to this action instinctively, out of a feeling that was not unique to [him]. [He] cannot be the only one who believes that if others just saw who [he] really was, then [he] would be understood and, perhaps, loved. But what would happen if one took off the mask and the other saw one not with love but with horror, disgust, and anger? What if the self that one exposes is as unpleasing to others as the mask, or even worse? (Nguyen 275).

His one moment of sincerity with Sonny, even if followed by the slow, damning shutter of Sonny's single eye, is immediately contrasted with the disguise the narrator puts on when leaving Sonny's apartment. Running into another man on his way out after the murder, the narrator:

> look[s] at him, which Bon sa[ys] not to do. Don't make eye contact. Don't give people a reason to give you a second look. But [the man] d[oes] not even look at [him]. Eyes straight ahead, he walk[s] by as if [the narrator] were invisible, a ghost, or likely, just another unremarkable white man. (Nguyen 278).

Here again, despite his brief and vulnerable confession to Sonny, the narrator leaves the apartment the same man he was before his confession, passing under the gaze of strangers as someone he is not. It is only the apparitions of his victims which follow him that see him for who he really is. The morning after the murder, for instance, the narrator flies to Thailand on a reconnaissance mission organized by the General, accompanied once more by the visions that he experiences as a product of his culpability. During the plane ride, he is "in a daze and terribly uncomfortable, sharing [his] seat…with the crapulent major on one side and Sonny on the other" (Nguyen 280). Because of these hallucinations, the narrator is unable to sleep, for "every time [he] close[s] his eyes, [he] s[ees] either the crapulent major's face or Sonny's, which [he] [cannot] bear to look at for long" (Nguyen 281).

The narrator's reaction to these visions is an inverse reflection of his reaction when he finally sees *The Hamlet,* the film he worked on with the auteur. Sitting in a Bangkok theater after his arrival, the narrator is thrust into "the gazes of Bellamy and Shamus," the two American soldiers who are the protagonists of the film (Nguyen 286). As a "variety of American-made weaponry vaporized, pulverized, lacerated, and splattered" Vietnamese bodies, the narrator "want[s] to close his eyes but c[an] not, unable to do more than blink a few times rapidly since the preceding scene" (Nguyen 286). Whereas the narrator forces his eyes to remain open to avoid visions of his victims, in the theater, he cannot look away from the blood and gore onscreen, however much he wants to. Distanced from himself through layers of disguise and suppressed emotion, the narrator easily escapes his perverse hallucinations through the cinematic splendor of the film. Thus, the film shares an antithetical relationship to the narrator's visions. Wholly contrived and inauthentic, the film is all the more impossible to turn away from. The narrator's visions, however, though just as surreal and grotesque as the film, are not simply the vivid re-

imaginings of his misdeeds. Rather, the narrator's hallucinatory visions are imbued with the truth of what only he knows, what he cannot admit to others. The phantom of the crapulent major and Sonny are the only figures besides the narrator's comrade, Man, who know that he is a communist and a murderer of the innocent. Always playing the part of the loyal aide to the South Vietnamese General or sporting various guises during assassination missions, the narrator admits that he "sometimes dream[s] of trying to pull a mask off [his] face, only to realize that the mask [i]s [his] face" (Nguyen 136). Thus, not knowing the difference between himself and his character, it is only in dreams that he can attain a glimpse of the real, of his genuine, unadulterated feelings.

Significantly, the foil between film and hallucination does not dismiss the notion that even the imaginary can affect material consequences. This is evidenced by the clear parallels between Sonny's death and the rape of Mai, the Northern Vietnamese woman in the film. In "the most extended shot of the movie," the "entire screen" fills with "Mai's battered face…one eye so swollen it has closed completely" while "her open eye wheel[s] in its socket" (Nguyen 287). These analogous scenes between the rape of Mai and the murder of Sonny underscore the dangerous potential of film as a tool for reframing reality. Although the film's perspective through the two U.S soldiers do not accurately portray Vietnam or the Vietnamese, it nonetheless distorts the American public's perception of the country and its people. When the film closes in on Mai's face and her single eye, it is reminiscent of Sonny's final, one-eyed gaze upon the narrator before his death, foregrounding the idea that the fantasy of film creates victims of its subjects and vanquishers of its spectators.

