Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and Coetzee's Early Fiction: Representation, Grievability, Framing

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Abstract

Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015) is an intriguing novel for anyone familiar with the early fiction of J.M. Coetzee. Nguyen's debut novel has as its theme the war in Vietnam, which is not surprising given his background and his scholarly work preceding its publication. Interestingly, Coetzee's first novel, *Dusklands* (1974) comprised two novellas, the first of which, called "The Vietnam Project", is also related to the US invasion of Vietnam. Both works offer critical insights into US war-mongering in the post-World War II era. Additionally, Coetzee's third novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), bears thematic resemblances with both his and Nguyen's debut novels, as they, in one way or another, are concerned with imperialism's modus operandi and its continuation through the subjugation, intimidation, and annihilation of collective subjects. The main aim of this paper is to investigate the parallels and overlaps that can be detected among these three novels that are germane to the stratagems adopted by an imperialist power to sustain its dominion, legitimize its presence, and justify brutality. These stratagems mediate the way the imperial force relates to or conceives of the other. Of the concepts employed in this article, the following are of particular significance: representation, grievability, and framing.

Keywords: Representation, metaphysics of comprehension, mythography, affect, precarity, just memory

Introduction

The novel *The Sympathize*r (2015) by Vietnamese American writer Viet Thanh Nguyen has been acclaimed by critics for its insightful representation of the Vietnam War from the unique angle of an unknown undercover communist. The double vision of the novel created by the unnamed narrator masquerading as an anti-communist footman while remaining a communist sympathizer offers a rare view of both sides of the conflict. The novel was nominated for numerous awards and ultimately won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Reviewers and critics have pointed to the thematic resemblances that exist between *The Sympathizer* and other texts by authors such as Graham Greene, Franz Kafka, and Joseph Conrad.[1] While I acknowledge the fact that the novel resonates with such subtexts, I would like to argue that *The Sympathizer*, in a subtle and curious way, bears thematic and conceptual resemblances to the early fiction of J.M. Coetzee, the South African 2003 Noble Laureate. Though the two writers are situated differently in their careers, it is interesting to note that Coetzee started his career in the early 1970s with the publication of *Dusklands* (1974), a novel consisting of two novellas, called "The Vietnam Project" and "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee". The publication year of

this book is of importance as it is exactly a year preceding the fall of Saigon in 1975 which brought the Vietnam War to an end. Coetzee's anti-imperialist sentiments were not only reflected in his writing, he was also involved in anti-war demonstrations at SUNY Buffalo University in the United States while he was teaching there. After being arrested he was denied a visa renewal which forced him to return to South Africa.

Nguyen's story unfolds with the tumultuous events of the fall of Saigon as the narrator describes the tense atmosphere of fear, chaos, and confusion in the run-up to the evacuation of the city. The story is written in the confessional mode of the first person, and it is only toward the end of the novel that the reader realizes that it is a confession written in retrospect and addressed to a commander who has imprisoned the narrator and is having him reeducated through torture in a communist camp. In the end, it becomes clear that "the very novel we are reading is a manuscript the hero has recopied from his own original (as post-torture therapy), is carrying with him out of the camp" (Rody 397). Between the beginning of the novel relating the fall of Saigon and the subsequent frenzied evacuation of the people and the end of the novel encompassing the capture, captivity, and release of the narrator, the novel depicts the vicissitudes of the life of Vietnamese refugees and their attempts at forming a united front for recapturing their country.

Coetzee's debut novel centered on the Vietnam War, as an example of the imperialist urge in its first part, and focuses on early colonialist forays into Africa in its second part. Though the two sections are temporally apart, Coetzee seems to be concerned with the megalomaniacal side of Western thought in its late and early phases of development. "The Vietnam Project", like Nguyen's novel, is narrated in the first person by Eugene Dawn, a sort of analyst working for the US Department of Defense. He is in charge of writing a report on how to psychologically undermine the enemy in Vietnam through propaganda based on mythological studies. The narrative is a solipsistic monologue presented by Dawn in the distinctive manner of Beckettian characters. Dawn is so absorbed in his report that he becomes estranged from his wife and child. His marital relationship is strained and he suspects that his wife is cheating on him. Ultimately, the pressure of work catches up with him and he experiences a mental breakdown. He kidnaps his own son, holding him hostage in a motel. He is finally arrested before he pierces the throat of his son with a pen. The story ends with him undergoing treatment in a mental institution.

