

Testimony and Impure Subjects: Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*

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Abstract: This article begins by describing how puristic accounts of testimony tend to connect witnessing with the stable and morally elevated subject position of victimhood. It argues that Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015) offers a significant challenge to these accounts through its use of a complicit narrator, calling into question the connection between the subject position of the witness and any assumption of moral purity. The first part of the article argues that the presence of complicity disrupts the notion that testimony can be adjectivized with easily identifiable subject positions such as 'victim' and 'perpetrator'. The second part examines the way that the novel's scrutiny of the process of testimony encourages consideration of the ideological frameworks by which definitions of 'wrongdoing' and 'complicity' are themselves produced. The third and final section argues that the fictional representation of a complicit testimony induces a process of reflection with regard to reading and judgement. For this reason, the fictional testimony represented in *The Sympathizer* is less a mode of access to historical truth than it is an attempt to reconsider how judgements and evaluations of history are made.

Keywords: complicity, testimony, Vietnam, purity, witnessing, perpetration

Introduction

Dori Laub writes that the first and most fundamental level of witnessing is that 'of being a witness to oneself within the experience'.¹ In doing so, he posits a connection between the individual, the events that they have lived through, and their testimony. This connection is also present in more recent theorisations, such as Sara Jones and Roger Woods's argument that 'the powerful bond between testimony and the individual generates one of the key characteristics of testimony: its uniqueness'.² This emphasis on individual experience, often in situations of extremity, has resulted

1 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 75.

2 Sara Jones and Roger Woods, 'Introduction: Testimony in Culture and Cultures of Testimony', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Testimony and Culture*, ed. by Sara Jones and Roger Woods (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 1-20 (p. 3).



in testimony tending to be adjectivized with one of a small number of subject positions: it is common to speak of victim testimony and survivor testimony (with these two positions often assumed and sometimes conflated), while important discussions of perpetrator testimony have also recently emerged.³

The association of testimony with the subject position of the victim has given rise to what I will refer to as ‘puristic’ accounts of testimony, wherein acts of witnessing are taken to express and hence provide access to the truth of an individual’s experience. Moreover, the truth expressed in testimony tends to be taken as originating from an ethically untainted position of victimhood, a linkage that is at its most reified in the figure of the ‘moral witness’ who, according to Avishai Margalit, is an individual who both experiences and attests to ‘suffering inflicted by an unmitigated evil regime’.⁴ Recent scholarship, particularly in the field of perpetrator research has, however, increasingly questioned the validity of a simple binary distinction between victims and perpetrators. For example, Tristan Anne Borer notes that the two groups ‘tend to be talked about as if they were two completely separate and homogeneous groups of people’, but that the differences between these are often less pronounced than is assumed, and they may in fact overlap; at the same time, similarities between individuals within those groups are often overstated.⁵ In a similar vein, the editors’ introduction to the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Perpetrator Research* argued that the US-led response to 9/11 had created ‘a pervasive ambiguity surrounding the distinction between victims and perpetrators, heroes and villains’,⁶ while Ute Hirsekorn and Sue Vice warn that ‘identifying the individual solely in relation to their actions at a specific period [...] can establish an artificial or Manichean division between guilty perpetrator and innocent victim’.⁷

3 Notably Leigh A. Payne, *Unsettling Accounts: Neither Truth nor Reconciliation in Confessions of State Violence* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008) and *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020).

4 Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 148.

5 Tristan Anne Borer, ‘A Taxonomy of Victims and Perpetrators: Human Rights and Reconciliation in South Africa’, *Human Rights Quarterly*, 25.4 (2003), 1088–1116 (pp. 1088, 1091).

6 Kara Critchell and others, ‘Editors’ Introduction’, *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 1 (2017), 1–27 (p. 1).

7 Ute Hirsekorn and Sue Vice, ‘Perpetrator Testimony’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Testimony and Culture*, ed. by Sara Jones and Roger Woods (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 567–95 (p. 570).

The consequences of such Manichean distinctions are revealed in Carolyn J. Dean's useful historical survey of how the figure of the moral witness has evolved in such a way that it has 'transfigured victims into quasi-sacred signs'.⁸ She argues that, where witnesses become such symbols, this will necessarily 'erase some realities and distort others'.⁹ Indeed, the way that the association between witnessing, victimhood, and moral purity can become actively harmful is revealed in Leigh Gilmore's discussion of how the testimony of women is often 'tainted' through the accusatory scrutiny to which it is subjected, and that the effect of this is that 'the victim who is presumed to be complicit can never be pure enough'.¹⁰ These problems as they pertain to witnessing also complement the more general suspicion, articulated by Alexis Shotwell, that conceptual models premised on purity are 'a common approach for anyone who attempts to meet and control a complex situation that is fundamentally outside our control' and that these ultimately result in a 'a de-collectivizing, de-mobilizing, paradoxical politics of despair'.¹¹

However, while academic work has begun to question the concept of purity, both in a general sense and as it pertains to testimony, the allure of puristic models of testimony persists. While the idea that 'victim' and 'perpetrator' are fixed subject positions has been challenged,¹² the continued use of these terms as qualifying adjectives for testimony re-inscribes them as distinct categories. This tendency in turn creates the risk that 'victim' and 'perpetrator' are treated as pre-given or fixed subject positions, when in fact it is through the process of testifying that such positions are established in legal and public discourse.

Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015)¹³ represents a striking intervention into these debates because it offers a direct but complex challenge to puristic accounts of testimony, and more specifically to the connection between testimony, the individual witness, and their subject position. The novel takes the form of testimony as related by a narrator whose defining characteristic is his conflicting sympathies

8 Carolyn J. Dean, *The Moral Witness: Trials and Testimony After Genocide* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019), p. 5.

9 Dean, p. 5.

10 Leigh Gilmore, *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 19–20.

11 Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), pp. 8–9.

12 Hirsekorn and Vice, p. 570; Critchell and others, p. 13.

13 Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* (London: Corsair, 2015).

during and after the Vietnam War, and who begins his account with the dramatic opening line: 'I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds',¹⁴ and later asks of himself 'how dare a man with two minds think he could represent himself much less anyone else, including his own recalcitrant people?'.¹⁵ In these passages, the narrator calls into question not only the idea that an individual can be 'witness to oneself within the experience', but also the stability of any form of identification with a particular group. From this starting point of the narrator's radical uncertainty with respect to his own subject position, and through his ethically compromised actions, the novel counters the oversimplification and distortion of history that occurs through the sacralisation of the witness. It does so by assertively detaching from each other the notions of testimony and ethical purity.

This narrator is a double agent, formerly a captain in the South Vietnamese army and now exiled in the United States, from where he continues to feed information back to the communist regime and to his childhood friend and handler, Man. The novel takes the form of his testimony, beginning in the final days before the evacuation of Saigon and detailing his life in California in the years since. The novel's title is a reference to the Captain's assertion that he is 'able to see any issue from both sides',¹⁶ while his position is further complicated by his being recruited by the CIA, who remain ignorant of his communist allegiance. His position as mediator between these various parties reveals that subject positions are rarely as pure as their rhetorical use implies, and that attributions of victimhood and perpetration often involve judgments that are less matters of moral absolutes than they are the product of an individual's own position and alignments, and of their relationship with particular, value-laden discourses. Moreover, the Captain's complicity with wrongdoing perpetrated on both sides works to undo the assumed connection between testimony, victimhood, and trauma present in much of the existing theoretical work.

The presentation of testimony in the novel thus prompts a series of interrelated questions. Firstly, in what ways does the presence of complicity challenge and supplement existing understandings of testimony? Secondly, and conversely, in what ways does a focus on testimony – as form and process – shed light on the concept of complicity?

¹⁴ Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 483.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Thirdly, what role do fictional literary representations of complicit testimonies play in further illuminating both of these concepts?

This article answers these three questions, around which it is structured, as follows. Firstly, the importance of complicity to theorisations of testimony is that it disrupts the reified, and often implicitly pure, subject positions by which the latter term is often qualified. Complicity is a secondary contribution to wrongdoing that falls short of direct perpetration, ranging from active and essential involvement to forms of implication that are indirect or distant causes.¹⁷ The discrete and definitive categories of victim and perpetrator that are often appended to descriptions of testimony are therefore called into question by the presence of complicity. In the case of *The Sympathizer*, the Captain's complicity with wrongdoing perpetrated by both sides of the conflict not only disrupts frameworks for interpreting testimony based on the *a priori* assignment of these positions to individuals and groups, but also makes visible this process of interpretation and the forms of power and judgement involved therein.

Secondly, this latter point indicates the importance of testimony to theorisations of complicity. Kirsten Campbell argues that 'testimony as a legal practice [...] assumes a community of witnesses and a community of judgment'.¹⁸ This 'community of judgment' possesses its own values and norms, and for this reason careful analysis of the process as well as the content of testimony shows that it 'describes not a visible world of facts, but rather reveals an invisible world of social relations'.¹⁹ Fictional representations of testimony, such as *The Sympathizer*, function to make these social relations visible, and in doing so they also bring to light the values by which that testimony is judged. Complicity presupposes that wrongdoing has occurred, but as soon as the social mechanisms of testimony become visible, so too do the norms and values by which wrongdoing is defined and constructed.

Thirdly, the value of literary fiction that mimics the form of testimony, and does so using complicit narrators, lies in the fact that it is not constrained by frameworks oriented towards definitive judgement. Mark A. Drumbl describes how what he calls the 'reductive

17 Chiara Lepora and Robert E. Goodin, *On Complicity and Compromise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 8.

18 Kirsten Campbell, 'Testimonial Modes: Witnessing, Evidence and Testimony Before the Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia', in *The Future of Testimony: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Witnessing*, ed. by Jane Kilby and Anthony Rowland (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 83-109 (p. 103).