With Nguyen, as with Cao, the distinction between dreams and reality is never quite definitive. For instance, at the end of the novel, it is revealed that the narrator was forced to

witness the gang rape of a Northern Vietnamese woman, a repressed memory which is immediately evocative of the rape scene in *The Hamlet*. Recalling the rape, the narrator says that "she was staring directly at [him], but with the screws of pain tightened on her jaws and eyes, those screws that turned ever more, [he] had the feeling she did not [see] him at all" (Nguyen 351). Like the crapulent major's third eye and Sonny's "blank and lusterless" gaze, the North Vietnamese agent's empty eyes stare at the narrator without seeing, perturbing him nevertheless (Nguyen 278). What results is a dynamic which ruptures the power structure of the colonial gaze on multiple levels. Firstly, the eerie, lasting effect that the victims' stares have upon the narrator troubles the one-way relationship in which the dominant define, subjugate, and dehumanize their victims. Here, it is the diametrical opposite, in which the victim torments the offender. On another level, Nguyen breaks free from the strict configuration which posits the West as oppressor and the Third World as oppressed by recognizing that the oppressed themselves can oppress still others. For Nguyen, humanizing the other does not just entail delivering "good" representations, but a holistic one in which the other is depicted for all her sins and virtues. This objective could not be more clearly achieved than in the narrator himself, not to mention the Vietnamese soldiers who rape one of their own.

Notably, hallucinations and illusions in *The Sympathizer* do not occur solely in the form of the narrator's victims, but comprise the entirety of the last four chapters in which the narrator has been captured by the Northern Vietnamese. It is only as he is being tortured into delirium that the narrator is able to recover the memory of the northern agent's rape, a memory which he has forgotten for the entirety of the novel until then. The visions he has during his captivity are not only suggestive of his mental unraveling as he is being deprived of sleep and continually questioned. Rather, they seem to indicate the emergence of an understanding previously

inaccessible to the narrator, just has the memory of the woman's rape was, for so long, forgotten in the depths of his unconscious. At the beginning of his torture, he begs for the light to be turned off, to which the commissar asks him if he "see[s] that he must see" (Nguyen 342). The commandant, however, laughs, and remarks that "he will never see, not with all the night in the world…He's fundamentally blind!" (Nguyen 342). Because his torture takes place within a reeducation camp, the role of vision in this scene can be read as a double-entendre: in one sense, referring to literal vision, and in another, referring to enlightenment. At one point during his torture, when the narrator hallucinates that he is the Holy Spirit, "clairvoyant and clairaudient," he looks upon the scene of his torture from above, watching the commandant "[press] lightly on [his] open eyeball," literally prodding him to see the world differently, to recognize the faultiness of his ideology (Nguyen 355, 356). Mind dissociated from body in this delusional state, the narrator achieves a state of understanding far beyond what his visions of the crapulent major and Sonny occasionally deliver to him. Having been forced to remain awake for days under the glare of the white light, the narrator realizes that, "simultaneously subjugated and elevated, [he] [i]s beyond the comprehension of even Sonny and the crapulent major, who [remain] on the plane of [his] chronic sleeplessness" (Nguyen 355). While his "placid consciousness float[s] high above…leaving [his] wobbly body's yolk shimmering beneath his viscous white mind," he becomes "at last, enlightened" (Nguyen 355, 368). Surely, the momentous climax of the narrator's enlightenment could not have been achieved had he not been driven to near-mania, for it is only when he is "mad but not insane" that he understands that "every truth mean[s] at least two things," that he is "a man of two minds," and that the "revolution ha[s] gone from being the vanguard of political change to the rearguard of hoarding power" (Nguyen 376).

