

ON MEMORY & MEDIA, MEMOIRS & MENTORING

MICHAEL WUTZ



A Conversation with VIET THANH NGUYEN

*Writing as power; writing as memory and representation; writing as a medium within an increasingly complex media ecology; and writing as a, still, formidable instrument to inform and to help shape public opinion – these are among the central concerns of author Viet Thanh Nguyen, who has emerged as one of the literary world's most prominent public intellectuals in the United States and beyond. If most readers know him as the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his astonishing debut novel, *The Sympathizer**

*(2015), he has since released an equally astonishing cluster of works that have remapped the American literary imagination in the same way they have helped reframe global discussions about what it means to be an immigrant, how to retrieve repressed histories, and how to recognize the age-old art of storytelling as an epistemological exercise of the first order. Erudite, empathetic, and profoundly personal and public at the same time, his work – from his fiction and academic writings to his columns for the *New York Times* or his Twitter posts – reminds us to put the human at the center of the humanities, largely conceived, and to recognize the genuine plight of refugees the world over, as they search for stability and security, home and peace. His writings are especially urgent at a time of mounting xenophobia and anti-refugee sentiment throughout much of the so-called First World.*

*To say that Nguyen is a storyteller at heart is also to say that he possesses the gift of blending fiction with memoir, and cultural criticism with critical theory, into a narrative fabric sui generis. *The Committed* (2021) follows the hero of *The Sympathizer into Paris* – the seat of Vietnam's onetime colonizer – where he continues to reflect on capitalism and his own kind of schizophrenia. Written over a span of 17 years, *The Refugees* (2017) is a collection of short stories looking at the lingering effects of the Vietnam War through the eyes of first- and second- generation survivors, who are each in their own way traumatized by what is often unspoken or repressed, and hence paradoxically sitting too close to the surface to be remembered. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and**

the *Memory of War* (2016), a finalist for the National Book Award in nonfiction, continues that focus by spotlighting, in a more critical vein, the mechanisms of memory production in Hollywood and the publishing industry. The study demonstrates that classical American cinema and literature – from *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket* to *The Things They Carried* and *Dispatches* – push particular narratives of American heroism, while Vietnamese people in them are largely rendered unvoiced and invisible, condemned to the status of insignificant extras without reaching anything like human fullness. The study, similarly, reaches beyond the American-Vietnamese binary to consider how South Korea, Laos, and Cambodia commemorate a war that has affected their countries as well, and makes a case for a new ethics grounded in “just memory” as a precondition for peace.

Dr. Nguyen is also the author of *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (2002) and founded *diaCRITICS*, a blog dedicated to a new generation of Vietnamese American writers. More recently, he has edited *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives* (2018), a collection of essays that offer fleshed-out counter narratives to the generic headlines of migration in the news industry. His forthcoming blend of

memoir and criticism, *A Man of Two Faces* (2023), echoes in the title some of the central concerns of his oeuvre and points to the uneasy double-facedness of the narrator of his novels. HBO and studio A24 are currently adapting *The Sympathizer* into a drama series with a Vietnamese cast, which should contribute to Dr. Nguyen’s hope of offering a more nuanced representation of the Vietnam War, and of Vietnamese people living in Vietnam and in the diaspora, to an international audience.

Dr. Nguyen is University Professor of English, American Studies and Ethnicity and Comparative Literature, as well as the Aerol Arnold Chair of English, at the University of Southern California. In addition to the Pulitzer Prize, he has received a Guggenheim Fellowship and a MacArthur Fellowship, among numerous other honors. In the following conversation, Professor Nguyen engages with questions about media, memory, and representation; form, gender, and style; and critical theories and critical practice, including the responsibilities of being a writer and teacher. I would like to thank Viet for his time and generosity in fielding my questions, and my colleague Abraham Smith for facilitating this meeting of the minds, which happened via Zoom on December 8, 2022. This interview can also be accessed on Professor Nguyen’s homepage at <https://vietnguyen.info/home>.

*My sincere congratulations on your forthcoming book. I have seen it being referred to as *Seek, Memory* and described as “a blend of memoir and criticism.” How did you blend the two? Can you give us a preview to coming attractions?*

Well, the title is probably going to be *A Man of Two Faces*. This is what my publisher and

editor want. It does connect this book very explicitly to *The Sympathizer*. I never wanted to write a memoir—the only way I could do it was through combining it with criticism and thinking about the individual story and the lives of my parents, which is what it’s also really about, in the context of the mass experiences of people like us, people who are refugees, people who are Vietnamese, people

who had to flee because of the war, who were affected by the war. The only way I could write this book was to imagine myself as the Sympathizer writing the book. For me, writing *The Sympathizer* was a really liberating experience because I could tap into a voice inside of me that I didn't really know I had. And likewise, with this new book, *A Man of Two Faces*, I use the voice of the Sympathizer to again liberate another part of me that I knew that I had, but I had a very hard time talking about. With that is the experience of growing up in my family, and with my family as refugees in the United States—for all the obvious political, historical reasons, but also for very personal reasons dealing with the traumas that my own family experienced. I really hesitate with the genre of the memoir, especially from people like me, because typically the way that these memoirs get published and marketed and received is as the memoirs of individual people overcoming individual hurdles. And so, the genre of the memoir, in the United States at least, is a deeply individualistic and privatized mode of memorialization and of writing. I'm deeply opposed to privatization as a political or economic idea, or as a narrative device or narrative approach. And so, there's a lot of my family and myself in this book, but always in relationship to these larger historical forces that I think made our arrival in this country possible.

