

TORTURED IMAGES IN VIET THANH NGUYEN'S *THE SYMPATHIZER* & THE WAR ON TERROR

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“We do not want pain. We do not torture”: So says the doctor at the Vietnamese re-education camp where the narrator finds himself in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s Pulitzer Prize-winning 2015 novel *The Sympathizer* (329). Throughout the novel, the unnamed main character’s experiences directly counter this statement, as he tortures at least two individuals and witnesses the torture of a third as part of his role in the Military Police’s Special Branch of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, supervised by US interrogation advisers. Secretly a spy for the communist North Vietnamese, the narrator himself is later punished via torture at the re-education camp for not stepping in to prevent the torture of other North Vietnamese agents. The novel’s scenes of torture correspond with accounts of US Central Intelligence Agency interrogation in South Vietnam, as well as data surrounding practices in postwar re-education camps in Vietnam (US Dept. of State 1979, 545–46). Through the text’s rendering of violence, Nguyen questions the textually- and historically-stated objectives of torture as a tool of war, effectively offering a larger critique of US interrogation practices. While readers follow the narrator across national borders, the novel’s scenes of torture create a heatmap of

US influence, reconstituting imperialism and the expenditures of US exceptionalism via the manipulation of the pain of Brown bodies.

The United States has justified actions constituting torture (such as those that fall under the guise of “enhanced interrogation techniques”) as effective means of gaining information, despite overwhelming evidence undermining the credibility of information gleaned from torture (Payne 2008, 97; Mayer 2011, 149; SSCI 2014, 8; Baron 2018, 189). Nguyen’s characters suggest additional uses for torture, including the ironic idea that being subjected to torture can reaffirm or influence ethical behavior. At the re-education camp, the narrator is subject to forced confession, electric shock, physical beatings, light and sound torture, and other manipulations of pain to help lead him back to the communist cause and the “realization” that “Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom” (Nguyen 2015, 360). To his re-education camp captors, including a former friend, the narrator is at once made sick and saved. Readers know, however, that this reeducation fails. As the novel ends, the first-person narration shifts into an abstract and ambiguous second-person plural “we,” making independence and freedom binary terms and blurring the line between the “good” and “bad” torture or military powers.¹

In *The Sympathizer*, torture functions as both punishment and rehabilitation. This duality and the cyclical experience for the perpetrator-turned-victim has implications for the way we think about “justified” torture. What, for instance, differentiates recuperative torture from punitive torture? If we follow the reeducators, the answer lies not in the action, but in its direction. Recuperative torture in the novel, then, is no longer a rights violation or potential crime against humanity, but rather, a selective mechanism of state power. While Nguyen stages this drama during the US war in Vietnam, these self-serving definitions of torture echo in contemporary US interrogation and detention in the War on Terror. Prescribing torture to encourage moral behavior and preserve national security is in line with the George W. Bush and Barack H. Obama administrations’ discussions of terrorist interrogations.

In its complex rendering of torture and state power, *The Sympathizer* is Janus-faced: turned toward the past, through consistently problematic narratives of the Vietnam War and Southeast Asians, and facing the present, refracting current US practice and rhetoric of interrogating Arab detainees during the War on Terror. Each framing of US enemies (and allies) depends upon a blurring of nationality

or allegiance that superimposes racist, colonial stereotypes on ostensibly Brown bodies. I begin this article by tracing an abbreviated history of US torture practices as they have been outlined in military training manuals, with a focus on the codification of torture tactics in the US war in Vietnam, particularly through the Phoenix Program. I then analogize these with the military actions of Nguyen's narrator. Lastly, I recast the novel in conversation with the 2004 release of the Abu Ghraib photographs and the Bush administration's attempts to legalize torture qua "enhanced interrogation techniques." As a fictional archive of torture during the Vietnam War, *The Sympathizer* presents an American imaginary that is redefined by and through acts of torture. Nguyen's novel is a case study for a methodological analytic of torture as well as a sociopolitical critique of torture as a temporally displaced act that makes legible the continuing mechanisms of an imperialist, racist US state.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF US TORTURE PRACTICE

As much rich scholarship has demonstrated, the US government has long authorized or minimized its own use of torture while critiquing other abusive states. This hypocritical stance condones US violence seemingly because of the state's supposed good intentions and allows the US to maintain a façade of itself as the utmost protector of human rights. In the United States, the development of state-sanctioned torture corresponds with broader national legacies of racialized violence in domestic and global arenas, encompassing state and police injuries, mass detention and incarceration, and the genocide and displacement of Indigenous peoples. Such contradictory analogy between what the state professes and what it does is not unique to torture. Mahmood Mamdani, for instance, argues that the US promotes narratives of the War on Terror as a humanitarian endeavor to obscure US military intervention and support in the Middle East and make palatable the ongoing violence (2004, 253). Yén Lê Espiritu argues that a similar forced misremembering preconditions nostalgia for a hospitable prewar United States, which ignores consistent state violence against bodies of color (2014, 181). Research on torture does not reinvent, but rather syncs and adds to movements evidencing, legislating, and possibly truncating a history of forgetting US state violence.