19 Campbell, pp. 102-03.

parsimony' of criminal trials erases nuance from discussion, thus tending to produce purified and reified subject positions.²⁰ By contrast, novels function in a more liminal space: as Stephanie Bird argues, 'fiction belongs to the realm of play and speculation, where it need not operate in the service of argument or coherence but can articulate multiple perspectives, imagine contradictions, and convey unresolved emotions and motivations';²¹ in a similar vein, Mihaela Mihai suggests that fiction is capable of 'highlighting the ambiguity and viscosity of the in-between'.²² As the discussion that follows attempts to show, *The Sympathizer* fully exploits the tolerance of ambiguity that inheres in fiction to challenge the purist qualities attributed to testimony, and in doing so to avoid the demonisation or sacralisation of individuals.²³

These qualities of fiction mean that it is capable of representing the frameworks and processes of testimony in order to reflect on their shortcomings. This article argues that, taken together, the combination of testimony, complicity, and fiction presented in *The Sympathizer* induces just such a process of reflexivity, which works to destabilise not only the subject positions by which testifying parties are often labelled, but also to shift scrutiny to the values and agency through which such judgements are produced. Ultimately, this article argues that, in the case of *The Sympathizer*, testimony cannot be taken as the expression of the experiences of particular, reified subject positions, such as victim and perpetrator. Instead, testimony is instrumentalised to create and attribute these very labels to the testifying individual in order to affirm frameworks predicated on the notion of moral purity. The wider implications of this argument are that testimony does not necessarily or solely provide access to the truth, as it is held to do in puristic theories of testimony, but rather constructs a particular truth as well as affirming the ideologies that this truth is designed to uphold.

20 Mark A. Drumbl, 'When Perpetrators Become Defendants Then Convicts', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 120-29 (p. 122).

21 Stephanie Bird, 'Perpetrators and Perpetration in Literature', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 301-10 (p. 302).

22 Mihaela Mihai, *Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care: The Art of Complicity and Resistance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022), p. 9.

23 Other notable recent novels employing fictionalised, complicit testimonies include Zia Haider Rahman, *In the Light of What We Know* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014) and Margaret Atwood, *The Testaments* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2019). While both are worthy of discussion, in my view *The Sympathizer* challenges existing conceptions of testimony to a greater extent than these, and is therefore the sole focus of this article.

Divided Subjects: How Complicity Shapes Testimony

Theorisations of perpetrator testimony tend to focus on examples wherein the status of the perpetrator is already clearly established. In some cases, such testimonies may frame themselves as confession, in which case disclosure of wrongdoing and a desire for forgiveness determine the register of the testimony.²⁴ In other cases, the testimonies of perpetrators also function as truth claims in which they attempt to rationalise and minimise their actions.²⁵ By contrast, the framing of the fictional testimony that forms *The Sympathizer* is much more ambiguous. The text is composed entirely of the Captain's testimony, and its status as such is signalled by his repeated use of performative constructions such as 'I confess'²⁶ and 'I testify'.²⁷ In addition, it is clear that he is addressing a specific audience within the diegetic fiction of the novel, referring to his interlocutor as 'my Commandant'.²⁸ Yet his purposes in doing so are initially unclear, as he does not seem to be seeking forgiveness, or to be making his own truth claims. Moreover, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the narrator is giving his testimony under duress, evident in his resistance to constructing a narrative that would conform to the Commandant's desired ideological framework.

While the Captain refers to his testimony as a 'confession',²⁹ he does not appear to seek absolution, and his account of events in fact reveals his own complicity with, and in some cases perpetration of, wrongdoing. His account emphasises his liminal status, and in doing so it conducts a pervasive relativisation of moral judgements with regard to perpetration and wrongdoing. As Clare Bielby notes, 'there is no universal or neutral notion of "perpetration"',³⁰ and on this basis she raises the valid question of what 'yardstick we should use to measure

24 Hirsekorn and Vice, p. 570.

25 Payne, p. 4.

26 Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, pp. 48, 348.

27 Ibid., p. 30.

28 Ibid., p. 2.

29 Ibid., p. 1.

30 Clare Bielby, 'Gendering the Perpetrator: Gendering Perpetrator Studies', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 155–68 (p. 164). Bielby's argument is in the context of gender and perpetration. The convincing arguments that she puts forward in this context can be generalised, and are of relevance to this discussion.

whether someone counts as a “perpetrator”.”³¹ The novel repeatedly uses the Captain’s divided sympathies to illustrate how this yardstick is generally determined not by any transcendent moral framework but by networks of affiliation.

The early stages of the novel in particular are dense with passages that show how the characters tend to make moral evaluations based on their alignment with particular groups, which for the most part means either their allegiance to the victorious communist regime in Vietnam, or their continued loyalty to the exiled community of former South Vietnamese. The effects of allegiances on moral judgements become particularly visible in the triangular relationship between the Captain and his childhood friends Bon and Man, the former loyal to the South Vietnamese cause, the latter a committed communist. When the Captain finds himself slated as the reluctant assassin of an individual he refers to as the Crapulent Major, whom he has identified as a mole in order to deflect suspicion from himself, he shares his misgivings with Bon as they plan the murder together. Bon justifies their actions on the basis that ‘we’re not killing. This is an assassination. You guys did this all the time’.³² Soon after, the Captain recalls a corresponding argument, albeit in the service of the North Vietnamese cause, made by Man in response to his misgivings about the human cost of the military information that he leaks to the communists. Man states: ‘Of course men will die [...] But they aren’t innocent. Neither are we, my friend. We’re revolutionaries and revolutionaries can never be innocent’.³³ Ends are used to justify unsavoury means in this way throughout the novel, with violence and torture repeatedly justified in the name of the collective interests of each group.