From the very beginning of your career as a writer, you have been writing with a great deal of responsibility for the Vietnamese American community. And over the years, you've been recognized with numerous awards, beginning of course with the Pulitzer, a Guggenheim, and a MacArthur "genius" grant, among many others. Have these public accolades increased this sense of responsibility for your constituency? Have they become liberating by allowing you to probe ideas with greater latitude, or have they, perhaps, become burdensome because of the expectations that might come with these

I really hesitate with the genre of the memoir, especially from people like me, because typically the way that these memoirs get published and marketed and received is as the memoirs of individual people overcoming individual hurdles. And so, the genre of the memoir, in the United States at least, is a deeply individualistic and privatized mode of memorialization and of writing. I'm deeply opposed to privatization as a political or economic idea, or as a narrative device or narrative approach. And so, there's a lot of my family and myself in this book, but always in relationship to these larger historical forces that I think made our arrival in this country possible.

awards? I imagine this might be a weighty ethical concern for a writer of your standing.

Yes, absolutely. You're very familiar with the idea of the burden of representation that writers of color and basically any minority writer faces. And you know, *A Man of Two Faces* addresses that, because part of the narrative of the book is about how, for me, there is no such utopia as being the great American novelist or the individual writer. I think that kind of idea, that kind of mythology of American literature, only comes about through the possibility of great structural privilege that gets masked behind individuality. I don't have that privilege, I think. And I don't want that privilege. So, for me, the meaning of these awards and recognitions is twofold. One is that they *are* liberatory. One of the reasons

why *The Sympathizer* won the Pulitzer Prize is because I wrote that novel, paradoxically, for me, not for anybody else. And then, paradoxically, it found an audience. So, when it won the Pulitzer Prize, my reaction was, I don't want this prize to make me feel like I have to repeat some kind of formula that I might have accidentally discovered, and instead I felt the prize only came about because I wrote

*For me, there is no such utopia as being the great American novelist or the individual writer. I think that kind of idea, that kind of mythology of American literature, only comes about through the possibility of great structural privilege that gets masked behind individuality. I don't have that privilege, I think. And I don't want that privilege. So, for me, the meaning of these awards and recognitions is twofold. One is that they are liberatory. One of the reasons why *The Sympathizer* won the Pulitzer Prize is because I wrote that novel, paradoxically, for me, not for anybody else. And then, paradoxically, it found an audience. So, when it won the Pulitzer Prize, my reaction was, I don't want this prize to make me feel like I have to repeat some kind of formula that I might have accidentally discovered, and instead I felt the prize only came about because I wrote what I wanted to write.*

what I wanted to write. The prize, it should liberate me, continue to liberate me, to do exactly the same thing. And so, *A Man of Two Faces*, this memoir, is written exactly from that same space. My wife has just read it, and last night she asked me, "Well, aren't you frightened about how some people will react to this, to what you say in this book?" And honestly, no. When the book is going to be published, and when I have to go talk about it, I probably will be worried about people's reactions. But in the space of writing the book, honestly, I was not thinking about that at all—I suspended that fear. But then, the other part of the response to your question is, yes. I feel that responsibility because I have achieved more visibility, people expect things from me. People who are not Vietnamese or not Asian have a certain set of expectations, and also people who are Vietnamese and Asian American have a certain set of expectations. Those expectations do weigh on me in my role not only as a writer, but as some kind of public person who voluntarily picks up the task of doing things like writing essays for magazines and newspapers, and all that. That is a related, but separate, task from being a writer. It is something that I feel is important, that being a writer has made that possible for me. And that has its own set of ethical challenges and responsibilities.

*The narrator of *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* is an eager reader of theoretical and postcolonial texts. In both novels, his range of readings is impressive and certainly chronicles his intellectual reach. (It may also be a kind of map of your own readings, in grad school and beyond). My point is that you integrate postcolonial theory and fiction in an elegant and meaningful way where we see an evolving narrator who is part revolutionary, part spy, but also part thinker, perhaps even a political philosopher. Could you speak to that?*