Yet, torture does have a unique place among this history of violence. While many of the above acts are often public secrets (i.e.,

well known but infrequently and insufficiently addressed by the state), torture is perhaps better characterized as a state lie, a historically common tool that the state cloaks in a gaslight narrative. Despite its fairly consistent use throughout the history of colonization of North America and today's United States, accusations of torture are met with shock and disavowal by many military and government officials. These "revelations" about the use of torture are used performatively to distance the state and its figureheads from the actions of the torturers: a "few bad apples" (Del Rosso 2015, 23). When the state does admit to torture, it is as a tool for interrogation and the maintenance of national security (McCoy 2012, 46; Case 2018, 89). In those instances, victims of state-sanctioned torture become antithetical to the state. Depending on the framing of the event, then, torture perpetrators and victims both become spectacular exceptions, in a move that serves to protect so-called "American" ethics and legitimize white supremacist racial Othering. Whether surprised by or admitting to torture, the state remains protector even as it enacts harm (Davis and Mendieta 2005, 78). Iterative revelations, distancing, and apologetics on behalf of the state give the illusion of progress and commitment to human rights, while sustained official uses of torture are integral to the US settler-colonialism and imperialism.

What we might think of as modern US state-sanctioned torture as a military and political tool emerges with the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. The US government initiated new research into effective forms of interrogation and coercion in the late 1940s and early 1950s following a series of highly mediated arrests in Eastern Europe (Otterman 2007, 18; McCoy 2012, 17; Leo and Koenig 2018, 148). Prevailing narratives suggested that those arrested had given false forced confessions. These "confessions" were at once threats and promising tools for US officials, who subsequently guided their research toward mind control and other interrogation techniques, drawing upon work conducted by former Nazi officials as well as leading international psychiatrists, neurologists, and behavioral researchers (Otterman 2007, 18–28; McCoy 2012, 56). The military and state prioritized medical, often eugenic, knowledge in order to prepare US soldiers and operatives to fend off psychological torture themselves and use it against others.

Throughout the 1950s, the US military and CIA each tested methods of psychological and physical torture on enemy combatants, US soldiers, and civilian personnel (Otterman 2007, 26–32; McCoy

2012, 20). Their research resulted in various covert projects, secret sites, schools of resistance training, and several reports and manuals. Among the most influential of these were the US Air Force's development of the SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape) program in August 1955 and the CIA's *KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation* manual of July 1963 (McCoy 2012, 61, 70). Together, SERE and the *KUBARK* codified US practices of interrogation. They also became the bases for later work, including the CIA's Phoenix Program during the war in Vietnam and the US Army's Project X, which used information gained from the Phoenix Program to inform the training of anti-Communist militants in Central and South America and possibly the Philippines from 1966 to 1991 (McCoy 2006, 71; Holden 2011, 336–40). The United States' forays into torture as a state-sanctioned tool (though often clandestine) thus implicated a range of epistemological approaches, privileging the knowledge of medical and military professionals.

While organized by different government agencies or branches of the military, the above programs were not wholly discrete. Their symbiosis and collaborative development are especially evident within the Phoenix Program. The program coalesced out of several distinct counterintelligence and combat plans run by the CIA in conjunction with the South Vietnamese National Police and its own Central Intelligence Organization (Holden 2011, 335; McCoy 2012 88–89; Shaw 2016, 697). Working alongside and under the guidance of the American CIA, the latter groups created interrogation centers and units across South Vietnam that practiced counterterror procedures. Together they adopted a method of terror through torture, assassinations, and psychological distress comparable—according to the CIA—to those used by their communist and nationalist “Viet Cong” enemy combatants² located in South Vietnam (McCoy 2012, 88–89; Shaw 2016, 698). In practice, the Phoenix Program became a method of rounding up, torturing, and summarily executing those suspected of being Viet Cong and communist sympathizers, many of whom were likely civilians (McCoy 2012, 95; Shaw 2016, 698). Nguyen's narrator, of course, would have been privy to these operations, as well as vulnerable to them as a “sympathizer” himself.

The program operated through counterterror teams, later renamed Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs) which worked on behalf of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN, or the South Vietnamese Army) to identify Viet Cong sympathizers or informants. In his examination of the legacies of the Phoenix Program,

Ian G. R. Shaw writes that there were approximately 4,000 teams “of a dozen or so members. . . . chosen, trained, and paid for by the CIA” (2016, 697). The United States turned full control of the program over to the South Vietnamese National Police in 1969 (McCoy 2012, 93), a move which later US officials used to disabuse themselves of the illegal and inhumane practices that took place. When the program came under scrutiny during investigations by the House of Representatives’ Operations Subcommittee in 1970 and again when former senior CIA field operative William Colby was being confirmed as the new Director of the CIA in 1973, South Vietnamese control became one major excuse for the deaths of between 20,587 and 80,000 people suspected to be “Viet Cong” informants or sympathizers (Otterman 2007, 71; Holden 2011, 335; McCoy 2012, 98; Shaw 2016, 697).