In his intermediate position, the Captain recognises that such alignments are determined less by any overarching morality than they are by contingencies over which individuals may have little or no control, such as which part of Vietnam they happen to come from. For example, when describing the moments before his escape from Saigon, he notes of the South Vietnamese soldiers around him that ‘they were my enemies, and yet they were also brothers-in-arms’.³⁴ When Man states that ‘revolutionaries can never be innocent’, he recognises that his ideological commitments impel him into positions of perpetration

31 Bielby, p. 156.

32 Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, p. 127.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

and complicity. By contrast, the Captain's tone is often detached and ironic. While this reflective ambivalence may seem preferable to the blind loyalties of other characters, it also leads him into a position of moral passivity that also becomes a form of complicity. This is true in a general sense, as indicated when he states of his commanding officer, with whom he fled Vietnam, that 'whatever people say about the General today, I can only testify that he was a sincere man who believed in everything he said, even if it was a lie, which makes him not so different from most'.³⁵ Statements such as this indicate that the narrator sees little scope for agency that might allow individuals to act outside the frameworks determined by these affiliations. It is through this passivity that he becomes complicit with the violence perpetrated by others, most notably in the novel's primal scene: towards the end of his narrative, the Captain recalls his long-suppressed memory of witnessing the torture and rape of a female North Vietnamese agent by the South Vietnamese and the CIA. He is powerless to intervene because doing so would reveal him to be a North Vietnamese spy, and this complicity becomes a lacuna in his account until he is compelled to reveal it under duress.

The Captain also recognises that these alignments, and the justifications for the harms premised on these, are defined and enacted through the language of his testimony itself. This process is most visible in the sections where his testimony is addressed directly to his captors, and in which he tends to reflect on his own representation of events. For example, at one point he tells the Commandant of the camp where he is imprisoned:

You have asked me what I mean when I say 'we' or 'us,' as in those moments when I identify with the southern soldiers and evacuees on whom I was sent to spy. Should I not refer to those people, my enemies, as 'them'? I confess that after having spent almost my whole life in their company I cannot help but sympathize with them, as I do with many others.³⁶

The Captain's uncertainty around the boundaries of group identities indicates that the labels assigned to particular groups, and the moral judgements implied by these, are imputed onto them as a result of the individual's position relative to that group. For this reason, language can be seen as contributing to the construction of subject positions rather than simply reflecting them.

³⁵ Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, p. 30.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

A further way in which the presence of complicity destabilises the subject positions associated with testimony is through the Captain's awareness of his actions and his narrative as a performance. The performative nature of testimony has long been recognised. For example, Payne notes that 'the specific characteristics of a performance—scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose—provide a set of categories for organizing observations'³⁷, while Krämer asserts that 'the witness does not simply talk and report, but rather he performs a speech act in an institutional-theoretical sense'³⁸ as a means of expressing their truth. The notion of performance can, however, also carry more negative connotations when it is used in the sense of pretence and falsehood. As a double agent, the Captain is required to change the performance of his sympathies depending on his audience, and in the earlier sections of the novel that detail his relationship with the exiled community in the U.S., he describes his life in these terms, stating on one occasion: 'too much freedom of the press is unhealthy for a democracy, I declared. While I did not believe this, my character, the good captain, did, and as the actor playing this role I had to sympathize with this man'. He then elaborates, however, that

most actors spent more time with their masks off than on, whereas in my case it was the reverse. No surprise, then, that sometimes I dreamed of trying to pull a mask off my face, only to realize that the mask was my face.³⁹

The Captain later attempts to alleviate his fears that his performance has become his reality by confessing his identity as a communist spy to Sonny, the editor of a Vietnamese-language newspaper. The latter, however, rejects his confession due to being too invested in the Captain's performance of his role as a South Vietnamese exile to accept this new narrative.

This passage disrupts the association of the figure of the witness with sincerity and authenticity. Margalit writes of the latter quality that 'an authentic person is one who gets rid of all his personae (masks) and gives expression to his "true self," especially in the extreme circumstances of being unprotected by a civilized moral environment'.⁴⁰ Clearly, the

³⁷ Payne, p. 15.

³⁸ Sybille Krämer, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), p. 148.

³⁹ Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, p. 178.

⁴⁰ Margalit, p. 170.

situation of the Captain in *The Sympathizer* challenges this conception of witnessing. Moreover, Margalit argues that moral witnessing anticipates the reception of its testimony by a 'moral community'.⁴¹ If *The Sympathizer* removes a stable subject position from the testifier, it also calls into question the idea that the audience of testimonial accounts holds a fixed or recognisable position. It does so through the revelation, late in the novel, of the identity of the commissar of the camp in which the Captain is now interned and where he is writing his testimony. The commissar is initially described as a 'faceless man'⁴² deformed beyond recognition, his 'lips scorched away to reveal perfect teeth, eyes bulging from withered sockets, nostrils reduced to holes without a nose, the hairless, earless skull one massive keloid scar'.⁴³ Yet the Captain eventually recognises the commissar as Man through his voice. Man's deformity means that he is physically 'masked', but this notion can also be applied in more existential terms given that he, like the Captain, performs two roles simultaneously, attempting to protect his friend and subordinate while also fulfilling his duties as commissar and thus subjecting him to torture and interrogation.