Yeah. I think that the narrator of these novels is not what many people would consider to be a representational narrator. That is, whenever people think of what the Vietnamese refugee is supposed to be, or a Vietnamese person, or an immigrant, and so on, a lot of readers would not think of this kind of a person. I think American literature in general, when it comes to these kinds of immigrant or refugee narrators, has a certain mindset about what to expect, and that fits in with the general formulas of middlebrow American literary fiction, and so on. So, according to this, to my perception, and what this formula is, the narrators are supposed to be resolutely focused on individual experience. To speak in the realm of, the register of, realism, and realism somehow seems to preclude people from having political or theoretical ideas. And so, number one, I think that's a formula that precludes the possibility of the exception. Why shouldn't we have the exception? My landmark when I was writing *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* was not to think about whatever *The New York Times Book Review* is rewarding, but to think about the landmarks of American literature and world literature that I respond to. Talking about American literature, let's say *Moby Dick*, or *Absalom, Absalom!*, or *Beloved*, these are books that have really exceptional kinds of narrators or protagonists at their center. That to me was a standard, not the standard of whatever is considered normal or representational. So, given that, then I wanted to create a narrator who would have the possibility of being an agent, both in terms of his physical actions, but also his intellectual actions. And I wanted to make use of this intellectual training that you and I have had. It's a delicate position, because, you know, I think that there have been writers who have been trained versus academics who never could quite get over their academic training, and that manifests itself in the writing. So, could I try to write fiction that would incorporate some of this theoretical thinking, but not be overwhelmed

My landmark when I was writing The Sympathizer and The Committed was not to think about whatever The New York Times Book Review is rewarding, but to think about the landmarks of American literature and world literature that I respond to. Talking about American literature, let's say Moby Dick, or Absalom, Absalom!, or Beloved, these are books that have really exceptional kinds of narrators or protagonists at their center. That to me was a standard, not the standard of whatever is considered normal or representational.

by it at the same time—that's a subjective issue left to the reader to decide. But that was the ambition in writing these books, finally, with the idea that these books are both like action novels. But action is not only the action of violence, and people doing things on the street, and so on, but action is also intellectual action because the underlying principle of these novels is that the worlds of these characters have been upended, not just by wars, but by philosophies and by theories.

In The Committed, a number of Marxist and theoretical texts enrich our narrator more so than they do in The Sympathizer. There is talk of Louis Althusser and Walter Benjamin; he quotes Eugène Ionesco; Hannah Arendt and the French feminists make an appearance (Hélène Cixous/écriture féminine, Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva); there are references to Aimé Cés-

aire, and the narrator quotes several passages from Frantz Fanon, in particular. That's no doubt because he lives and breathes French intellectual culture, and I am wondering how that is affecting the narrator's thinking, particularly with a view toward living in his fatherland/father's land in the diaspora and (what I understand may be) the final installment of your trilogy.

I think I started off as “the scholar,” but I think I’m probably a better fiction writer than a scholar or theorist. A lot of these issues that get raised in the novels are things that I’ve dealt with in my scholarship, but I’m never going to be able to write about them in a scholarly or theoretical way with the same effect that I could in fiction. The first two novels, and also the third novel, are my attempt to work out and work through and deploy these theories at the level of fiction and see what they can do to these ideas, but also to the fiction. *The Committed* is, I think, positioned in the middle of the three novels of the trilogy, and it’s a novel where he is really hitting bottom in all different ways. He has the opportunity to think through the ideas that have made him, which are also the ideas that have made *me*. Some of the debates and things that he’s working through at the level of fiction are some of the things that I’ve been thinking about since I went to college and graduate school. And so, *The Committed* is not only about him working things out; it’s also me working things out. I think the third novel—because I do think of the trilogy as a dialectical trilogy—the third novel won’t do the same things. I think he won’t need to dwell as much on these ideas, these formative theories and principles; he has worked through them. In the third novel, he’s going to have to try to implement them. The first novel was about action without really him reflecting about the way that he’s been shaped and conditioned by his political intellectual heritage. The second novel is about him working

through that heritage. And the third novel is about what’s next, or what is to be done—the question of what continues to drive him. I haven’t written the novel yet, but there’s tons of ideas in there. Obviously, the challenge for me again, as always, is to try to figure out how to implement the ideas into a narrative form that will be informed by these ideas. But hopefully it won’t be bogged down by them.

So, it sounds like it may be going to be more of a synthetic novel in terms of dialectical materialism, moving those two previous books into a third “synthetic” stage, something along those lines?

Yes, but there’s also some kind of boundary of realism for the trilogy. I think the trilogy operates at a level of surrealism as well. I really like this idea in Behrouz Boochani’s *No Friend But the Mountains*, where Boochani, the author, and his translator, Omid Tofighian, come up with the term “horrific surrealism” to describe the experiences of refugees, and then how to write about refugees. For me, that’s a fairly apt description of at least some dimension of these three novels—except mine also try to be funny and satirical as well. They operate in this register of surrealism, but at the same time there’s a frame of realism in there. There are certain time periods as events are taking place. The third novel takes place beginning in about 1985 in the Americas. So, not just the United States, but other places as well. It’s bound, to a certain extent, by that realism, which means that even though it’s supposed to be a synthesis, there is also the stage for another dialectic that will not be realized in the trilogy. He’s going to reach some kind of conclusion for himself, but another world opens up beyond the scope of the trilogy.