While the two aforementioned works address the concerns of this special issue, the third novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), seems to be the odd one out as it is not geographically concerned with the region which Arif Dirlik calls the "Asian Pacific and Euro-American Pacific" (64). Yet Coetzee's allegorical novel set in an unidentified territory and an unknown time depicting the operation of "the Empire" can serve as a palimpsest of the two debut novels.

Waiting for the Barbarians (henceforth *Waiting*) is narrated in the first person by an unnamed Magistrate who is serving out his years in one of the outposts of Empire. The laid-back atmosphere of the

frontier town is disrupted by the arrival of a division of the civil Guard of the Third Bureau led by Colonel Joll. They have been dispatched by the Empire because there have been rumors of sabotage and attacks by the alleged barbarians. The army is there to probe the matter and to forestall any invasions. As part of preemptive measures, a group of nomads is captured and brought into the town. After the agents of the Empire fail to elicit any information from them, they are released and allowed to wander around. The Magistrate notices a mutilated girl left behind and decides to lodge her in his quarters. Gradually he becomes obsessed with the girl's body, which bears the marks of torture. What she was subjected to during the interrogation, and what the wounds and marks of torture on her body signify, become an unresolvable enigma for the apparently well-intentioned Magistrate. Unable to shake off his obsessive curiosity about the girl's story, he returns her to her people but upon arrival is arrested by Colonel Joll's men and subjected to interrogation, torture, and mock execution on charges of "treasonously consorting with the enemy" (Coetzee, *Waiting* 77). In the end, the soldiers of the Empire, lured into the desert by the elusive "barbarians", return, vanquished, to the town to beat a hasty retreat and leave the town to its people and the Magistrate.

Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*, though drastically different in terms of narrative style, shares motifs and themes with Coetzee's two novels, thus inviting comparison. A comparative analysis of these three works, which are centered on imperialism, will hopefully reveal some new insights into how empires and imperialism are maintained by conceptual or ideological mechanisms to ensure their ascendancy. An interesting point of departure for a discussion on the three novels is the way imperialism falls back on mediatory terms or mechanisms to relate to the other. These serve as epistemological tools that aid and abet imperialism's subsumptive power to sustain its total domination. Accordingly, in all the three novels here, the question of representation is considerably important. Another noticeable thematic resemblance among these novels is the issue of torture and the infliction of pain on the body. In *Waiting* and *The Sympathizer* an ethical dimension opens up following the subjection of the bodies of the narrator-protagonists to pain and agony. Their bodies become the site for the recognition of the pain previously endured by the victims of imperialism. While the protagonists of *Waiting* and *The Sympathizer* are painfully brought to a recognition of their failure to carry out their moral responsibility, Eugene Dawn in "The Vietnam Project", remains impervious to any change as he takes sadistic pleasure in gazing at the pictures of US troops' atrocities in Vietnam. His reliance on the photos to spur his imagination betrays his sadistic voyeurism. These snapshots of torture help him sustain his connection with Vietnam as he "refused a familiarization tour of Vietnam" because he believes that "Vietnam, like everything else, is inside" him (Coetzee, *Dusklands* 14). His propensity for discovering truths in the Vietnam project "by introspection" (14) results in his "psychic brutalization" (9) and alienation from his family, his body, and his surroundings. This is why Eugene, unlike the two other protagonists, is not

susceptible to shame or guilt. In what follows I will focus on some shared issues among these novels to bring to the fore the common concerns of the two authors in addressing the question of imperialism.

Representation and Metaphysics of Comprehension

There is an undeniable rapport between the desire for political ascendency in the West and its philosophical orientations. Both are interrelated as they mutually reflect and sustain each other. The urge for discovery and exploration is accompanied by a tendency for self-affirmation and, by extension, other-definition. Both these inclinations are reflective of the way epistemology (seeking truth) has been wedded to ontology (self-preservation). Empires and imperialism are brute realities of Western thought which have sought to legitimize their *raison d'être* via justificatory arguments such as the "civilizing mission" and emancipation from barbarity and ignorance. Since none of these goals are realizable without some degree of persuasion, coercion, and consent, representational mechanisms mediating reality become indispensable components of empire-building, as well as tools for its consolidation and continuation.

The question of military occupation to ensure domination and subordination is only effective if it is in tandem with discourses of representation such as the one elucidated by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978). According to Said, the discourse of Orientalism, which is the conflation of imperialism and culture, cannot ontologically obliterate the Orient but it "does have the means to capture it, treat it, describe it, improve it, radically alter it" (Said 95). There is a point here that needs elaboration. Ontological obliteration can mean two different modes of action: (a) physical elimination and (b) reduction to or assimilation into a general concept. The meaning of (a) is self-evident. I will expand on the second by drawing on Emmanual Levinas, the French philosopher known for his philosophy of ethics. Levinas in the preface to his magnum opus, *Totality and Infinity* (1979), strives to establish an interconnection between ontology, war, and totalization by arguing that war is the suspension of morality as it is characterized by totalization and the derision of morality. For Levinas, totalization means the denial of alterity because nothing remains exterior to it. Similarly, war as an example of totalization "does not manifest […] the other as the other" (Levinas 21). Being or ontology also reveals itself in war that is "fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy" (Levinas 21).