The Captain makes a direct and explicit comparison between their situations when he records that:

As I sat watching him from my bamboo chair, still bisected into myself and another, I detected a similar division in him, in the horrible void where a face had been. He was the commissar but he was also Man; he was my interrogator but also my only confidant; he was the fiend who had tortured me but also my friend.⁴⁴

On the basis of the existential uncertainty produced by moments such as this, in one of the novel's more didactic moments the Captain reflects that 'some might say I was seeing things, but the true optical illusion was in seeing others and oneself as undivided and whole, as if being in focus was more real than being out of focus'.⁴⁵ In this way, the multiple and shifting complicities of both he and Man challenge the idea that testimony is constructed in the relationship between individuals with stable and identifiable subject positions.

41 Margalit, p. 155.

42 Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, p. 403.

43 Ibid., p. 421.

44 Ibid., p. 484.

45 Ibid.

Demands and Judgements: How Testimony Shapes Complicity

As noted above, the Captain's relativisation of the terms 'us' and 'them' reveals how language is used to define, and hence to create, particular groups. The novel is acutely aware of how language, and specifically testimony, can be instrumentalised in order to attribute particular identities to individuals, along with moral judgements and attendant sanctions. If Sonny's rejection of the Captain's confession shows that the audience itself is not a blank canvas onto which a confession is projected, the role of the audience in actively shaping testimony becomes more visible in the later sections of *The Sympathizer*, when the extent of the coercion under which the Captain is writing his account becomes clear. In these passages, the captors use both the form and framework of testimony to ascribe wrongdoing and complicity to various parties. Gilmore describes how those who possess power use the process of testimony itself to frame and define individuals, and in some cases to 'taint' them with the suspicion of complicity in their own victimisation,⁴⁶ and Drumbl writes that the framework of international criminal law functions 'to massage the construction of the perpetrator'.⁴⁷ Both observations indicate that the subject position of the perpetrator, and related attributions of complicity, may be constructed through acts of testimony. In other words, rather than testimony being a means of access to the truth, as it is often described in puristic accounts, it is used in a self-interested manner to shape and define conceptions of wrongdoing and complicity. This is precisely the process that occurs in *The Sympathizer*, in which moral judgements of the Captain's testimony are undergirded by notions of moral purity.

In the early stages of the novel, the Captain addresses his captors occasionally but relatively infrequently. For this reason, while it is evident that he is writing his testimony for a particular audience, the extent of the pressure exerted by that audience is not fully revealed until the late sections of the narrative that relate his return to Vietnam and his capture at the hands of government forces. The sections detailing his writing of his testimony under torture reveal this process to be the opposite of puristic accounts of testimony in almost every way. For example, in a twisted echo of the idea of the moral witness's authenticity, the Commandant tells the Captain, 'the prisoners tell me

⁴⁶ Gilmore, p. 2.

⁴⁷ Drumbl, p. 128

what they think I want to hear, but they don't understand that what I want to hear is sincerity',⁴⁸ a claim contradicted by his efforts to coerce the Captain into producing a performance of sincerity within a pre-determined ideological form.

More specifically, these aims are revealed by the Captain's continued internment and torture for refusing to conform to one of the roles described to him by the Commandant, who states that 'everyone except you has confessed to being a puppet soldier, an imperialist lackey, a brainwashed stooge, a colonized comprador, or a treacherous henchman'.⁴⁹ The Commandant is more concerned with labelling the Captain as one of several pre-defined and ideologically charged subject positions than he is with understanding the events he narrates in their full complexity and ambiguity. To return to Dean's warning regarding the dangers of transforming the witness into a 'quasi-sacred' symbol, the Captain's interrogation mirrors this process but with the aim being his demonisation rather than his sacralisation: it is his transformation into a useful scapegoat and antagonist for the Vietnamese regime that the Commandant seeks through the testimonial process. In the face of the Captain's intransigence, the Commandant finally settles on a pejorative label, telling him: 'you exhibit no sense of collectivity, no belief in the science of history. You show no need to sacrifice yourself in the cause of rescuing the nation and serving the people [...] you are a bourgeoisie intellectual'.⁵⁰ As noted in the previous section, the Captain's passivity becomes a form of complicity with acts of violence committed by both sides, but the irony of this section is that the Commandant, ignorant of the Captain's true role, condemns him for his passivity with respect to the revolutionary cause in order to label him as complicit with U.S. imperialism though 'elitism and Western inclinations'.⁵¹

The Commandant's assertion that he concerned with 'sincerity' is also contradicted by his earlier remark that the interrogation will cease

When your confession reaches a satisfactory state based on our reading of it and on my reports of these self-criticism sessions to the commissar, you will move on to the next and, we hope, last stage of your reeducation. In short, the commissar believes you ready to be cured.⁵²

48 Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, p. 419.