When I’m hearing South America, or the Americas, and surrealism, I’m also hearing “magical realism.” Is this the wrong direction to follow?

No, this is pretty much the right direction (Laughter).

What I'm inferring from what you say is there is "theory" underlying the novels and there's theory articulated in them through the narrator..., but your short stories, The Refugees, are fictions that execute embedded forms of theory, such as postcolonialism. That's when the theory doesn't rise to the level of discursive surface, but it's fully there in the narrative action. Would this be an apt distinction to make?

Yeah, I think so. The short stories are working through or dealing with all kinds of political and personal histories that are quite familiar to the readers of American fiction. They can be read through the lens of multiculturalism as well as postcolonialism. I'm always happy when people read the short stories and have very positive reactions to them because it was such an agonizing experience writing the book. I'm gratified that they deliver an emotional and narrative experience; that's important for some readers. But as a writer, I also feel that those stories were my attempt to work through both the aesthetic demands of writing—just trying to write a short story is really, really hard—but also trying to work out those aesthetic demands at the same time as I was trying to work out the complications of things like multiculturalism and postcolonialism when it comes to narrative and fiction. To that extent, I think that the short story collection is limited aesthetically and politically in terms of what it's able to do in working through those concepts, both at the secondary formal level and also at the political level. I'm glad that some people don't agree with me in my own assessment of my works, but that is my own idea about them, which is why I don't think I'll ever write another book like that again.

I have to say, I've taught The Refugees two or three times now, and the stories are really

I'm always happy when people read the short stories and have very positive reactions to them because it was such an agonizing experience writing the book. I'm gratified that they deliver an emotional and narrative experience; that's important for some readers. But as a writer, I also feel that those stories were my attempt to work through both the aesthetic demands of writing – just trying to write a short story is really, really hard – but also trying to work out those aesthetic demands at the same time as I was trying to work out the complications of things like multiculturalism and postcolonialism when it comes to narrative and fiction. To that extent, I think that the short story collection is limited aesthetically and politically in terms of what it's able to do in working through those concepts, both at the secondary formal level and also at the political level.

sitting well with the students. I feel it's an extraordinarily coherent collection, where each story works on so many levels within the larger ensemble. Plus, each one of them is a little jewel within itself. So, I think you may be a little self-deprecating. Those stories work really well, and my students would say the same thing.

I'm obviously very pleased at that. You know, my models for writing the stories as a whole, as a collection, were books like *Dubliners* and *Lost in the City*, by Edward P. Jones, books that I felt rose to a greater sum than the parts. So, if it works for the course students, it's fantastic.

As you said in a previous conversation, it's available at Costco.

The American dream. I'm in Costco! (Laughter)

*When I first read *The Sympathizer*, I was immediately taken by the narrator's/your beautiful prose. There are elegant phrases leaping off the page, constructions that sparkle like precious stones. That sense of style continues in *The Committed*. There, our narrator almost deliriously crafts sentences that extend into several pages (as if he were imitating Proust). I would liken it to what the French critic Roland Barthes many years ago described as *jouissance* – a kind of exhilarating drunkenness with words, an aesthetic pleasure for the writer and reader alike. That language is of course reflective of your skill, but also part of the character(ization) of the narrator. Could you speak to the linguistic play and complexity of your style? What are its "politics"?*

You know, one of the best things someone ever said to me is, a few weeks ago, there was a Vietnamese American reader who said, "When I read *The Sympathizer*, I could hear the Vietnamese language in there, the formal structure of the language." It was really interesting to me because I'm not fluent in Vietnamese by any means, but I grew up hearing the language and being shaped by it at a deeply emotional level and understanding, intuitively, some of its style and structure. And so, even though my grasp of Vietnamese is imperfect, what that meant is that I was always looking at Vietnamese from the inside and the outside at the same time.

And then, when it came to English, I felt that by the time I wrote *The Sympathizer*, I had achieved what I wanted to achieve, that same relationship to the language. Up until writing *The Sympathizer*, I think my relationship to English was one of attempted mastery. You know, it's a very common Asian American experience; we were, and are, perceived as outsiders and foreigners. And, you know, we're demeaned for our accent. So therefore, part of the battle to become an American is to master the English language. And so, I felt that my place in American literature was to demonstrate mastery, and to prove without a doubt that we belonged here in English and in American literature. This is also the claim to the entire world, because of American cultural power, that if you became an American novelist, you were also a world novelist for very problematic reasons. When I wrote *The Sympathizer*, there was that ambition behind it. I mean, immodestly, *The Sympathizer* is certainly written with the ambition to try to go up there again, not against, but in conversation with some of the names that I've already mentioned. There was no modesty about the novel. But in writing the novel, I also felt that the demonstration of mastery of the language—it's complicated—the ambition was also going to be a mastery of the language from the outside. I think it's one thing to be a master of the language when you're raised as an American and as a white person; it's another thing when you're coming from the outside—both as a non-white person in my case, but also as someone who wasn't born here. And so, the mastery to me felt like I had a kinship with someone like Nabokov, who was also coming at it from the outside. That line from *Lolita* was really important to me: "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style." I thought that that was a perfect expression of what *The Sympathizer* was trying to achieve. That was the character of the *Sympathizer* himself, but also of someone like me. The book I'm writing now,

I think it's one thing to be a master of the language when you're raised as an American and as a white person; it's another thing when you're coming from the outside – both as a non-white person in my case, but also as someone who wasn't born here. And so, the mastery to me felt like I had a kinship with someone like Nabokov, who was also coming at it from the outside. That line from *Lolita* was really important to me: "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style." I thought that that was a perfect expression of what *The Sympathizer* was trying to achieve.