It would be unfair to address the motif of dreams and illusions without considering the state of sleep and wakefulness in these texts as well. Like Cao's protagonist, Mai, who finds "comfort" in the "verifiable peace in every…tablet of reliable, synthetic caffeine" that helps her stay awake, the narrator in *The Sympathizer* does not sleep either, though his insomnia is enforced rather than self-imposed. Only in this raw, unyielding wakefulness do both protagonists learn to grapple with their dreams and hallucinations, deriving empowerment or enlightenment from them in an unexpected way. For instance, when the narrator is being tormented and agonized by the guard, his captor tells him that "only without the comfort of sleep will [he] fully understand the horrors of history. [The guard] tells [the narrator] this as someone who has slept very little since what has happened to [him]" (Nguyen 337). Of course, sleep in this instance represents not only literal unconsciousness, but passivity as well, for sleep deprivation is the communists' "prescription" for the narrator's supposed subversion of the regime (Nguyen 337). In this configuration, wakefulness signifies mobilization and resistance. This is evident when the commandant enters the room in which the narrator is being kept, responding to his pleas for sleep by declaring that "of course [he] cannot sleep," for "revolutionaries are insomniacs, too afraid of history's nightmare to sleep, too troubled by the world's ills to be less than awake" (Nguyen 355). Such a statement echoes the sentiment expressed in the narrator's lessons with Man, who would make stirring calls to action in their study group back in Vietnam, proclaiming: "awaken, peasants, workers, colonized! Awaken invisible ones! Stir from your zones of occult instability and steal the gold watch of time from the paper tigers, running dogs, and fat cats of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism!" (Nguyen 339). Evidently, then, the reason for the narrator's torture and confinement despite being a double agent for the North is that he is "guilty of the crime of doing nothing," of *watching* while the northern agent was being raped, but being

unwilling "to sacrifice [him]self to save [her]" (Nguyen 356). After correctly answering the commissar's question by saying that *nothing* is more precious than independence and freedom, that nothing has a "*positive* meaning" in that "nothing is, indeed, something," the commissar allows the narrator and Bon to leave the reeducation camp (Nguyen 371). Newly enlightened, the narrator departs, acknowledging both the value of the illusions induced by his torture and the power of direct resistance. He thinks to himself:

> Despite it all—yes, despite everything, in the face of *nothing*—we still consider ourselves revolutionary. We remain that most hopeful of creatures, a revolutionary in search of revolution, although we will not dispute being called a dreamer doped by illusion. Soon enough we will see the scarlet sunrise on that horizon where the East is always red, but for now our view through our window is of a dark alley, the pavement barren, the curtains closed. Surely we cannot be the only ones awake, even if we are the only ones with a single lamp lit. (Nguyen 382).

Doped by illusion he may be, but it is by the strength of this illusion that the narrator continues to struggle against the powers that be—the powers that trap him into a single image, that dub him and his countrymen "primitives" and "boat people," a name "which smacks of anthropological condescension" (Nguyen 382). As with the protagonist in Cao's novel, the narrator in *The Sympathizer* is simultaneously awake and dreaming, dreaming to survive and to imagine "scandalous thoughts, extravagant hopes, and forbidden plots" (Nguyen 382).

While, the narrator is awake, however, the commissar ("the faceless man" who is revealed to be Man), remains "sleeping his morphine dream, dreaming of an eternal sleep, or perhaps dreaming of nothing" (Nguyen 381). Disenchanted with the party's ideology, Man is nevertheless unable to leave, for he must pretend to keep believing in the revolution at the risk of

being sent to a reeducation camp himself. During his interrogation of the narrator, for instance, the commissar admits "the unspeakable," proclaiming that "now that [the communists] are the powerful, [they] don't need the French or the Americans to fuck [them] over. [They] can fuck [them]selves just fine" (Nguyen 364). Like the narrator, Man understands that although they were "once revolutionaries themselves, they had become imperialists, colonizing and occupying [their] little defiant land, taking away [others'] freedom in the name of saving [them]" (Nguyen 376). Knowing this, Man forces the narrator's hands around a pistol pointed to his own head during the interrogation, asking him how "a teacher [can] live teaching something he does not believe in?" (Nguyen 364). Ultimately, however, Man can only save the narrator and Bon by remaining alive and buying their escape. Though he cannot save himself, saving his childhood friends is sufficient compensation for the sacrifice of remaining eternally caught in the "morphine dream" conjured by communist regime (Nguyen 381).