What follows from this argument is that there is an equation between knowing things as in gaining total knowledge of them, and knowing them through concepts in their generality: "For the things the work of ontology consists in apprehending the individual (which alone exists) not in its individuality but in its generality" (Levinas 44). This domination or apprehension is the essence of the idea that "the relation with the other is accomplished through a third term" (44), that is, a concept, or "a middle or neutral term" (43) that comprehends beings. To comprehend the other means to seize, hold, or grasp it in an attempt to enhance the

subject's freedom which "is identification of the same, not allowing itself to be alienated by the other" (Levinas 42). The disposition to reduce the other to unifying concepts is reminiscent of Said's words in the preface to the 2003 reprint of *Orientalism,* where he talks about the "the terrible reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics like 'America', 'The West' or 'Islam' and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse, cannot remain as potent as they are, and must be opposed" (Said xxiii).

In Coetzee's "The Vietnam Project", American imperialism can be seen as the tacit representation of a belief in America's right to unilaterally determine the fate of a nation in the Pacific. Aside from the fact that the US invasion of Vietnam was meant to prevent the rise and spread of communism, American interventionist policy in the Pacific can also be viewed as part of a historical consciousness that according to Dirlik sees the Pacific "as an extension of the conquest and consciousness of the Americas" (65). This means that there is a tendency to consider the historical and conceptual understanding of the Pacific as inseparable from that of the Americas. In other words, the Pacific suffers from a belated recognition of its territorial independence. Coetzee in "The Vietnam Project" shows how America seeks to transplant democratic values in Vietnam through the conflation of technological, psychological, and mytho-political means. In *Waiting*, the Empire embodies modern intellect[2] which unilaterally imposes its regimen of truth, meaning, and representation through its adherence to predefined categories of binary divisions: the civilized vs. "the barbarians". Whatever lies outside the borders of the Empire is categorized as "barbarian" and a threat to its territorial integrity and civilizing mantle. According to Clingman, the Empire in *Waiting* is characterized by "*a regime of indifference*" because it "does not permit any difference beyond the differences it constructs; it becomes a total environment, imposing its own version of the uniform. Its time and space are 'homogeneous, empty', and what it requires from its subjects is – in every sense of the word – 'indifference'" (222; emphasis in original). Indifference means that the subjects' agency is cancelled out as their ability to think and act independently is forestalled. Indifference also can imply creating an undifferentiated world within the Empire (Clingman 222). Either way, the Empire is the sole mediator, the author of truth and reality. Authorized agents (such as the Magistrate) act indifferently by virtue of the authorization they have been granted.

In *The Sympathizer*, the question of authoring the truth and representation is raised in the section where the unknown narrator is offered a job as a consultant on a film project named *The Hamlet* – ostensibly a parody of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) – to provide a "human touch" to the film (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 182). The narrator admits that he has taken the job to "effect a change in how we [the Vietnamese] were represented" (Nguyen 234). As "an infiltrator into a work of propaganda" (225), he was spurred by Marx's axiom about representing the working class, that is, "they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 189). But to his dismay, his contribution does not yield

the desired result, because his attempts at enhancing the authenticity of the film were not only negligible but had the obverse effect of making the path of the "behemoth […] smoother as the technological consultant in charge of authenticity" (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 234). By the end of the film, he learns a precious lesson which costs him dearly: those who own the means of production are also in possession of the means of representation (Nguyen 234). The ontological obliteration that was mentioned above bears on the argument here. Physical elimination is accomplished by the military force of imperialism but it requires the representational juggernaut of Hollywood to conceptually render the other insubstantial and nonexistent. Just as the film required the Vietnamese extras (some of whom were to be multiply cast as dead in various scenes), "the military-industrial complex" which had "the technology to obliterate natives" needed such films to function as "the local anesthetic applied to the American mind, preparing him for any minor irritation" (Nguyen 235). Thus, every representational action is a rehearsal of how to metaphorically (through a conceptual reduction) or literally obliterate the natives: "The movie was just a sequel to our war and a prequel to the next one that America was destined to wage" (Nguyen 234).