A Man of Two Faces, is partly about writing as an act of betrayal. So, there is a kind of violence for me in being a writer—maybe not murder exactly, but violence that I'm doing to the people I'm writing about. Whether it's my criticism of Americans, or it's the way that I treat the Vietnamese people, or, in *A Man of Two Faces*, the way I treat my family. It's a mastery that I think is a self-conscious one. I'm just going to speculate: if you're a white man who's grown up in this country, you take your mastery of the language for granted in some ways as *yours*—you *own* that. For me, I feel like I *do* own it because I've earned it. But there's contingency, and that contingency is being from the outside.

In Nothing Ever Dies and elsewhere, you've told the story of your awakening to the racism in American culture while

watching Apocalypse Now. Coppola's film deprives Vietnamese soldiers of any voice – they become silent bystanders without verbal agency, decorations in the mise-en-scène. And you have of course written about that, too, in The Sympathizer, which is not only a terrific novel, but also a terrific piece of film criticism. So, your primal scene as a writer, if one can call it that, is grounded in film. I wonder how you see the fault lines of print and post-print media, especially, say, streaming video and social media, shaping up in the near future? In your fiction, in particular, I sense a kind of visceral and affective power in your language that exceeds the spectacular quality of film. What's your take on that?

That's a great question. Well, one thing to say is that a film like *Apocalypse Now*, but also the Vietnam War movie genre in general, was certainly a primal scene for me at the level of racism, but also sexism. There is a critique of racism in my work, obviously. *The Committed* and then also *A Man of Two Faces* is my attempt to grapple with the sexism of these scenes and how I participate in those things as a man. So, there's a complicated relationship there when we talk about the primal scene, and that's magnified by the visual dimension that you're referencing. Literature can be very brutal in these ways of depicting racism and sexism, but also in interpolating us and generating pleasure or pain. The visual medium is able to make it so much more graphic—visually. But, as you say, these are different advantages. So, the visual medium has that graphic advantage, but the literary medium has a different capacity with language that can't be translated literally into the visual medium. And so, I'm getting a very good exposure to that in the adaptation of *The Sympathizer* for TV, because I'm reading the scripts. I'm glad that I did not want to write scripts for this TV show, because they're changing my story. I'm, like, why are you doing this? Why aren't you using some of my beautiful lines? I have to give up the

ownership of the story because the visual medium is a separate thing. The complexity of the language that you're talking about cannot simply be put into the visual medium. It may not work to hear people saying the lines from *The Sympathizer*. Instead, what happens is, and hopefully in the hands of the right people, we have a collaborative mechanism where the spirit of the language somehow becomes transmuted into the spirit of the visual graphic dimension. That's why Park Chan-wook was crucial in directing it. His film *Oldboy* (2003)—its weirdness, its violence, its style, its panache—actually were really quite important to *The Sympathizer*. And in my way, I try to adapt what he achieved visually there into the language. So, there's a nice circularity to that, but also a recognition that these are two very different media in which adaptation entails a capturing of the spirit of the first medium into the second one. But, you are going to make changes; it's inevitable.

I just recently watched the adaptation of Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad, directed by Barry Jenkins, where the same thing happened. The miniseries rewrote key moments in the novel and realized them visually in a totally different but equally powerful way. The spirit may be still the same, but it goes at the expense of the literary quality of the novel.

You have often talked about the way in which memory depends on the control of the means of production and distribution. Now that HBO and studio A24 are adapting The Sympathizer into a drama series with a largely Vietnamese cast, I wonder how close this series will get to influencing, if not controlling altogether, the means of production and distribution. How do you hope this adaptation will lead to a more refined representation of the Vietnam War, and of Vietnamese people living in Vietnam and in the diaspora, to an international audience?

Well, you know, *The Sympathizer* is about getting screwed over by Hollywood (Laughter), and now we are participating in Hollywood, so who knows what's going to happen? But I think that there has been a significant change in the way that Hollywood operates. When I was growing up, Hollywood was pretty much the uncontested global cinematic power. And now, because of global capitalism and many other complications, that's no longer solely true. You have other powerful national cinemas and media industries out there, including South Korea. You also have domestic changes within the United States. The cumulative effect of all these social and political struggles around diversity have had an impact to some extent on how Hollywood operates and how it imagines things. I can see this working from inside of HBO. They've been super sensitive, maybe oversensitive, to certain things like casting. I've written long memos to HBO around a couple of the casting decisions. Maybe, someday, some scholar will write about it if they ever bother to dig into the archives and look at these really long memos that I had to write, and you'll see that popular entertainment has changed.