In summary, this chapter delineates the various ways that Cao and Nguyen adopt dreams, optical illusions, and hallucinations as an alternative to the spectatorial relations which relegate the Vietnamese into a concrete image of wretchedness. Essential to this analysis, however, is understanding that these novels themselves are representations that promote their own kind of gaze.

III. WOMEN, FORM, & ARTIFICE

As we have seen, visuality has historically been used to legitimate power, often blurring the lines between discursively produced notions of the other and her own sense of identity. Especially in the aftermath of the War, American-produced film and media have greatly warped how Vietnam and the Vietnamese are perceived. In response to this scopic model that relegates Vietnamese lives to the margins, Nguyen and Cao both adopt dreams, illusion, and hallucination as a means of escaping the western gaze. However, in this system which locates film as the garish, hypnotic space between dreams and reality, how do other forms of representation—for instance, the novel—measure up? Through various choices on form and style, Nguyen takes his text a step further by breaking the fourth wall and signaling to his audience that the novel itself is a creation of the imagination which has no claim to authenticity or truth.

Throughout the novel, there are several direct parallels between the making of the fictional film, *The Hamlet,* and the actual events the narrator experiences as a South Vietnamese lieutenant. These corresponding sections of *The Sympathizer* transform the novel into a *mise en abîme* in which the film simulates real life while the novel simulates the film. For instance, when the unnamed narrator reads a scene in the Auteur's script in which a little girl is captured by the Viet Cong and "screams before her throat is cut," he is transported into a memory of the torture of a prisoner (Nguyen 131). In this memory, the narrator watches as a "strand of rusted barbed wire" is wrapped around the throat of an elderly Montagnard rumored to be a liaison for the Viet Cong (Nguyen 131). As he disputes with the Auteur about the accuracy of the Vietnamese' screams in the script, the narrator is consumed with guilt, remembering his inability to save the liaison with whom his true sympathies lie. Though he could not rescue the man from his captain's torments, "in [his] mind…as [he] watched the scene, [the narrator] screamed *for* him" (Nguyen 131; my emphasis). Thus, when the narrator revises the script to correct the cries of the

little girl, it is not out of some dogged devotion to authenticity or scrupulousness, but rather, out of a desire to give voice to his unatoned sins. After all, the narrator's revisions evoke his own internal scream, not the Montagnard's, who does not actually scream at all while being tortured. Thus, although the narrator does aspire to fairly portray his countrymen, he is not unlike the Auteur in that he, too, uses the film as a medium to play out his personal vision, in this case, a vision which absolves him of his complicity as a spectator of the Montagnard's death. In this regard, the narrator also possesses an inclination to present selective representations of the war.

If the Auteur paints a poor picture of the Vietnamese in his film, then the narrator wishes to obscure the worst of parts of this vision. His motivation to represent his people in the best light possible is made clear when he asks the Auteur "whether a rape scene [i]s really necessary," (Nguyen 163). To this, the Auteur replies that "this is war, and rape happens;" therefore, he has "an obligation to show that" (Nguyen 163). For the narrator, however, the rape of Mai by Viet Cong soldiers seems "heavy-handed" (Nguyen 163). At the end of the novel, when the narrator uncovers a suppressed memory about a rape he had witnessed while conducting an interrogation, the resemblance between the film's rape scene and the rape he watches his colleagues commit is no coincidence. In the film:

> Long shots from the cave's darkened corners depicted a human octopus writhing at the cave's center, the naked Mai struggling under the backs and limbs of her half-naked rapists. While [the audience] s[ees] glimpses of her naked body, most of it [i]s obscured by the strategically placed legs, arms, and buttocks of the VC… (Nguyen 287).