Specific torture tactics as well as tangled, inefficient lines of command (and blame) thread the Phoenix Program throughout the US war in Vietnam and the 2003 US-Iraq war. Historian Alfred W. McCoy writes that “it seems that the CIA revived at least three key attributes of its Vietnam-era Phoenix program to prosecute its clandestine war in Iraq—torture, assassination, and native mercenaries” (2012, 113). Aside from blaming South Vietnamese operatives (Shaw 2016, 697)—who were often made to conduct the torture under US direction or observation (McCoy 2012, 89), US officials have defended their actions in Vietnam, and later in Iraq and at Guantánamo Bay, through two main methods: questioning what constitutes “torture” (Paust 2011, 286, 297; Case 2018, 92; Waldron 2018, 260–68) or projecting institutionalized violence onto the actions of so-called aberrant groups of deviant agents (Hooks and Mosher 2005, 1632; Donnelly-Cole 2006; Razack 2012, 218). The latter defensive strategy of deflecting the crimes of the state onto “a few bad apples” became the precedent for the Bush and Obama administrations’ discussions of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal (Jaffer and Singh 2007, 1; Forsythe 2011, 132; McCoy 2012, 16).³ This differs from the approach of the Donald J. Trump administration which was vocal about attempts to redefine torture and legalize specific practices such as waterboarding (Cox 2018, 489, 502).

In the reading of Nguyen’s book that follows, I focus on how equivocating about torture allows characters to use it as a screen to manipulate political and moral authority. I rely on Rebecca Gordon’s legal definition of torture: “the intentional infliction of severe mental or physical suffering by an official or agent of a political entity”

(2014, 25), which often serves as a means of gathering information, punishment, expressing power and superiority, and forcing rehabilitation. Nguyen's narrator takes an active or indirect role in the torture of at least three people, repeatedly discusses his "interrogation course" with his US trainer Claude (2015, 163, 332), acts as an adviser to a fictional filmed torture scene (159–65), and himself becomes a torture victim while held at a re-education camp. The narrator's multiple roles offer prismatic views on torture which inform the novel's multivalent critique.

PICTURING ABU GHRAIB THROUGH *THE SYMPATHIZER*

The narrative format of *The Sympathizer* encourages diachronic, or historical, readings, as it weaves together several temporally-divergent plots. After the first two-thirds of Nguyen's book, the unnamed narrator discloses that everything up to that point has been a forced confession written to "the Commandant." Thus far, the book-as-confession has detailed the narrator's escape during the Fall of Saigon, his refugee life in California, and his eventual return to Vietnam under the orders of the South Vietnamese General. When the "confession" catches up to the narrator's time in the re-education camp (so that he is writing in the narrative "now"), the story switches to tracking the narrator's lived experience as he is tortured and later released from the camp (Nguyen 2015, 296). The novel ends with the narrator and his friend Bon's second attempt to flee Vietnam, this time en masse with what the media termed "boat people." For reader access, I begin this section with a more detailed summary of Nguyen's novel before reading a specific scene using torture as an analytic.

The novel/confession opens as the narrator and Bon flee Saigon with an officer of the South Vietnamese Army known only as "the General." As a refugee in California, the narrator takes a minor desk job at a university and becomes a cultural consultant for a fictionalized version of *Apocalypse Now* (1979), all while he and Bon still work covertly with the General to return to Vietnam and resume the fight against communism. While the narrator poses in all of his daily life as a former captain of the South Vietnamese Army, he continually reports in code to Man, his communist handler and he and Bon's childhood friend. This ostensibly "true" identity as a double agent for the communist regime is unsettled by the narrator's further secret sympathy for the causes of Bon and the General, who are unaware of his allegiance to the communist party. Thus

entangled, the narrator's true sympathies are unclear to everyone, including himself.

Throughout the text, the narrator struggles to balance his various roles as a spy for the communist North Vietnamese, continued secret operative for the dissolved South Vietnamese Army, and Vietnamese refugee in the United States. In California, the General tasks the narrator and Bon with carrying out operations by killing other operatives and returning to Vietnam to support a coup to take back the country and reinstall American aid (Nguyen 2015, 132–33). The narrator returns to Vietnam against Man's orders because he feels responsible for getting Bon involved in the mission and wants to protect him (221, 268). After the rest of their return party are killed, Bon and the narrator are captured by the ruling communist forces and taken to a re-education camp where they are subject to hard manual labor, torture, and forced confessions.

The narrator and the Commandant discuss his confession—the book's first 295 pages, the writing of which is a (small) reprieve granted in faith to him by the “commissar,” the “faceless” superior officer of the camp who is later revealed to be Man (Nguyen 2015, 298, 311). Together with a group of doctors and security officers, commissar Man brings the narrator from his cell to use torture as a means of getting him to admit to a truth that Man says is missing from the forced confession. After a series of torture sessions, the narrator testifies to witnessing the torture and gang rape of a female communist agent in 1972, alluded to but not fully described throughout the written confession (9, 335). The narrator's torture and detention are revealed to be his punishment for not intervening in crimes committed by the South Vietnamese Army against communist agents. Specifically, Man and the Commandant charge him for three crimes: being a bystander to that rape and acting as the main torturer of two other captives of the South Vietnamese Army, one involving a leader of a terrorist cell, who eventually commits suicide, and the second, a Bru Montagnard man⁴ who also dies during the act of torture (127). Man charges the narrator repeatedly to remember, telling him, “You indeed did nothing. That is the crime that you must acknowledge and to which you must confess” (324). After this tortured testimony, Man helps the narrator and Bon escape Saigon by sea, but the novel ends with their journey uncompleted.