I'm watching *Wednesday* right now, which is a lot of fun. I did not expect it, in the third episode, to have a very strong anticolonial take about the Pilgrims being genocidal. So, there's been a shift in the popular cultural idiom that was not there when I was watching things like *Apocalypse Now*. I'm not being utopian about this. It's still a gigantic industry that is, for the most part, still operating in conjunction with the military industrial complex—but there are openings. I hope that the TV series will fit into one of these openings in the same way that, for example, Raoul Peck was able to do in HBO's *Exterminate All the Brutes* (2021), a four-episode series on white supremacy that's really explicit about that. The representation of the Vietnamese, I think, will inevitably be affected by this simply because it's going to be an HBO global production. And there's all this cultural, and

political, and economic capital that goes with that. Even a good novel will be lucky if it sells tens of thousands of copies. Even a bad TV series will have millions of viewers, that's what's inevitably going to happen. Whether the series is a success or not—aesthetically or commercially—it's still going to have millions of viewers. There's going to be some impact. If the series is successful, the impact will obviously be tremendous. Even if the series is not so successful, what it does is it advances the struggle one step further in giving people more opportunities. The creatives involved here—in front of and behind the camera—shift the possibilities of stories. Every kind of achievement we can make here opens the door further to other possibilities. And again, I'm not trying to be utopian here, you know, because you can see that with things like *Wakanda Forever*, which I just watched as well. Opportunity for Black, creative people, right? But the messaging is still containable within the imperatives of American imperialism, even though there's an anticolonial take in that. But anyway, one step at a time. I think that's what *The Sympathizer* as a TV series will do.

Last year, I had the privilege of talking with Ramin Bahrani. You wrote the liner notes for his film Chop Shop (2007), "American Hustle," in which you noted that the film's spotlight on the immigrant working classes is in itself a political act. It is a film, like Ramin's earlier Man Push Cart (2005), that rewrites the dominant narratives of Hollywood by taking a close look at the Global South within the Global North, of large swaths of Third World living within the First World of wealth and health, money and power. Have you worked with or written for other film makers?

I actually have also written a set of liner notes for another Criterion DVD, *After Life* (1998), by the Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda, which is an amazing movie that had a deep

emotional impact on me. I welcome the opportunity to write more liner notes. I think it's the appropriate medium for me, because, as I implied, I think my days as a scholar are pretty much over, so I'm not going to be able to write a scholarly study of film. But that film had such an enormous impact on me aesthetically, politically, emotionally, and so on. And so, as a writer, I try to borrow, not just from writing and from literature, but also from other media as well. And film is certainly very important. But visual art in general, installations, text-based art, all that has been important. I'm grateful to have had the chance to be able to comment on the works of filmmakers like Ramin and Hirokazu Kore-eda simply to recognize what they've been able to achieve in their own media.

*Just a couple of weeks ago, I watched Leon Le's film Song Lang (2018). It's a beautiful and meditative film about a subdued homosexual relationship. I'd like, in that context, to ask you about how memory, trauma, and the body form a kind of thematic triangle in much of your work, both long and short. I would like to revisit those links with you and add another term: gender and gender identity. In the first story in *The Refugees*, "Black-Eyed Women," we have an unnamed, traumatized narrator whose gender is revealed only gradually. And she retains the boyish haircut given to her by her brother as a marker of her conflicted gender role into middle age, and only then, perhaps, opens herself up to the possibility of a long-term relationship and a family. For her, her boyish hair becomes a form of concealment, or gender camouflage. It also prefigures the second story ("The Other Man") about gender identity: about a gay couple and their sponsored Vietnamese houseguest, Liem, who allows his repressed homosexuality in Vietnam to come to the fore in San Francisco. Then there is "Someone Else Besides Me," which is structured around several layers of complicated gender inflections. Could you elaborate*

on this, what I feel, is a rather crucial link, in your fiction?

Yeah, absolutely. As I was growing up, I was wrestling with all kinds of things, from my American identity to my racial identity, but also my gender identity too. And I think that the questions of gender and sexuality were the ones that I least understood, or was least articulate about, and wrestled with throughout my college years and graduate years. It's through my writing, as it always is, that I deal with these kinds of complications. And so, one of the great things about writing *The Refugees* was writing realistic short stories that demand a lot of empathy. If one creates a lot of different characters, and it's very deliberate in *The Refugees* for me to create a lot of different characters, even though most people in the book are Vietnamese, they all come from different kinds of backgrounds. It was very deliberate, on my part, to make sure that I was writing about women, or about queer people, both as a sort of a technical demand on me to try to figure out if I could do this at the level of fiction, but also with a demand about empathy and imagining other people who were like me, and not like me, in some very crucial ways. This would allow me to deal sensitively with some of these issues of sexual and gender identity and difference. It would also challenge me to figure out how to write about those things. So, just to use the "Black-Eyed Women" story for example, that took 50 drafts over 17 years, because it was so difficult to try to figure out how to not just empathize with somebody, but how to aesthetically represent them. The challenges of writing about a Vietnamese woman—and, in fact, in the original draft she was a lesbian, explicitly in a lesbian relationship—the challenges of how to write about that were enormous. That's why it took 50 drafts, as I tried to figure out how to do it. In the end, what happened is that the story that you have is not about the fact that she's a lesbian. It's not even there in the story. I mean, in my mind she still is, but it's not manifested in the story. So, that's part of one