The film chapters of *The Sympathizer* are in this way comparable to "The Vietnam Project" in *Dusklands* because both work to expose and question the strategies deployed by America's propaganda apparatus. Both works of fiction depict the mental and psychological aspects of warmongering as part and parcel of the modern machinery of war. Whether it is the film industry or mythography, modern imperialism tends to accomplish its subsumptive and exploitative objectives utilizing every means to maintain its domination. As mentioned earlier, this totalizing trend undergirds Western thought, a fact that has been pointed out by Zygmunt Bauman and Jacques Derrida who both argue that "the different and murderous totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century grew from European thought" just as "Hannah Arendt suggests that anti-Semitism and colonial expansion stem from" it (Eaglestone 182). To comprehend and to totalize are two features of Western thought. In other words, "the metaphysics of comprehension is a way of describing how western thought works" (Eaglestone 184). I believe that the reference to Hollywood film-making adventurism in Nguyen's novel and Coetzee's use of mythography in his novella exemplify imperialism's attempts at comprehension and subsumption of the not-I.

Coetzee in "The Vietnam Project" addresses the issue of mythography as a means through which American imperialism relates to the other. To demoralize Vietnamese civilians and combatants, Eugene Dawn devises and implements strategies that are modelled on myths and their interpretative frameworks. Here mythography, like Hollywood productions, is used as a propaganda tool by imperialistic warlords to undermine the "bondedness" of the Vietnamese through fragmentation and individualization (Coetzee, *Dusklands* 24). The purpose is not to offer a counter myth but to propagate a new mythology in order to instill the sense of guilt and shame in the enemy. If Hollywood's blockbusters seek to evoke fear and humiliation in

the enemy and bolster the confidence of US troops, mythography aims at breaking down the morale by working insidiously on the psyche of the subjects. In his report, Dawn explicates that the application of the myth of the father together with random assassinations which had "the *appearance* of selectivity" (Coetzee, *Dusklands* 24; emphasis in original) are successful tactics in breaking down "the community not by attacking the whole but by facing each member with the prospect of an attack on him as an individual with a name and history" (Coetzee, *Dusklands* 23). The father-voice speaks in both abstract and concrete ways: first, through the sound of B-52s (high-altitude bombers) flying overhead and second, through equally devastating means that are broadcast on radio waves: "There is a military air-war with military targets; there is also a political air-war whose purpose is to destroy the enemy's capacity to sustain himself psychically" (Coetzee, *Dusklands* 28). Propaganda either in its film production form or its political strain is a tool in the service of military dominance as demonstrated in both novels.

In *Waiting*, the Empire is depicted as a totalizing force in its nascent stages of development. As such, the Empire in this novel is not as sophisticated and advanced in cajoling or coercing the locals into submission. Its representational strategies are comparatively cruder when it comes to employing tactics for subduing the subjects and justifying the presence of the occupying force and the resort to violence. It is interesting to note that all three works of fiction point to a common practice of imperialism (be it American as in "The Vietnam Project" and *The Sympathizer*, or allegorical and prototypical as in *Waiting*); its predisposition is to dichotomize and conceive the world through a reductive conceptual framework. It can be argued that this penchant for totalization via dichotomous categorization stems from an ideological myopia that draws sustenance from the innate egomania of Western thought.

Coetzee's *Waiting* depicts the circumstances involved in the process of settler colonialism. There is a marked distinction between the passive and docile town dwellers living within the known territory of the Empire and those indigenous populations vilified as "barbarians" roaming and conducting nomadic lifeways outside the boundaries of the Empire. They are the original inhabitants of the land and, through the logic of the Empire, are pitted against the settler population and other "civilized" native people. The "barbarians" are essentially deemed as threats. Their absent presence is reminiscent of the liberty that postcolonial studies has taken with respect to the status of indigenous people in the colonial past. Drawing on Jodi Byrd, the barbarians are an indigenous population which cannot simply be placed in the vertical axis of colonizer-colonized but must be viewed in "horizontal interrelations between different colonized peoples within the same geopolitical space" (63). In the novel, there is a scene in which a horde of fishermen are brought as captives to the frontier town, an incident that enrages the Magistrate. Angered by Colonel Jolls's decision to keep them as prisoners, the Magistrate berates an officer thus:

> Did no one tell him these are fishing people? It is a waste of time bringing them here! You are supposed to help him track down thieves, bandits, invaders of the Empire! Do these people look like a danger to the Empire? […] did no one tell him these prisoners are useless to him? Did no one tell him the difference between fishermen with nets and wild nomad horsemen with bows? Did no one tell him they don't even speak the same language? (Coetzee, *Waiting* 17-18)