The changing roles of the narrator—as a soldier of the South Vietnamese Army trained by US forces, a communist spy, a Vietnamese American refugee, and re-education camp detainee—are

made symbiotic through his participation in torture as perpetrator, victim, and witness. Torture is used to make the narrator remember the crimes he committed and witnessed as an agent for the South Vietnamese Army and, ulteriorly, to recall his and Man's beliefs in Ho Chi Minh's statement that "nothing is more precious than independence and freedom" (Nguyen 2015, 360). Torture bleeds across his identities. It is only through these acts of torture that the narrator is able to hold himself accountable for the violence he has committed, which ultimately destroys him physically and verbally. Meta-narratively, *The Sympathizer* itself also pushes back against a habit of strategic forgetting, holding the United States accountable for state-sanctioned violence that, though periodically acknowledged, does not end.

In both the book's plot and metanarrative, Nguyen uses torture as a memory device. Torture enables the remembering and critique of continuing US imperialist torture practices, for both the narrator and the reader. Nguyen's novel makes visible the effects of torture in the structure of the text and utilizes torture's (questionable) effects on memory as a means of punishing and, according to the Commandant, rehabilitating the narrator and the US public (Tanner 1994, 35–37; Gorman and Zakowski 2018). Resultantly, the fictionalized remembered torture of the novel serves as a reminder of past US-inflicted trauma as well as a caution to address that which continues in Guantánamo Bay and other facets of the War on Terror today.

Recollections of torture emerge fluidly throughout the narrator's confession, interspersing, but rarely disrupting, the narrative. Subtle references to pain or morality steer the narrator from conversations about his refugee life to memories of himself as torturer or accomplice. Upon learning that the General suspected a spy within the ranks, the narrator's story digresses to the need to ask his colleague-turned-lover Sofia Mori to accompany him on a date (Nguyen 2015, 71–74), from there to his first sexual experience (with a squid later eaten for dinner) years earlier (75–77), and then to a brief recounting of tortures he had witnessed. The narrator connects his sexual initiation to these traumatic memories by comparing the taboos of sex and violence, saying, "Some will undoubtedly find this episode obscene. Not I! Massacre is obscene. Torture is obscene. Three million dead is obscene. Masturbation, even with an admittedly non-consensual squid? Not so much" (77). In this metacommentary, the narrator acknowledges the reader of his confession—and perhaps

Nguyen acknowledges the reader of his novel—and highlights the “episodic” nature of his narration.

Significantly, this reflection leads the narrator to recall his own experiences witnessing torture, represented not as meta-narrated “episodes,” but as traumatically triggered memories. The narrator moves, then, from fear of his potential impending discovery and death, to sex, and finally, torture. Indeed, two out of the three instances of torture that the narrator recollects throughout the text are sexual in nature. The narrator belies the connection between sex and violence in a move that likely is less based on a Freudian self-analysis than on an awareness of how sexual humiliation is a common torture tool, a connection Nguyen’s readers likely make via the graphic Abu Ghraib photographs (Tétreault 2006; Puar 2007, 110–12; Richter-Montpetit 2014, 56; Sontag 2004; Pérez 2015, 66–76; Case 2018).

Humiliation on the basis of sexual “perversion” specifically resonates in *The Sympathizer* in the narrator’s torture of “the Watchman,” an alleged terrorist responsible for attacks “that had killed a few thousand and terrorized Saigon” (Nguyen 2015, 181). The narrator utilizes music torture, imposed disorientation of time, muted colors, forced pre-written confessions, and sexual humiliation as a means of inducing the Watchman to give up more information about his organization (179–86), all of which are suggested interrogation tactics in the *KUBARK* (1963, 45, 86–87).

In the novel, the narrator shows the Watchman a pre-written criminal confession in which the latter also “admits” his homosexuality. The Watchman is infuriated and insulted, saying that the suggestion that he would betray his family and organization for the love of a man would insult them, calling it “lies,” “filth,” and “dirty” (Nguyen 2015, 184). The confession is a threat: if the Watchman speaks to the interrogators, it will be kept secret; if not, its contents would destroy his reputation and family’s memory of him. The ensuing argument between the narrator and the Watchman blurs the lines between who is speaking to whom. Thus far in the scene, the dialogue between the two men has occurred within one paragraph, distinguished from the narrator’s metanarrative to the Commandant by speech tags such as “I corrected” or “he said,” rather than by quotation marks. Following an extended paragraph tracking the increased anger of the Watchman, Nguyen’s narrator breaks up the page:

Then no one will care when we publish it in the newspapers along with your lover's confession and intimate photographs of the two of you.

You will never get me in such a photograph. (Nguyen 2015, 184)

Is the second statement the Watchman's response to the narrator, a pathetic defense that will be quickly refuted by the CIA's "remarkable talents with hypnosis and drugs" (184)?⁵ Or is it a fierce resistance from Nguyen's narrator, now detained victim, reflecting back on his role as torturer in his "confession" to the Commandant? The ambiguity of who is speaking in the second statement—if the Watchman speaks to the narrator or the narrator speaks to the Commandant or, in some ways, both—points again to the dual nature of the text and signals the fraught optics of torture.