Just as the narrator wants to close his eyes while watching the film, but cannot, he is also "helpless to watch" the rape of the communist agent, which he is forced to see as part of his

training in the art of torture. As in the film, the narrator never gets a direct look at the agent herself. All he sees is:

> …the policemen grunting and pounding, and the other two shuffling around the table with their pants around their ankles…as [they] jostled one another and obstructed [his] view, all [he] could see were their sweaty nether regions and the agent's thrashing legs (Nguyen 351).

The similarities between the gang rapes of Mai and the communist agent do not imply that art is any kind of reliable source to examine a country's history and politics, particularly not the kind of art driven by profit. This is especially true because while the movie depicts Mai's rape at the hands of the communists, the narrator's experience is the exact inverse wherein the communist agent is raped by the Southern Vietnamese. Given this crucial difference, the resemblance between these parallel scenes suggest that neither party is infallible, but that the party whose glorification justifies imperialist, capitalist interests will be the one to triumph in the end, even if only in memory. Wanting to exclude the plot point that most vilifies the revolution, the narrator shares in the Auteur's impulse to frame the war according to his own motives. Whereas the Auteur is driven by money and artistic distinction, both of which are most easily achieved by relying on a jingoistic invocation of American exceptionalism, the narrator is driven by the communist cause. Because humanizing the enemy is not in the interest of the state/the dominant, who hold the means of production/representation, it is no surprise that the narrator's perspective can never be realized.

Of course, the narrator's participation in the making of the movie does more than reveal his need to show only one side of Vietnam. As he bears witness to the exploitative nature of *The Hamlet*, the narrator also observes how the process of simulation ultimately becomes a process

of desecration. Though the War spanned nearly twenty years and left approximately three million Vietnamese troops and civilians dead, in films like the Auteur's, the conflict is only a backdrop to the drama of lives supposedly more worth chronicling (i.e. American lives). By mimicking the violence and brutality of the war without acknowledging all that is at stake for the country, the film forces the Vietnamese to "suffer one last indignity for the sake of entertainment" (Nguyen 181). The irreverence of recreating the war in this way is well illustrated by the Thespian. Adopting the technique of method acting to perfect his role, the Thespian's approach becomes less about entering into the psychology of a soldier and more about the Thespian's vain need to prove his dedication to his craft. When the narrator confronts the Thespian, who "had still not taken a shower after seven months of shooting," he tells him that "no soldier ever passed up the opportunity for a shower or bath," to which the Thespian smirks as though the narrator could not possibly understand his choices as an actor (Nguyen 177). In response to his insight, the Thespian triumphantly declares that "it is precisely because no soldier has done this that [he] [is]" (Nguyen 177). Such a self-important statement betrays the Thespian's belief that his work on the film is grander and more culturally significant than a soldier's life could ever be, a sentiment that is shared by the Auteur when he tells the cast and crew that "long after this war is forgotten…this work of art will still shine so brightly it will not just be about the war but it will be the war" (Nguyen 178).

The notion that film simulates war does not merely end at the Auteur's claim. No, in the making of this fictional movie (as with *Apocalypse Now*), the Auteur goes to great lengths to replicate the locale, dress, and props. As the narrator slowly realizes, "the trim of a costume had to be real, but the truly important things…like emotions or ideas, could be fake" (Nguyen 179). Though it would be dismissive to say that art is more meaningful than the war itself, it is true that

it is, in fact, an extension of war. Indeed, the pre-production of *Apocalypse Now* doubtlessly resembles a nation preparing for battle. For example, Francis Ford Coppola and his co-producers famously met with President Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines to request "military technical advisers, military escorts, aircraft (mostly Huey helicopters), ordnance (firearms, artillery, etc.), military vehicles, and a radio communication system" (Cowie 15). In so doing, the filmmakers essentially re-enacted the war, "napalming Philippino forests and villages to recreate the hell of South Vietnam" (Baudrillard 17).