49 Ibid., p. 405.

50 Ibid., pp. 414-15.

51 Ibid., p. 415.

52 Ibid., p. 403.

The conceptual framework of illness and cure is one that evokes purity, with the Captain's failings in this regard attributed to his being 'contaminated' by foreign ideology;⁵³ the Commandant later explicitly refers to the process of interrogation and torture as one intended to produce a newly 'purified' individual.⁵⁴ The Commandant's rhetorical use of purity and contamination forms part of a more fundamental conflict about the nature of language itself. As both Debra Shostak⁵⁵ and Sandra Kumamoto Stanley⁵⁶ note, at stake in the exchanges between the Captain and the Commandant is the question of whether language itself is monologic or dialogic. The monologic worldview that drives the process of questioning is one informed by the notion of a pure subject, as evident in the notion of 'cure' and the determination to compel the Captain to conform to a 'satisfactory state'. When the Commandant acknowledges that the Captain has confessed his actions 'in content, perhaps, but not in style' and elaborates that 'confessions are as much about style as content, as the Red Guards have shown us',⁵⁷ he is indicating that testimony is a performance with its own rules and expectations, that is, its own 'epistemic practices'.⁵⁸ Clearly, the process of coerced testimony in *The Sympathizer* possesses its own epistemic practices that differ significantly from those employed, for example, in international law. By reframing the subject position of the witness as a patient in need of a cure, the Commandant implies that testimony is not a means of generating knowledge, but of compelling the witness to demonstrate – and to perform – his conformity to a predetermined, monologic, and ostensibly pure ideological position.

The way that testimony is used with a predetermined conclusion in mind is clearest in the final stages of the Captain's interrogation. These passages describe the Captain's recovery of his repressed memory of the rape of the female agent and of his failure to intercede. This stage of the interrogation is led by Man, who notes that the Captain has mentioned her several times without elaborating on what befell her, before stating

53 Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, pp. 406–07.

54 Ibid., p. 409.

55 Debra Shostak, 'Paternity, History, and Misrepresentation in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*', in *21st Century US Historical Fiction: Contemporary Responses to the Past*, ed. by Ruth Maxey (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 171–89 (p. 175).

56 Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, 'Citizens of the Imagination: Refugee Memory in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 66.2 (2020), 281–300 (p. 288).

57 Nguyen, p. 406.

58 Campbell, p. 101.

'you must tell us what you did to her. We demand to know!' When the Captain protests 'I did nothing to her', Man responds 'Exactly! Don't you see how everything in need of confession is already known? You indeed did nothing'.⁵⁹ The Captain intends his statement that he 'did nothing' as an assertion of innocence, but Man is able to turn this against him because the Captain's complicity in the rape of the female agent was precisely his failure to intervene. At this point, however, the Captain has not yet recalled this suppressed memory (the reader is similarly ignorant at this point, the effect of which is discussed below), but it is clear that the interrogators are already aware of these events. Testimony in this case therefore becomes a means of reproducing a version of the truth already established by one party. It is not used in the interests of the historical record, or with a concern for justice for the victim of the rape, but is instead used to shape the Captain into a particular type of impure subject within the ideological schema of his interrogators as a precondition for his 'cure'.

These passages of the novel are significant to the wider examination of the effect of testimony on the concept of complicity that this section seeks to address. The novel shows that within the performative process of testimony, the audience may exert pressure on the witness to produce what appears to be a monologic form of testimony, that is, a form of testimony framed by a worldview that is reluctant or unwilling to admit ambiguity. *The Sympathizer* therefore suggests that testimony itself can be used to construct subject positions of guilt and complicity. In such cases, the process of testimony treats complicity not as a descriptive tool for addressing the messy moral terrain that often accompanies collective violence, but rather as a normative judgement within a worldview premised on positions of purity.

Reading and Spectating: Fiction and Complicit Testimonies

The interrogation of the Captain shows the monologic drive of the Commandant's questioning straining not only against his captive's dialogic instincts, and also against the inherently dialogic nature of the process. This tension may remain unseen in situations such as international criminal trials due to their being framed in terms of justice and objectivity. In this final section, however, I discuss how

59 Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, p. 438.

Nguyen exploits the flexibility afforded by fiction to reflect upon and interrogate the nature of testimony and complicity in ways that would not be possible in other textual forms. In the previous section, I noted how the presence of an audience shapes narrative accounts, and it is often the case that testimony is created in anticipation of judgement, whether moral or legal. I have cited Bird's argument that fiction inhabits 'the realm of play and speculation',⁶⁰ and that one of the strengths of fiction is that it can induce in its readers a suspension of judgement. *The Sympathizer*, as I argue in this section, goes further and uses the flexibility offered by fiction to turn the question of judgement back on the reader, and hence to question the frameworks by which categories such as perpetration, victimhood, and complicity are attached to testimonial accounts. This section first discusses concerns regarding representational complicity that are addressed directly in the novel and which have been acknowledged in many critical responses. It then turns to the question of what I have called 'readerly complicity', namely 'situations in which reading becomes a form of alignment with characters and ideologies present in the text',⁶¹ and argues that the novel induces reflexivity in the reader with respect to moralistic judgements and the frameworks that inform them.

The ways in which artistic representation can become a form of complicity in discriminatory structures are addressed in the sections of the novel detailing the Captain's advisory role in the movie *The Hamlet*. The film and its director, who is known simply as the Auteur, are transparent parodies of *Apocalypse Now* and Francis Ford Coppola respectively, and thus function as a metonymic commentary on the representation of the Vietnam War. The original script for *The Hamlet* predictably focuses on heroic American characters rather than the local population, with one exception being a crass scene depicting the rape of a villager named Mai. The Captain's interventions fail utterly to change the film's representation of the Vietnamese in any significant way, other than securing their token presence in the film. As a result of this failure, Bon complains to him, 'now white people can say, look, we got yellow people in here. We don't hate them. We love them. ... You tried to play their game, okay? But they run the game'.⁶²

60 Bird, p. 302.

61 Ivan Stacy, *The Complicit Text: Failures of Witnessing in Postwar Fiction* (Lanham: Lexington, 2021), p. 25.

62 Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, p. 376.