Photographs not only make evident the act of torture; they also threaten future harm (as the Watchman fears here). Historically, the torturer is often absent or obscured in evidentiary photographs, hindering culpability and reparations, which is partly why exceptions like the documentation of My Lai, Abu Ghraib, and other atrocities are so extraordinary. Like the Watchman, the narrator-as-detainee has no ability to restrict access to his body. His body cannot testify to his own truth. It becomes instead a screen that bears witness to the crimes of others.

Reviewing the moment when the Watchman reads his fictional forced confession from surveillance tapes, the narrator reflects upon this inability to bear witness, telling the Commandant: "The Watchman could not represent himself; I had represented him" (Nguyen 2015, 185). The line rewrites the quotation from Karl Marx with which Edward Said opens *Orientalism*: "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (1978, 8). In so doing, the narrator calls attention to the racial Othering occurring between the Watchman and the torturers, as well as the liminal position he occupies between them, as a mixed-race man whose mother was Vietnamese and father was French, neither fully colonizer nor colonized, both sympathizer and enemy combatant (Nguyen 2015, 19). The narrator is, as he tells us, "a man of two faces" (1) and is therefore seen as neither wholly Southeast Asian nor wholly white European. Ironically, then, his "representation" of the Watchman reminds readers that the narrator himself cannot be represented (Prabhu 2018, 389). Again, the narrator's torture of others functions as a parallel to his detention, but here the mirror is skewed. The narrator's ability to

write his own confession, though coerced, appears to be the “privilege” that the Commandant assures him it is (Nguyen 2015, 298).

The text’s treatment of sexual humiliation and harassment overtly recalls the photographs and documents from Abu Ghraib. The Abu Ghraib scandal got public attention following CBS’s *60 Minutes* April 28, 2004, broadcasting sixteen of the 1,600 recovered photographs taken by members of the 372nd Military Police Company at the Abu Ghraib prison and detention center, outside of Bagram, Iraq (Hersh 2004; McCoy 2012, 16; Ordower 2018, 320–21). The images are shocking in their gruesome and sensationalized nature. They depict detainees in positions of bodily violence: hanging by their hands and feet; their arms outstretched and connected to electric currents; hooded; flinching in fear from military dogs mid-bark; covered in female undergarments; smeared with human waste; formed in naked human “pyramids”; performing and simulating sex acts by themselves or with other prisoners; and throughout, being observed by US guards acting as directors and nonchalant spectators (Hersh 2004; McCoy 2012, 160–61, 306n4; Case 2018, 94).⁶

The images fomented public and political suspicion about US actions in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the treatment of detainees in CIA sites globally, including Guantánamo Bay. The debate culminated in part in various investigations and the Senate Select Committee’s investigation into CIA Interrogation and Detention Practices. The Committee’s report, partially declassified and released publicly in 2014, cited CIA and military intelligence as having consistently implemented interrogation tactics that constituted cruel, inhumane, and degrading punishment and torture, which at times effected the deaths of prisoners (SSCI 2014, 4). These “enhanced interrogation techniques,” as they were framed by the Bush administration (McCoy 2012, 38), were not effective in retrieving accurate information (SSCI 2014, 2). By renaming the actions of military personnel and contractors, the United States sought to obfuscate the lines of culpability, practicing what Jordan J. Paust (2011) calls “shifting definitions of ‘torture’ as if the manifest illegality of its approved interrogation techniques could be defined away” (284). As with Phoenix, lower-ranking parties were held responsible for these actions, reinforcing a narrative of isolated abuse, and forgiving, if not denying, systemic and ordered practices of torture, inhumane detention, and execution (Forsythe 2011, 132).

Beyond the intended shame of the poses and acts exhibited in the photographs, some scholars and journalists have suggested that

the images themselves were intended as forms of torture. Speaking about the possibility of the photographs as torture, Elissa Marder draws upon journalist and author Seymour M. Hersh's *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* to critique the backfiring of this potential plan (2012, 107). Hersh notes that "It was thought some prisoners would do anything—including spying on their associates—to avoid shameful dissemination of the shameful photos to family and friends" (quoted in Marder 2012, 106). This assumption of shame is predicated upon race-based rhetoric that deems Arab, and, for that matter, all racially Brown victims, homophobic and transphobic (Puar 2007, 110–12; Pérez 2015, 68, 74). This includes the assumption "among neoconservatives in the Bush administration that 'Arabs are particularly vulnerable to sexual humiliation'" (McCoy 2012, 158). Acts of sexual harassment and humiliation against detainee bodies include forcing men to wear women's underwear on their heads, being mocked for one's presumed or false sexual preferences, made to simulate or perform sexual acts with other detainees or guards, the insulting and threatening of family members, and forced nudity, among others (Hooks and Mosher 2005, 1629; Tétreault 2006; McCoy 2012, 104, 158).