In *The Sympathizer*, the Auteur (the director of the film) believes in the importance of authenticity (hence the reason for approaching the unnamed narrator to act as an advisor), yet for him the story and imagination override authenticity (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 169). Although his crew look for actors and extras among Vietnamese refugees, the lead actors are non-Vietnamese: a Korean, an "Asian Everyman" and Filipinos (Nguyen 207). The Vietnamese in the film are as expendable as the film set itself: both have been invoked and repeatedly resurrected to be blown up in the end, an orgasmic *coup de grace*. The either/or logic is also reflected in the casting of the roles among Vietnamese and their corresponding fates. The unnamed narrator explains that no matter under which category (civilians, freedom fighters or the Viet Cong) the Vietnamese extras are cast, they are doomed to die at some point in the film (Nguyen 212). In other words, a good Vietnamese is a dead Vietnamese. The film is the illustration of the *modus vivendi* of US imperialism according to which the subjects, in Gayatri Spivak's words, occupy the space of the Imperialists' self-consolidating other (Spivak 253). The film can also be seen as an ego trip for the arrogant auteur and by extension "the military-industrial complex of which Hollywood was a part" (Nguyen 235), which stokes US egomaniacal fantasies. Likewise, in "The Vietnam Project," Coetzee points to this urge for self-affirmation as Dawn explains the logic of invasion:

> We brought them our pitiable selves, trembling on the edge of inexistence, and asked only that they acknowledge us [….] We landed on the shores of Vietnam clutching our arms and pleading for someone to stand up without flinching to these probes of reality: if you will prove yourself, we shouted, you will prove us too, and we will love you endlessly and shower you with gifts. (Coetzee 17)

As demonstrated above, representation can write the other into or out of existence which means that it is somehow associated with ontological concerns. The means of representation, like the means of production, affect one's status as a living entity and is therefore literally and figuratively a matter of life and death. This is the very conclusion reached by the narrator-confessant of *The Sympathizer* as he mulls over the question of representation: "Not to own the means of production can lead to premature death, but not to own the means

of representation is also a kind of death. For if we are represented by others, might they not, one day, hose our deaths off memory's laminated floor?" (253).

Relying on its technological ascendancy and advanced scientific status, the West takes liberty with the representation of the rest. All three texts are implicitly concerned with representing and relating the rest: in "The Vietnam Project" it is via myths that the West formulates its relation to the other; here mythological and psychological erudition are used as the auxiliary arm of the military to intimidate subjects into inaction and surrender. In Nguyen's novel, the film industry is presented as a similar propaganda machine.

Frames of Representation: Affect and Grievability

Representational acts also contain an affective dimension. This is the point elaborated by Judith Butler in her book *Frames of War* (2009). Her argument in this work is focused on the way affect and moral considerability can be regulated as "a selective and differential framing of violence" (1). For Butler framing involves not only epistemology, but also the question of ontology. In other words, it concerns both apprehending the lives of others as "injurable" or "grievable" as well as what constitutes life. These are inseparable from ethical or affective aspects because the purpose is to shed light on the way representational strategies control and manipulate our responsiveness, which is a condition for moral responsibility:

> The epistemological capacity to apprehend a life is partially dependent on that life being produced according to norms that qualify it as a life or, indeed, as part of life. In this way, the normative production of ontology thus produces the epistemological problem of apprehending a life, and this in turn gives rise to the ethical problem of what it is to acknowledge or, indeed, to guard against injury and violence. (Butler 3)

As Butler argues, norms and modes of recognition can be a function of the precariousness of life. Precarity is dependent on the interpretative frameworks that maximize or minimize our affective responses particularly during strife or wars: "This differential distribution of precarity is at once a material and a perceptual issue, since those whose lives are not 'regarded' as potentially grievable, and hence valuable, are made to bear the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and differential exposure to violence and death" (Butler 25). According to Butler, perception and policy are modalities which have impact on the existential precariousness or ontological status of a population who are considered threats and whose lives are "'lose-able' or can be forfeited, precisely because they are framed as being already lost or forfeited" (Butler 31).