Stanley argues that, 'as the Auteur cannot escape the political ideology embedded in his Art, the narrator cannot escape his complicity in the Auteur's film'.⁶³ The dilemma faced by the Captain echoes Linda Hutcheon's notion of 'complicitous critique', namely critique arising from within a position of 'its own complicity with power and domination, one that acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyze and maybe even undermine'.⁶⁴ However, while Hutcheon envisages some potential for effective critique, the Captain fails almost entirely in this regard, and he struggles to find a position outside the representational frameworks that perpetuate injustice and violence. Yet this section is perhaps the novel's most self-reflexive, and many critical responses have suggested that despite – and indeed because of – the Captain's failures, the text as a whole is more successful in challenging representational complicity.

For example, Caroline Rody argues that *The Sympathizer* can be placed in a lineage of American novels that employ 'the bold, critical, self-ironizing monologue of a clever, marginalized outsider',⁶⁵ who exhibits 'the ironic, exilic, critical complicity that makes this narrator the kind that American literature loves'.⁶⁶ It is precisely this voice that demonstrates the Captain's 'insufficiently revolutionary qualities'⁶⁷ to his captors. Furthermore, the Captain's account ends with a shift from the first person 'I' to a 'we' that encompasses other refugees leaving Vietnam, on which basis Rody suggests that, 'Nguyen's narrator opens his uniquely porous "I" to a diverse collectivity, and the Americanness he claims is minoritized, interethnic, and clamorously defiant'.⁶⁸ Roberta Wolfson also reads the novel as presenting positive representational possibilities, doing so in light of Nguyen's *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (2016),⁶⁹ which has been described as a 'critical companion' to the novel.⁷⁰ In it, Nguyen outlines his conception of 'just memory', which involves 'recalling the weak, the subjugated, the

63 Stanley, p. 292.

64 Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 4.

65 Caroline Rody, 'Between "I" and "We": Viet Thanh Nguyen's Interethnic Multitudes', *PMLA*, 133.2 (2018), 396–405 (p. 396).

66 Ibid., p. 402.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., p. 400. The ending has been read in similarly positive terms by Stanley, p. 297, and by Sunny Xiang, 'The Ethnic Author Represents the Body Count', *PMLA*, 133.2 (2018), 420–27 (p. 426).

69 Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2016).

70 Xiang, p. 423.

different, the enemy, and the forgotten' in contrast to the tendency to remember one's own.⁷¹ Wolfson interprets the novel as an attempt to put the concept of 'just memory' into practice, arguing that 'the narrator eventually seeks to rewrite the history of the war from the more ethical lens of just memory, a project that takes final shape in the form of the manuscript that is *The Sympathizer* itself'.⁷² These critics thus suggest that the novel can be regarded as a successful example of complicitous critique, with the protagonist's failings resulting in the novel's success in terms of avoiding representational complicity.

Others are more sceptical, however, and Silvia Shin Huey Chong offers compelling examples of how the novel reproduces some of the deficiencies and imbalances, both racial and gendered, that it holds up to scrutiny. For example, she notes that the Captain's intermediate position allows him to deconstruct many of the binaries upon which such representations rest, but that doing so also 'depends on the fixity of other players – the filmic Mai, the Bru elder, the communist agent – to occupy their roles of abjection'.⁷³ She also asks of the novel's use of rape whether it is 'possible to write (or film) the war without traveling through this abject trope',⁷⁴ thus suggesting that the novel is unable to 'escape implication'⁷⁵ in the frameworks that it seeks to critique.

Importantly for the arguments I am making about the relationship between complicity, testimony, and fiction, Chong's linking of spectatorship with implication in representational wrongs is not confined to the diegetic world of the novel, but also expands to encompass the reader. A key juncture of her argument is her suggestion that:

In a novel devoted to excavating heretofore unseen (or underseen) aspects of the Vietnam War era – including the machinations in the South Vietnamese diaspora, the complicity of South Vietnamese and Americans in corruption and various war crimes, and the vacuity of the communist reeducation camps – the section on *The Hamlet* reads as safely familiar. A critique of the culture industry in the United States is perhaps an easier pill to swallow than a critique of how all aspects of the United States' culture and economy are complicit with its war machine.⁷⁶

71 Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, p. 27.

72 Roberta Wolfson, "A Man of Two Faces and Two Minds": Just Memory and Metatextuality in *The Sympathizer's* Rewriting of the Vietnam War', *College Literature*, 50.1 (2023), 57-86 (p. 79).

73 Silvia Shin Huey Chong, 'Vietnam the Movie: Part Deux', *PMLA*, 133.2 (2018), 371-77 (p. 377).

74 Ibid.

75 Hutcheon, p. 4.

76 Ibid., p. 372.

Her argument here is based on the notion that readers (and viewers) possess agency in terms of where they choose to focus their attention and in terms of the types of narrative that they accept as legitimate representations of the past. As noted in the section above, the diegetic audience of the Captain's account (the Commandant and Man) shapes his testimony; reflexive sections such as that describing *The Hamlet* prompt the extradiegetic audience (the reader of the novel) to recognise their own role in shaping cultural forms through habits of consumption.