example of how the intersection of aesthetics and empathy happen. You know, I think that a potentially clumsy way of dealing with these kinds of things—writing about people who are not like you—is to foreground that difference. Whereas if you yourself embody that difference, for whatever reason, it's a normal experience that's only highlighted when other people see you as different. But when you look at yourself, you don't talk about those kinds of things, so she has no reason to talk about herself as a lesbian. It's not the primary issue of the story. And yet, nevertheless, I think that, knowing that she's a lesbian was really crucial in writing the story in the way that it happened, and also dealing with the sexual violence and all that. That story taught me an important lesson about how to deal with difference at the level of fiction.

I want to congratulate you on recently receiving the Inspiring Writer Award from the American Writers Museum. Looking back on your work as an educator, and as a father (and husband and brother) perhaps, what is your mentoring practice for students, both

It was very deliberate, on my part, to make sure that I was writing about women, or about queer people, both as a sort of a technical demand on me to try to figure out if I could do this at the level of fiction, but also with a demand about empathy and imagining other people who were like me, and not like me, in some very crucial ways. This would allow me to deal sensitively with some of these issues of sexual and gender identity and difference.

undergraduate and graduate? Do you have strategies that have worked particularly well for students?

I think I've gotten better as I've gotten older. When I began teaching undergraduate, I was 22 years old. The thing about being a teacher and mentor is that it's partly about some kind of knowledge and expertise about the subject in question, but a lot of it is also about other things, especially when it comes to mentoring. You know, it's like psychology—it's about counseling; it's about wisdom; it's about persona; and it's about affect. None of those things came easily to me, especially when I was in my twenties. And so, it's only been through trial and error, and life experience over three decades, that I think I've become good at it—not with everybody, but with some among my students, the general public, and other writers. For me, with parenting, there's a huge question about balance—how much expectation and how much nurturing needs to be put in play with each other. When it comes to writers—how harsh should you be, or should I be, with a writer when it comes to my criticism of their writing? Should I just try to be supportive and give them the space to do what they want, what they need to do? I have no easy answer for that. It partly depends on the class, on the chemistry of the class. It depends on the student, the individual. It depends on how I feel in a given semester, how much time that I have. But I think in general, the principle that drives me is something my colleague David Roman in the USC English Department wrote in one of his books. He's a drama critic, a theater scholar, and he coined the idea of "critical generosity." To be a good mentor or teacher, it's partly about generosity—thinking about my time and my experience as gifts that I can give to students, and they are gifts that do not require reciprocity. I think of Lewis Hyde's book, *The Gift*. He says that art is a gift given without reciprocity. If you give with the expectation of reciprocity, then it's not really a gift. It's something else.

I think in general, the principle that drives me is something my colleague David Roman in the USC English Department wrote in one of his books. He's a drama critic, a theater scholar, and he coined the idea of "critical generosity." To be a good mentor or teacher, it's partly about generosity – thinking about my time and my experience as gifts that I can give to students, and they are gifts that do not require reciprocity.

So, as a writer, when you put your art out into the world, or as a teacher or a mentor, when you try to give something of yourself to your students, the recipients take the gift and incorporate it into their own spirit, and then they themselves will give to somebody else later on. And that's, I think, the spirit that drives what I do outside of the individual active writing, when I think of myself as a public person in the classroom, or working with other writers, and so on. The idea is to try to create conditions for them to find their own gift.

Recently, there has been a nationwide effort to bring EDI – equity, diversity, and inclusion – back into universities. The academy is being invited to rethink the canon once more (which many of us have been doing all along anyway). The idea is for underrepresented minorities to see themselves reflected, and genuinely so, in curricula and teaching materials, and to make higher education more accessible in general terms. This is of course a most laudable goal. How far do you think we have come in this endeavor? Have we arrived? Could you give us, from your point of view, a report on the condition of the country?