Like the Thespian, James Yoon also treats the War as a pretext for a film that is ultimately more significant than the war itself. Yoon[3] is a Korean American actor given the role of Binh, a South Vietnamese soldier, and he is eager to break the cycle in which he has been type casted and "disposed of many times…onscreen as the evanescent Oriental" or the "Asian Everyman" (Nguyen 158, 167). Starved for accolades and recognition, Yoon goes to extreme lengths to deliver the most sensational, climactic performance that he can, for he views his torture scene as "his best chance for a supporting actor Oscar" (Nguyen 167). Even during a lunch break during shooting, he demands to be left strapped to the torture contraption, noting to the narrator that people like Binh probably endured worse conditions. While agreeing that prisoners of war go through "much worse," the narrator also thinks to himself that "James Yoon's harrowing experience would at least be finished today…whereas a real prisoner's mortification continued for days, weeks, months, years" (Nguyen 168). Yoon's zealous performance is no testament to the pains of prisoners of war. On the contrary, his histrionic display—climaxing when he actually forces himself to vomit—is only a game at the end of

[3] The fact that no Vietnamese actors play the leading Vietnamese roles in the film is another way in which they cannot represent themselves. They must be represented, in this case, "by other Asians" (Nguyen 158)

which waits the prospect of a glittering trophy to give him "the giddy smile of a freshly crowned beauty pageant queen" (Nguyen 167). While the narrator concedes to the Auteur's point that art survives war "long after…nature ha[s] ground the bodies of millions of warriors to powder," his observation that a prisoner's torment far outlasts the self-inflicted pain of Yoon's performance frustrates this idea (Nguyen 178). That is, although the pains of Yoon's performance are memorialized in film for all to see, it is nothing compared to the torture endured by prisoners of war. For the Auteur and the cast, then, suffering is meaningless without an audience. The narrator, however, asserts that lack of an audience cannot diminish or erase the trauma of an entire nation.

Nearly every movie scene the narrator details has its analogue in an actual event that he experiences, and Binh's death is no exception. During filming of this death scene, the narrator watches Yoon's face, which is "lachrymose with pain" and "bathed in sweat, mucus, vomit, and tears," and recalls the face of the communist agent he was unable to save (Nguyen 170). This memory is "real, so real that [he] ha[s] to stop thinking about her face" and instead focuses on the "fictional state of total degradation that the Auteur want[s]" (Nguyen 170). Because Yoon's performance is devoid of any real emotion and bears no relationship to the War, it is easier for the narrator to confront despite its immediacy and grotesquerie. Conversely, the half-faded memory of the communist agent's torture continues to haunt him. This is because, contrary to Coppola and Baudrillard's claim that the war is merely a pretext, the sorrow and anguish experienced by the Vietnamese—even if it does not matter to the west—still matters.

Until this point, I have highlighted the ways in which spectatorship is used to magnify the ideology of the dominant while the lack of it justifies the erasure of others. Through several literary and stylistic choices, the final sections of *The Sympathizer* drive home this indictment of

spectatorship by demonstrating how multiple gazes are imposed upon Vietnamese women. For example, the fact that the rape of the communist agent takes place "in the room they called the movie theater" highlights how the fetishization of the Vietnamese female body is only another form of the colonial gaze wherein woman is reduced to spectacle (Nguyen 347). In this scene, the agent lays "in the center of the capacious room," strapped to a table while "in the back of the room stand[s] a movie projector" (Nguyen 348). Because "the movie screen serve[s] as a backdrop" for the agent's violation while she is given pride of place in the center of the theater, it is clear that being watched and objectified under the male gaze is as much a part of her torture as the rape itself (Nguyen 348). The narrator, though he does not participate in the rape, is ashamed that he "watche[s]" and "s[ees] everything," even if under the orders of Claude, who says that "this [is] nasty business, but that [the narrator] ha[s] to see it" (Nguyen 349).