In twisted logic, this move to torture based on supposedly deviant sexual behavior reaffirms the moral superiority of American torturers, again assigning culpability to the torture victims. This racialized moral frame corresponds with Jasbir Puar's (2007) writing on the Muslim-qua-terrorist versus the white militarized savior who is, if not homosexual himself, then accepting of diverse sexual orientations. Puar writes that "reinforcing a homogeneous notion of Muslim sexual repression vis-à-vis homosexuality and the notion of modesty works to resituate the United States, in contrast, as a place free of such sexual constraints, thus confirming the now-liberated status of the formerly repressed diasporic Muslim" (2007, 92). Discussing these images alongside US racialized practices of mourning, Judith Butler agrees that the use of photographs coupled with such sexual abuse was an intentional machination, writing "it is clear that they were used to blackmail those depicted with the threat that their families would see their humiliation and shame, especially sexual shame" (2009, 85). Given that the use of sexualized torture practices was included in field manuals throughout the Vietnam War, including in the abovementioned *KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation* manual (Hooks and Mosher 2005, 1636), the images shock not because they are categorically un-American. Rather, the images

shock because they illuminate US racial sexualization of torture as a consistent practice instead of an exception.

The photographs at Abu Ghraib and the fictitious photograph of the Watchman thus subscribe to and propagate problematic and conflicting narratives of US violent prejudice on the one hand and moral liberalism on the other. In casting Arab and Vietnamese bodies in the photographed performances, the images seek to villainize Brown bodies by forcing them into roles of immoral deviance (Puar 2007, 87). Capturing the image, then, ostensibly functions as a form of evidence for the United States, “proving” the malevolence of the photographed. Melanie Richter-Montpetit explains: “The performance of torture along a misogynist, homophobic and transphobic script [which] casts the tortured bodies as racially queer; simultaneously sexually repressed and perverted, the torture script gives rise to the homophobic misogynist fundamentalist and implicitly constructs the USA as exceptionally feminist and gay-friendly” (2014, 56). Although fictional and earlier in time, the photograph of the Watchman recalls an Orientalist screen that reaffirms the dichotomy of the (white) US forces and the racial Other: the nude, sexualized Vietnamese or Arab body as uncontrolled, barbaric, threatening; the Global North/Western body, clothed, rational, precise, even happy.

Nguyen’s narrator resists easy categorization along these lines. Instead, his US trainer Claude uses him as a racialized defense, a shield protecting CIA agents from culpability by observing rather than performing torture—though this method does not leave Claude without his hands dirty (Yemini 2014). Claude is perhaps the novel’s most overt critique of US military practice of torture centers. He “supposedly worked in refugee relief,” but “in reality, [. . .] was a CIA man whose time in this country dated back to the days when the French still ruled an empire” (Nguyen 2015, 4–5). Claude helps train the narrator and the army of South Vietnam in US interrogation techniques. He supplies them with the *KUBARK* report (272, 331–32); trains them in holding detainees in temperature-controlled cells filled with all white materials, clothing, and furniture; and constantly repeats music to induce both “timelessness” and “spacelessness” (179–80). The Watchman angrily reminds the narrator that despite their opposition in the torture session, US racial politics prevent him from fully occupying a position of power. The narrator reports the Watchman’s response:

Because to them all yellow people are guilty until proven innocent. Americans are a confused people because they can't admit this contradiction. They believe in a universe of divine justice where the human race is guilty of sin, but they also believe in a secular justice where human beings are presumed innocent. . . . They pretend they are eternally innocent no matter how many times they lose their innocence. The problem is that those who insist on their innocence believe anything they do is just. (Nguyen 2015, 182–83)

The Watchman's statement, which the narrator acknowledges silently is astute, critiques US practice in the war while condemning performances of shock and innocence at the violence the US regularly enacts.

Applied to continued practice in the War on Terror, the Bush and Obama administrations' outrage at the photographs and the individuals who participated in them present the United States as opposed to sexual violence even while that evidence proves otherwise (Richter-Montpetit 2014, 56). Examples of this rhetoric include remarks made by President George W. Bush after a 2004 meeting with King Abdullah II of Jordan. About the photographs, President Bush says,

I told His Majesty as plainly as I could that the wrongdoers will be brought to justice, and that the actions of those folks in Iraq do not represent the values of the United States of America. [. . .] I assured him Americans, like me, didn't appreciate what we saw, that it made us sick to our stomachs. ("President Bush, Jordanian King" 2004)

The logic is that by committing torture, these individuals lost their claim to Americanness and that such actions were unexpected and not authorized by US military and government authorities. Yet, as many of the scholars herein cited discuss, the United States consistently has codified torture throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with approval and legalization from the state.

Thus, while Claude says, "Interrogation is not punishment. Interrogation is a science" (Nguyen 2015, 163) and the re-education camp doctor says, "We do not want pain. We do not torture" (329), the transparent fiction of their statements in light of the text's graphic torture scenes recalls President Bush's similarly structured response: "We do not condone torture. I have never ordered torture" ("President Bush Welcomes" 2004). Their comparable negative assertions try to reclaim a moral foundation and dismiss their responsibility but, in so asserting innocence, already admit to the possibility of blame.