In 1990-1991, my fellow students at Berkeley and myself were campaigning on campus and getting arrested for doing protests about things that we would now call EDI. Back then, we called it diversity and multiculturalism. That was part of a time period of the so-called “culture wars” where people were opposed to these kinds of things. They thought we were threatening Western civilization, which I thought was ridiculous. Thirty plus years later, we’ve seen the successes of the movement of diversity and multiculturalism, so much so that it is now part of the public parlance and corporate speak of the university. It’s still seen by some as a threat against civilization. Now, the term “critical race theory” is what people are frightened about—what’s happening with books and book banning. So, I think that the idea of “diversity, equity, and inclusion” is simply the newest language that we put into a struggle that’s always been with us in the United States, since the very inception. Again, it’s always the proper balance between the unity of the culture and the recognition of the many kinds of diversities and differences that we have as a nation. There will be people on either end who will see the struggle as apocalyptic in their own ways. My reading of the contemporary university, and these kinds of issues, is that it’s a positive. We need to address this and try to make the university more inclusive at every level. But the reality of it also is that all of this diversity, equity, inclusion work takes place within the context of corporate universities and military industrial America. We are trying to make life better and more equitable and so on for people within the context of these negating kinds of institutions and nations, right? It’s a very complicated thing. And, on the other hand, there’s the possibility that diversity, equity, and inclusion in its own way silences people. That’s the fear around “wokeism” and “cancel culture” which, I think, is overblown. But nevertheless, I think there is some element of truth to that, and part of what my work is directed at is the perils of orthodoxy and that orthodoxies exist

in all kinds of ideology. It’s not just the people I’m opposed to that are orthodox, and try to suppress diversity, and all of that. I also fear that on the progressive side, and on the left, there are some of those tendencies as well. Not because they’re progressive or left, but simply because they’re human beings. And anybody who’s invested in power struggles, there’s always a tendency towards orthodoxy, and we should be worried about that.

You are a scholar of memory and continue to think through the various machineries of memory production and representation that shape a culture’s record of itself. Being from Germany – a country with an extraordinary sense of historical guilt and responsibility – I couldn’t help but notice your reference to James Fenton’s “A German Requiem” at the beginning of The Refugees, and in Nothing Ever Dies you cite the German writer W. G. Sebald’s notion of “secondhand memory” – the impact of war and trauma on those “seared at too young an age to know exactly where the scar is.” I am also reminded of Clint Smith’s recent piece in The Atlantic, “Monuments to the Unthinkable” (December 2022), in which he reflects on the way Germany, in particular, has processed, and continues to process, the Holocaust. What similarities – but more importantly perhaps, what differences – I wonder, do you see in the way particular countries are working through their, often complicated, history? How do you get from acknowledging guilt to something like just forms of memory (and forgiving)?

I think that question, and the set of problems that you brought up, are true for many countries. I, in my own work, reflect a lot about how this happens. In Vietnam, for example, or Cambodia or Laos, and then, obviously, in the United States, I think that violence is carried out at many levels—at the symbolic level, and then also at the level of institutions and warfare. Violence can be individual; it can be

collective; it can be microaggression; it can be mass murder. So, there is this whole spectrum of things that happen at the level of subjugating people and eradicating them from their lives to their memory. Therefore, the work of remembering also has to take place at many levels as well. That means that the work of memory has to take place at the individual level and has to take place at the collective level. It has to be symbolic. It has to be material. When we talk about the micro level, how each of us tries to cope with memories, it also has to take place at an institutional level. Now, all that being said, the United States is struggling, imperfectly, in this way. I think we have many centuries to go before we ever will reach an adequate, “just memory,” “just forgetting,” or what Paul Ricoeur calls a “happy forgetting.” I think there are many examples of unhappy forgetting that we can point to. Well, a “happy forgetting” is sort of utopian, because I think happy forgetting takes place only when we have adequately addressed the collective and institutional, material consequences of the terrors of the past. So, here in the United States, I take a little bit of encouragement. The idea that we’re starting to talk about reparations and Land Back, for example, at least in conversation, has reached a national level. We actually have to make

the material commitments, which means dollars and space, in terms of our psychic space and our physical space, building the necessary memorials and museums, and transforming the curricula, and so on. When I think about Germany, and I’ve been there a few times, I’ve seen some of the efforts. I would say that I take heart that Germany, as imperfect as its memorial efforts may be, has certainly done more to address its central sins in recent memory than the United States has done to address slavery. I think that we can look at different examples globally to see different ways that these imperfect efforts—“just memory” and “happy forgetting”—have taken place. I don’t think any country right now has achieved that. But there’s different efforts that have been really crucial—from some of the things that have happened in Germany to the Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial Museum in Japan, to small museums that are underfunded in different places that have gone against national or collective memory, to the individual efforts in classrooms and educational projects. And then, of course, art and literature. We have a lot of work, collectively, that we still need to do.

Thank you very much for your time, Viet. It was a pleasure, and an education.



Michael Wutz (Ph.D., Emory University) is Brady Presidential Distinguished Professor in the Department of English at Weber State University and the editor of *Weber*. He has published in the fields of American literature, media studies, science, and the humanities. Recent publications include a volume of original essays, *E. L. Doctorow: A Reconsideration* (co-edited with Julian Murphet, Edinburgh UP, 2019), and an edition of original essays by the late media theorist Friedrich Kittler, *Operation Valhalla* (co-edited with Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Ilinca Iurascu, Duke UP, 2021).