After uncovering this memory, the text takes on the form of a screenplay, positioning the reader as a spectator as well. Here, Nguyen's emphasis on the artifice of the novel bolsters his project of destabilizing the gaze by suggesting that no representation (even one produced by a Vietnamese) is impartial. Just as one should not consider *Apocalypse Now* a faithful examination of the War, neither should readers do the same with *The Sympathizer*. However, this is not the only way Nguyen underlines the constructed nature of a narrative. For example, before the South Vietnamese policemen rape the communist agent, they ask her what her name is, to which she replies that her "surname is Viet and [her] given name is Nam" (Nguyen 350). This response is a direct reference to Trinh T. Minh-Ha's film of the same name. The film *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* details the lives of Vietnamese women after the war, and is itself a "self-reflexive work that challenges the claim of so-called non-fiction film to represent reality and hence, to be factual and truthful" (Higashi 1124). At the end of the documentary, Trinh interviews the

women, who are actually revealed to be actors playing parts. In so doing, Trinh upsets the conventions of ethnographic film to make an intervention in which the gaze itself, disguised as western scholarship and enlightenment logic, becomes an object of critique. Nguyen's allusion to Trinh's film suggests that his choice to transform the end of the novel into a screenplay is no accident. Like Trinh, Nguyen urges his audience to question the narrative they are being presented with, and in turn, those narratives propagated by the dominant.

Wrapped up in the project of destabilizing the gaze is also the question of how Vietnamese women, in particular, are represented. American war films and Vietnamese national narratives all rely on the trope of woman as nation, an analogy that figures in *Monkey Bridge* and *The Sympathizer* as well. In *Monkey Bridge,* for instance, Mai sees Vietnam on a map and describes it as a "slightly bent, half-moon country shaped like a starved sea-horse," recalling how:

> Legend had it that Vietnam was once a wild horse with a long mane and lustrous body. Too many wars made the horse so sad that it retreated into its present shape, a long twisted peninsula hanging on to the coast of the South China sea like a starved sea horse waiting for happier days. (Cao 150).

Later in the text, when Mai quietly observes Thanh, she notices how "in the silver light, [her] mother's silhouette cast[s] a faint sea-horse curve against the dark window-shine" (Cao 161). Like Vietnam, Thanh is diminished both mentally and physically, her bony, burned body like "a battlefield" (Cao 7). Thanh's role as a stand-in for the nation exemplifies how women often bear the brunt of war. Of course, Nguyen is conscious of this as well, for the rape of the communist agent is just one example of how Vietnamese women are positioned at the juncture between colonial and sexual violence, a victim of both western and male gazes. If the communist agent's

rape in a movie theater was not a clear enough demonstration of such as gaze, then the heinous act committed after her rape certainly is. When the three policemen are finished with her, they take an empty coke bottle and leave "the drained bottle inside, buried to the throat of its neck" (Nguyen 352). The phallic bottle, shoved into the communist agent's vagina, becomes a "makeshift speculum" for the policemen, who jokingly exclaim that they "can see right into her" (Nguyen 352-353). This disturbing act is also one that is incredibly gendered, the ultimate evidence that the imposition of colonial, male vision is doubly harmful to the woman of color.

Although both Cao and Nguyen rely on the trope of woman as nation, both also complicate it as well. Cao, for instance, rejects rape as an allegory for the conquest and pillaging of the nation, for while Thanh does die in the end, she dies by her own hand. Conversely, Nguyen depicts rape, but does so while going against the usual formula in which the Vietnamese woman is raped by a foreigner or suffers heartbreak by an American soldier. While the communist agent declares that she is Viet Nam, in many ways, the narrator himself is also an allegory for the nation. A double agent, the unnamed narrator works for the South but is dedicated to the North, just as Vietnam is split into North and South. This fissure is also embodied in the narrator's mixed background, he being the illegitimate son of a French priest. After the communist agent is raped, she looks directly at the narrator but "d[oes] not see [him] at all," reflecting how one Vietnam does not recognize the other (Nguyen 351). The tension within the nation is also exemplified by the fact that the communist agent is raped by her own men, a travesty that is evoked by the commissar's declaration that Vietnam "[does not] need the French or the Americans to fuck [them] over" because they "can fuck [them]selves just fine" (Nguyen 364).