This argument about affect can be applied to a scene in *Waiting* where Colonel Joll has decided to publicly punish the captured "barbarians". The magistrate is horrified by what is about to happen. He is not

the same person as before as he has undergone humiliation and torture by the agents of the Empire for sedition and collaboration with the enemy. The scene at a rudimentary level can be taken as an example of what Butler elucidates about the way the regulation of affect is executed. A number of prisoners are brought to the town square but before the soldiers start beating them, Colonel Joll enacts what we can consider as a way of framing to justify violence and regulate affective responses:

> The Colonel steps forward. Stooping over each prisoner in turn he rubs a handful of dust into his naked back and writes a word with a stick of charcoal. I read the words upside down: *ENEMY*. . . *ENEMY*. . . *ENEMY*. . . *ENEMY*. . . He steps back and folds his hands. At a distance of no more than twenty paces he and I contemplate each other. (Coetzee, *Waiting* 105)

The word "enemy" resonates strongly with people who are protected within the enclosure of the frontier town. By scribbling the word "enemy" on the body of "the barbarians" Colonel Joll seeks to sanction violence and render their lives "ungrievable" because it functions as an interpretative framework that creates a differential distribution of affect. Later, it is the magistrate who counters this logic of differential recognizability of lives when Colonel Joll, holding a hammer, intends to smash the bodies of prisoners. Horrified by the hideous intention and the crowd's indifference, the magistrate hears himself shouting: "'*No! No! No!*'" (Coetzee 106). He accuses the Colonel of "depraving" the people and denounces his action by saying that: "You would not use a hammer on a beast, not on a beast!" (106). He reminds him by pointing to the prisoners that they are "*Men*!", that we are "The great miracle of creation" (107). The magistrate goes to great lengths to undo the exclusionary practices of the Empire's regulatory power by reiterating the precarity of prisoner's lives: "from some blows this miraculous body cannot repair itself!" (107). He not only challenges the Empire's perpetuation of the perception that certain lives are losable but also presents a more inclusive understanding of humanity and its precarity.

Just Memory and the Ethics of Recognition

The differential regulation of affect is in a way comparable to the idea of the ethics of remembering discussed in Nguyen's non-fictional work, *Nothing Ever Dies* (2016). The book is premised on the idea that "all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory" (4). Proceeding from this assumption, the book demonstrates how the industrialization of memory disposes people to remember and disremember differentially. For Nguyen, warfare and memory both have firepower of their own: the former is deployed on the battlefield and the latter used to define and redefine war's identity (13). Put simply, Nguyen wants us to be more inclusive in remembering or forgetting of our own memories and those belonging or relating to the other. The argument is pretty straightforward: he wants us to be wary of a selective remembering

or forgetting which denies the humanity of the other while fully acknowledging our own humanity. By introducing the term "just memory" he demands adherence to an ethics of recognition that says "the other is both human and inhuman, as are we" (Nguyen, *Nothing* 73). He explains that seeing both the humanity and inhumanity in ourselves and others (as both victims and victimizers) can be constructive because

> When we recognize our capacity to do harm, we can reconcile with others who we feel have hurt us. This ethics of recognition might be more of an antidote to war and conflict than remembering others, for if we recognize that we can do damage, then perhaps we would go to war less readily and be more open to reconciliation in its aftermath. Refusing to recognize our capacity to inflict damage does not preclude reconciliation with those who might have injured us, but it does encourage us to seek concessions and confessions from these others, who may themselves want the same from us. (73)

As Nguyen argues, the need for this recognition is what is missing in Butler's discussions on precarity of life. For him Butler tends to consider the other (in this case Iraqis) only as victims or objects of sympathy and not as subjects. Needless to say, Butler's book concerns the war on terror as it was written in response to the US and allied forces invasion of Iraq. However, her argument can also be extended to the Vietnam war because the Vietnamese (like the Iraqis) are also guilty of committing war atrocities on their fellow-country men. This necessitates viewing the other as subjects who are also capable of inflicting suffering on others:

> Iraqis killed and tortured one another as well, and regardless of American culpability in creating the conditions for such warfare, the responsibility for such killing and torturing falls on those Iraqis who committed the acts. To be a subject, rather than to be an other, means that one can be guilty, and such guilt can be and should be examined as fully as Western guilt. (Butler 76)

Despite Nguyen's objection to Butler's argument, I think he fails to notice that Butler, by reminding us of the precariousness of life "as a shared condition of human life" (13), is also reiterating the need for reciprocation and mutual recognition which leads to an awareness of one's own position of liminality.