The Sympathizer as a book and as a meta-narrated confession, like the photographs, videos, and documents analyzed by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in 2014, pushes against state-sanctioned rhetorics of denial by offering overwhelming evidence to sustained human rights abuses. These intersecting resources point toward the complexity of US state and civilian responses to the photographs as well as sustained dialogues about race-, gender-, and sexuality-based violence in the United States. The permissiveness and persistence of such acts of violence in the United States prefigure state-sanctioned acts of torture. They also become part of a longer tract of violence against bodies that are putatively non-normative in the schema of a white, heterosexual, neoliberal Americanness.

LEGACIES OF TORTURE

Torture restages a national project born violently upon bodies of color. This analysis of the Watchman's torture is only one of the ways *The Sympathizer* speaks to a continuing conversation about US complicity in racialized and gendered motivation for torture. While the novel critiques such acts, through overt and subliminal criticism of US beliefs and the proceduralization of torture, it does not offer a neat resolution. The narrator's torture and forced confession in the re-education camp belie that the communist Vietnamese state does not oppose torture summarily, only the torture and abuse of some individuals. Notably, those acts which are forbidden and punishable are so because they are 1) conducted under the guidance and guise of US power and 2) perpetrated against racialized, gendered, and sexualized bodies. In this way, the text does not offer a clean parallel to US practices, but rather overtly censures them. Nguyen's narrator gets stuck repeating his ultimate lesson that "nothing is more precious than independence and freedom" (2015, 356). He interprets this, like all else, in a dualistic manner: nothing, first, as in not a thing and second, in that "a revolution fought for independence and freedom could make those things *worth less than nothing*" (361). Amid contemporary academic, public, and state debate about the utility of torture, Nguyen's text asserts an absolutist⁷ approach: when states and individuals use their ideals to justify torture, violence, and murder, they are not only devalued, but made meaningless.

Nguyen's "Acknowledgements" section in the novel speaks to such implicit connections. He recognizes McCoy's *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (2006) as

being “crucial for understanding the development of American interrogation techniques from the 1950s through the war in Vietnam, and their extension into the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan” (Nguyen 2015, 369). In so doing, Nguyen invites dialogue about the book’s relevance to concurrent scholarship surrounding US detention and torture. Nguyen continues this analysis in his 2016 monograph *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. In *Nothing Ever Dies*, Nguyen refers to now common comparisons between the US wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq (2016, 285), writing that they are all

part of a century-long effort by the United States to exert its dominion over the Pacific, Asia, and eventually the Middle East—the Orient broadly defined. . . . The real American War was this entire American Century, a long and uneven expansion marked by a few periodic high-intensity conflicts, many low-intensity skirmishes, and the steady drone of a war machine’s ever-on-going preparations. (Nguyen 2016, 7)

His interpretation of ongoing American war informs a reading of the fictional novel as a critique extending beyond the war described in its pages.

Nguyen’s book suggests that an ethical memory of US military intervention refuses efforts to rationalize torture. In so doing, *The Sympathizer* evidences the continuation of torture practices, rather than a revitalization, syncing with Mahmood Mamdani’s reframing of the War on Terror as a vestige or continuation of US Cold War military hostilities (2004, 12). Nguyen’s argument in *Nothing Ever Dies* echoes Mamdani’s and others’ claim that the various proxy wars in which the US took part following the end of the war in Vietnam constituted preludes to the Gulf War and the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (179). Although outside the scope of this article, *The Sympathizer*’s narrator and Claude’s connections to the French regime in Vietnam further lend themselves to extended analysis of Nguyen’s work in conversation with discourse about the United States as in a perpetual state of war.

The Phoenix Program and CIA Interrogation and Detention practices in the early War on Terror highlight a pattern of torture practices that rely upon racialized and sexualized assumptions about suspects, displace blame onto non-US actors, and justify practices of harsh interrogation as methods of gaining necessary information for the protection of the state and its interests. Significantly, these

two examples correlate further in that their crimes, though horrific and highly mediated at points, have been largely forgotten publicly. State reports and investigations into these issues have treated them as isolated events (Donnelly-Cole 2006, 170), ignoring evidence of a lineage of trauma, and fostering an “intangible problem of public forgetting” (McCoy 2012, 264). Comprehensively, the scholars referenced herein document extensive US use of torture as a tool for furthering US agendas of neoliberal capitalism and empire. These violent acts contravene the United States’ stated dedication to human rights, as outlined in the United Nations documents to which it is signatory, including the UN *Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Punishment*, which the United States ratified in 1994 (“Status of Ratification” 2014). Accordingly, evidence of torture by US state actors historically has been dismissed, as noted earlier, as the fault of a few deviating individuals. Continued human rights abuses prevail, then, when both state and public practice is to resist introspection into the US’s history of committing violence upon bodies of color. As Nguyen reminds readers in *Nothing Ever Dies*, “The sign of unjust forgetting is repetition. If we repeat a history of violence, then we have not addressed the root causes of that violence” (2016, 284).