Nguyen, like Cao, is attentive to the way that Vietnamese women are subject to multiple levels of spectatorship as the object of both the male and colonial gaze. Furthermore, Nguyen also attempts to recover Vietnamese subjectivity by recognizing that the Vietnamese are not just one-dimensional, helpless victims of imperialism; rather, they, too, are capable of vicious crimes. In a sense, then, Nguyen's inclusion of the communist agent's rape "sets into motion…the reclamation of humanity through inhumanity" (Chong 377).

CONCLUSION

Throughout these chapters, I have attempted to illuminate the ways in which Vietnamese American authors grapple with the historical role that visuality has played in framing how a nation and its people are perceived. The capitalist, colonial enterprise had always justified itself by re-imagining natives, first as savages in need of civilization, then as oppressed subjects in need of American benevolence (or, in the case of the Northern Vietnamese, as enemies to democracy and freedom). In this sense, then, the colonial imagination has always been a tool with which to relegate the other to a state of subhumanity. By the end of the twentieth century, this colonial imagination was only fortified by the surreal imagery conjured by countless American-produced movies about the War, allowing for American modes of seeing to be amplified as these films were transported to a global audience.

Inasmuch as *Monkey Bridge* and *The Sympathizer* condemn Hollywood as an arm of the American military-industrial complex, so too do they resist the voyeurism and dehumanization Hollywood encourages in their own work. Throughout both novels, Nguyen and Cao employ the motif of dreams, optical illusions, and hallucinations as a way to subvert the western gaze. In a so doing, they demonstrate one way that the Vietnamese might re-appropriate the imaginary as a tool of their own—in a literal sense, as in the case of military strategy focused on illusion/myth/disguise, and in a figurative sense, as when Mai and the unnamed narrator rely on their fantasies and dreams to empower themselves or discern certain truths. Essential to this evaluation of spectatorial relations, however, is how Vietnamese women in particular are doubly objectified under the western gaze and the male gaze. Rather than cave into a trope that positions Vietnamese women as the victims of white men, however, Nguyen and Cao recover the agency and subjecthood of the Vietnamese by tracing women's abjection to the nation's internal strife.

Ultimately, my aims for this thesis are many. Firstly, by analyzing Nguyen and Cao's treatment of the film industry as a messenger of American political interests, I hope to promote a more critical engagement with the narratives we are presented with, especially since movies about the War continue to be made every couple of years. For instance, just a few months ago in January of this year, American production company Roadside Attractions released the film, *The Last Full Measure*, starring Samuel Jackson, Sebastian Stan, and Christopher Plummer, among others. The film follows the journey of one Pentagon staffer investigating a Medal of Honor request made for a deceased Vietnam veteran, William H. Pitsenbarger, who risked his life to save over sixty men. Clearly, the film valorizes the sacrifices of American soldiers and invokes a sense of patriotism that obscures the horror of war and the pain of its victims. While this critique will not stop war films like this from being produced, I hope that it can engender a social consciousness in regard to how the humanity of others is diminished by representations such as these.

Finally, although the western gaze certainly exerts a powerful influence in the way we view the world, I want to emphasize that spectatorship does not simply pass from "the west to the rest." That is, postcolonial subjects also "look back" at their spectators, though their perspective is only as visible as the power and reach of their culture industries. Making this distinction restores agency to the Vietnamese, who are not merely passive victims of western imperialism, something that some sympathetic representations of the Vietnamese might suggest. Key to the project of recovering Vietnamese subjecthood is the need to realize that they are capable of both honorable deeds and dishonorable atrocities. In other words, recognizing that the oppressed can oppress still others means rejecting the one-dimensional image of the Vietnamese as misfortunate subjects under the yoke of neocolonialism.

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