I believe that both *Waiting* and *The Sympathizer* offer critical reflections on the liminal stage as a precondition for a kind of moral transformation. Focusing on the function of ghosts in *The Sympathizer*, Bosman argues that "Nguyen uses the indeterminacies associated with spectres in *The Sympathizer* to trouble the simple binaries between aggressor and victim, and to ultimately emphasise the liminality of his unnamed first-person narrator" (4). Bosman offers a reading based on Nguyen's model of ethical memory expounded above. He believes that the novel can be interpreted against the backdrop of *Nothing Ever Dies*. For Bosman the appearance of the spectres of the two men (the crapulent major and Sonny) killed by the unnamed narrator

cannot be regarded as a demand for punishment or vengeance but must be seen in light of just memory. Throughout the interrogation and psychological torture which the narrator undergoes in the North Vietnamese prison camp, the spectres' presence and heckling intensify his agonies. However, their harassment comes to an abrupt end immediately after the narrator remembers what he has forgotten and what was missing from his confession: the rape of the Vietnamese girl by police officers in his presence and supervised by the crapulent major. According to Bosman this marks an ethical moment because it is the acknowledgement of "an unrecognized history":

> It is revealed that the narrator failed to recall that the crapulent major was one of the men who orchestrated the heinous rape. This reveals the dangers inherent in selective amnesia. The narrator has forgotten the episode entirely in order not to have to consider his own role in the event. (9)

Nguyen's protagonist realizes that he is being punished not for what he has done but for what he has not done, i.e., "nothing". He did not interfere with the rape and consequently failed to save the girl for fear of blowing his cover. The ghosts are catalysts that bring about the awareness of liminality for the protagonist because

> they represent the twin axes of aggressor and victim in Nguyen's model of just memory. They embody the ethical imperatives of remembering the suffering of the self and the transgressions of the other *as well as the suffering of the other and the transgressions of the self* […]. Nguyen uses them to embody ethical imperatives that demand the narrator acknowledge his own ability to inflict harm. (Bosman 10; emphasis in original)

A rather similar scenario unfolds in *Waiting*, where the unnamed Magistrate is brought to a realization about his complicity in the atrocities of the Empire after he becomes acquainted with "the barbarian" girl. 'Doing nothing' is also a moral lapse for which Coetzee's Magistrate can be held accountable. The Magistrate's vacillation between ignoring and heeding the painful cries of the prisoners tortured in the granary is the common motif in the novel. Early in the story he tends to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to what is happening right under his nose. His initial reaction is to deny or pretend not to hear them: "Of the screaming which people afterwards claim to have heard coming from the granary, I hear nothing" (Coetzee, *Waiting* 4-5). His denials or refusals suggest a kind self-induced oblivion. However, once he encounters "the barbarian girl" and becomes engrossed in her narrative of the dark chamber (of torture), he is unable to evade the truth about himself. He realizes that he is as much culpable as others who inflict severe pain on prisoners: "The distance between myself and her torturers, I realize, is negligible" (Coetzee, *Waiting* 27). Long before this awareness blossoms into its fullest present form, the Magistrate had acknowledged it: "who am I to assert my distance from him? I drink with him, I eat with him, I show him the sights, I afford him every assistance as

his letter of commission requests, and more" (Coetzee, *Waiting* 5-6). This is only a casual acknowledgment of his similarity to Colonel Joll, as it does not evince any degree of remorse or shame. His resemblance to him can be accounted for in terms of their imperial agency and being its functionaries: "The Empire does not require that its servants love each other, merely that they perform their duty" (Coetzee, *Waiting* 6).

A thematic point of convergence emerges once the two nameless protagonists of *Waiting* and *The Sympathizer* undergo mental and corporeal punishment at the behest of their superiors which enlighten them about their inadequate moral responsibility. In Coetzee's novel, this moral awakening kicks in after the Magistrate undergoes bodily torture and social humiliation by the agents of the very Empire he serves. It is as if this moral consciousness closes in on him first vicariously then corporeally as he is exposed to pain and shame in private and public. It is at this point that he comes to identify himself as an outsider (similar to the barbarian girl) as he becomes more practically conscious of the very injustice of colonialism, a fact that he had admitted grudgingly before. As a result, his circles of compassion widen to embrace others indiscriminately, hence his interference with the public punishment of the captives described earlier. While this consciousness is forced on Nguyen's protagonist through mental agonies, Coetzee's pleasure-seeking and complacent Magistrate needs to go through a process in which the comforts of his life are not only stripped away but are replaced by bodily pain. The same body that was the conduit of pleasure becomes the site of anguish and suffering. Thinking about the misery of his life in custody, the Magistrate wonders about how the body is targeted by torturers:

> They were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well, which very soon forgets them when its head is gripped and a pipe is pushed down its gullet and pints of salt water are poured into it till it coughs and retches and flails and voids itself. (Coetzee, *Waiting* 115)

While Butler believes that "affect is never merely our own" in that it is "communicated from elsewhere" (50), the two examples from the novels demonstrate that a body in pain tends to display a more acute awareness of the precarity of life. Pain can be destructive, demoralizing, and unnerving but it can also be binding and bonding as it functions as a reminder of the injurability of life. Bodies in pain have a wider ambit of moral considerations. This is another takeaway of comparing the two novels.