The use and transmission of these techniques from the “American adviser” (Nguyen 2015, 163) Claude (who admits much of his knowledge comes from the French) to the South Vietnamese Army and finally, to the North Vietnamese communists offers a sort of pathogenic reading of torture as transnational and crossing temporal periods. While we might enumerate the acts of torture in *The Sympathizer* and find their referents in the events at Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, or elsewhere, such acts also have been replicated across US (and international) history. Their frequency in the text and current discourse, through the narrator, the figure of Claude, and the novel’s incisive reading of “Americanness” particularly lend the novel toward a critique of contemporary US acts of torture. By placing *The Sympathizer* in conversation with US interrogation practices in the War on Terror, Nguyen reaffirms activists’ and scholars’ conclusions that the practice of torture in the service of interrogations at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo are not relegated to the fault of a few non-American “folks.” Rather these acts highlight that US practice of racialized and gendered violence encourages the use of torture, is replayed in torture, and has been for more than fifty years.

Nguyen's novel excavates these teleologies of racialized violence in the United States for popular audiences. *The Sympathizer* collaborates with reports of Guantánamo Bay and the Abu Ghraib photographs to draw attention to the Orientalist gaze of the US public (Tétreault 2006, 37–38), unsurprising to many in the wake of anti-Arab violence post-9/11 and further increased following the 2016 presidential election of Donald J. Trump (Saylor, Hooper, and Arain 2017). Recognizing Nguyen's mapping of racialized violence in *The Sympathizer* catalogs the text's relevance beyond its apt exploration of refugee life, Vietnamese Americans, and the Vietnam War. If, as Tétreault suggests, the Abu Ghraib photographs extend an archive of commodified images of US violence, alongside those of lynchings, nineteenth-century orientalist images of harems, and graphic mutilations of Vietnamese corpses during the Vietnam War (2006, 34), then the novel works similarly by making such history visible through an analytic of torture. Citing Elaine Scarry's theory of rituals of violence, Tétreault posits that the images construct a shared experience of performing and witnessing violence (39). Butler probes a similar question in asking how these images can and should instigate moral and political outrage (2009, 91). Following Tétreault's and Butler's interpretations of the images as demanding interaction in their witnessing, *The Sympathizer* presupposes various levels of recognition, such that the viewer may either participate with the torturers in the Orientalist gaze (presuming superiority over an Othered, racialized body) or object to its violence.

Nguyen's imagined photograph emphasizes that for Brown bodies, violence in general is not confined to the interrogation session. Like the significant majority of those detained by US forces in Iraq and at Guantánamo Bay, the Watchman is a victim to torture because of his racialized body.⁸ The photo and the novel as a whole, however, also incorporate the means for disrupting such violence, as it provides means for documenting and punishing torture. As if fulfilling American politicians' and media representatives' fears that these photos would encourage retaliatory acts and incriminate US forces (Hooks and Mosher 2005, 1638; Srikanth 2011, 30), the narrator's complicity in this interrogation leads in part to his detention and torture in the re-education camp. As the novel complexly shows, the moral outrage on the part of the new Vietnamese state promotes more violence, leading to more torture that is kept further secret from the public. Again, however, evidence remains, this time in the

form of the forced confession. Torture, Nguyen promises, is never truly secret.

NOTES

- ¹ For further discussion of Nguyen's use of "we" at the novel's end, see *PMLA's* special forum on the author in March 2018, vol. 133, no. 2. Especially relevant are Sarah Chihaya's "Slips and Slides" (364–70) and Caroline Rody's "Between 'I' and 'We': Viet Thanh Nguyen's Interethnic Multitudes" (396–405).
- ² The vagueness here refers to the broad categorization of any Vietnamese forces working against the US-supported military as Viet Cong, a pejorative shortening by the US Information Service. The term sought to subsume varied groups as Vietnamese communists, further working to divest their enemy combatants' goals of legitimacy. For a more thorough discussion of this conflating term, see Christian G. Appy (1993, 106), Nguyễn Cao Kỳ (2002, 22), and Nick Turse (2013, 10). While acknowledging the derogatory origins of the term, I follow the precedent of others writing on the US war in Vietnam, including Nguyen himself and YẾN LÊ Espiritu, by using "Viet Cong" in the essay.
- ³ In a May 4, 2004, interview on *The Pentagon Channel*, Bush administration Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz infamously stated of the incident "that a few bad apples can create some large problems for everybody." Alfred W. McCoy (2012) notes that this practice of impunity continued when President Obama responded that the country should "move forward" after his 2009 decision to not release additional classified photos of detainee abuse at Abu Ghraib, noting that the actions were done by "a small number of individuals" (246).
- ⁴ "Bru Montagnard" here refers to the character's ethnic group and indigent affiliation as the narrator understands them.
- ⁵ See also the *KUBARK's* discussion of these techniques (1963, 95–100).
- ⁶ Several activists, artists, journalists, and scholars have thoroughly analyzed the Abu Ghraib images in more depth than this article warrants. See for example Susan Sontag (2004); Kari Andén-Papadopoulos (2008); Errol Morris's *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008); Wendy Kozol (2014); and Hiram Pérez (2015).
- ⁷ Fritz Allhoff's *Terrorism, Ticking Time-Bombs, and Torture: A Philosophical Analysis* (2012) and Henry Shue's *Fighting Hurt: Rule and Exception in Torture and War* (2016) each offer extended discussions of absolutism as regards torture.
- ⁸ Melanie Richter-Montpetit notes that the percentage of detainees who are suspected innocent or have "no intelligence value" varies between sources but that most estimates range between 70 and 90% of all detained in Iraq (2014, 47).

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