A Peep Behind the Scenes

In this final section and before wrapping up my argument, I would like to point to the manner in which the three works of fiction give us a peek behind the curtains of imperialism's *modus vivendi*. In this, the three fictional works are comparable to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). In a way these three texts are

attempts at writing back to the center. They do not necessarily give voice to the disenfranchised but illuminate the inner workings of Empire to justify its existence and operation. Taking *Heart of Darkness* as the palimpsest of these novels, one common theme emerges that binds them together: despite Empire's claims to rationality and civilization its mode of existence is predicated on the projection of its inner evil on others. In Simon During's words, Conrad's novella "shows that the otherness of the primitive is precisely 'our' otherness — where that 'our' indicates, however tentatively, a civilized Eurocentric community" (36). Similarly, Coetzee's *Waiting* arguably extends Constantine P. Cavafy's poem of the same title by demonstrating how the projection of inner demons constitutes the cornerstone of empire's policy of representation.[3] The Magistrate, like Conrad's Marlow, inadvertently becomes privy to the demonization of 'the other' through which the empire maintains its endless cycle of manipulation and repression. "The Vietnam Project" is also a commentary on the dehumanization of the Vietnamese represented by the abstraction of charts and figures. Eugene Dawn's irrational and threatening treatment of his own son pulls the rug from under his project of mythography which casts the Vietnamese in a father-son relationship with the Americans: the father is the menacing egomaniac who, driven to madness and insensibility, is bent on the destruction of his own son.

And finally, in framing the interpretative and representational frames of Empire, the stories reveal overlaps as well. This has created the impression of *mise en abyme*, the formal technique that refers to the embedding of an image or narrative within another narrative. The technique is utilized most clearly in *The Sympathizer* where the chapters concerning the production of the film, *The Hamlet*, is a parodic recontextualization of Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* which denaturalizes the representation of the Vietnam War through the interventionist and interpolative commentaries of the unnamed narrator. *Apocalypse Now* is a postmodern reworking of *Heart of Darkness*, in which the disparities between truth and lie as well as representation and reality are untenable. For During, *Apocalypse Now* is "the representation of a representation of a representation" (37) as the battle scenes were shot using real troops and artillery. That is why making films and making war becomes indistinguishable: "The film is enabled by acts of neo-imperialist war: it cannot disengage itself from what it represents" (During 37). Through recontextualizing the film's production process, Nguyen's novel writes back to this triple monopolization of representation. The unsuccessful redressive actions of the nameless narrator indicate the Third World's powerlessness vis-à-vis the advanced technology of the West. Though not exactly to the same degree of thematic concern, both of Coetzee's works are postcolonial-postmodern narratives of colonial men who like their predecessor, Kurtz, go wrong and thus mad. In *Dusklands*, Dawn's fascination with the pictures of torture represents his moral degeneracy which precipitates his fall into savagery and mental breakdown as he vicariously forays into the hinterlands of imperialism. In *Waiting*, The Magistrate and Colonel Joll, as imperial emissaries, each demonstrate colonial man's susceptibility to degeneration, the latter irremediably, the former transiently.

In my concluding remarks, I wish to address specifically the relevance between the comparative analysis conducted here and the focus of this special issue on Transpacific literature. Except for Coetzee's *Waiting*, which due to its allegorical nature cannot be historically, spatially or geographically pinned down and, for the same reason, can be universally and perennially read against the backdrop of imperialism in present and past times, the other two works deal with American adventurism in modern times. As demonstrated above, both Coetzee's and Nguyen's concern is to illustrate how America's attempts at maintaining global supremacy necessitate the deployment of military, cultural, and psychological mechanisms. In this way Coetzee and Nguyen, each from their unique historical vantagepoint, work to critique US hegemony through their fiction.

Notes

1. See "Kafka in Saigon: *The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen" by Michael Williams, "Gesturing beyond the Frames: Post-apocalyptic Sentiments in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*" by Yu-yen Liu, and "Between 'I' and 'We': Viet Thanh Nguyen's Interethnic Multitudes" by Caroline Rody.

2. For a more detailed explication of this point see "The Empire as the Embodiment of Modern Intellect: A Critical Reading of Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* through Levinas" by Mahdi Teimouri.

3. The closing lines of the poem correspond to the theme of the novel:
Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.
And some people have arrived from the frontiers,
and said that there are no barbarians anymore.
And now, what will become of us without barbarians?
Those people were some sort of a solution.

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