The section on *The Hamlet* offers direct commentary on representational complicity, but the process of readerly reflection explored in the final stages of the novel is also crucial for understanding the relationship between complicity, testimony, and fiction. This reflection takes two forms. The first is that the later stages of the narrative create a split between its diegetic readers, in the form of the Commandant and Man, and the intended readers of the novel, who exist outside the story's world. This split is created by revelations regarding the audience of the narrative and the coercion under which it is produced, resulting in dissonance that prompts a process of reflection. The second is that the acts of reading and interpretation themselves become the subjects of the final sections of the narrative.

As noted above, the Captain's belated recollection of witnessing the agent's rape introduces into his testimony information previously unknown to both him and the reader. However, when Man responds to the Captain's protestation of innocence ('I did nothing to her') by saying 'you indeed did nothing',⁷⁷ it becomes clear that the Commandant and Man are already aware of these events. For this reason, while a discrepancy between the positions of the diegetic narratees (the interrogators) and implied reader (the reader of the novel) is present throughout the novel, it becomes particularly visible at this juncture. This discrepancy is further emphasised by the intensity of the Captain's revelation being represented through present tense narration when the interrogation begins, followed by a shift to the third person in the section detailing the rape, and finally to dramatic script to describe his mental collapse under torture. For this reason, the position of the extra-diegetic implied reader diverges significantly from the diegetic narratees, who at this point occupy a position of absolute power over the narrator and who seek to elicit a narrative about events already known to them that conforms to their own ideologically determined ends. The

77 Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, p. 348.

novel thus stages a situation in which the Captain's testimony is read by two audiences according to two different ideological frameworks, or, to use Stanley Fish's phrase, depending on the interpretative community to which they belong.⁷⁸ Indeed, the way that potential differences in interpretation are determined by these frameworks is brought into relief by the fact that readers of the novel and the Captain's torturers are responding to precisely the same text.

While the revelation of the interrogators' prior knowledge of events makes visible this interpretative rift, the Captain also becomes his own reader in the final stages of the novel. When he does so, his own interpretative position is also divided, first taking the form of traumatic dissociation under torture before finally becoming a more reflective form of reading. The Captain's narrative evokes traumatic dissociation through the shift to external perspectives in sections described in the third person and rendered as dramatic script. This dissociation is also made explicit through the Captain's description of his 'divided, tormented body below, placid consciousness floating high above'⁷⁹ and by him hearing somebody screaming before realising that these screams are coming from himself.⁸⁰

In an argument that draws heavily on Freudian psychoanalysis, Shoshana Felman writes that 'one does not have to *possess* or *own* the truth, in order to effectively *bear witness* to it' because 'the speaking subject constantly *bears witness* to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, *not available* to its own speaker'.⁸¹ It is on this basis that Felman makes the claim that testimony should be understood 'not as a mode of *statement of*, but rather as a mode of *access to*' the truth.⁸² Again, *The Sympathizer* offers a provocative alternative to this model. When the Captain narrates his suppressed memory, he does so not through a dialogic process of what Felman calls 'unconscious testimony',⁸³ but under torture. The captain's coerced testimony is a mode of access to the truth, and it reveals facts about the past hitherto unknown to him, but these are uncovered and articulated in the service of a monologic version of the truth imposed upon his testimony by the

78 Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 14-15.

79 Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, p. 461.

80 Ibid., pp. 476-77.

81 Felman and Laub, p. 15. Emphasis in original.

82 Ibid., p. 16. Emphasis in original.

83 Ibid., p. 15.

secondary witnesses. The representation of traumatic memory in this case therefore emphasises how the process of testimony is weaponised for ideological ends. Moreover, the way that the suppressed memory is simultaneously revealed to him and to the extra-diegetic reader means that the reader of the novel becomes a spectator to torture and is thus affectively implicated in the violent process that produces the testimonial narrative. For this reason, in *The Sympathizer*, the act of reading is neither the reception of testimony in good faith, nor is it part of its dialogic construction, but is an act of consumption of a narrative produced by violent coercion.

If the Captain becomes his own observer in the section describing his dissociation during torture, in his period of recovery he becomes his own reader. At this point, he begins to re-write his own testimony, re-reading it as he does so, and states that 'as I absorbed my own words, I developed a growing sympathy for the man in these pages, the intelligence operative of doubtful intelligence'.⁸⁴ The Captain's testimony is not a direct appeal to the reader's sympathy, and he returns to his detached mode following his interrogation, stating, 'if one really thought about it, with just a little bit of distance, with even the faintest sense of irony, one could laugh at this joke played on us'.⁸⁵ Yet, for the reader, a corollary to the Captain's sympathetic reading of his own actions is the question of the extent to which the reader might judge him to be worthy of sympathy and, further, whether such sympathy becomes a form of empathetic complicity with his own contributions to wrongdoing as detailed in the novel. Chong raises this question when she notes that the section on *The Hamlet* evokes both 'the pleasures and dangers of phantasmatic identification with victims'.⁸⁶ Of the way that the novel addresses rape, she asks:

Why is it necessary that we, as the readerly or spectatorial audience, play confessor to the guilty conscience of the [...] Auteurs of the world? If the rape of the communist agent has its analogue in *The Hamlet's* rape of Mai, can one savage the representation of Mai's rape as exploitative while commending the rape of the communist agent as artistic, perhaps necessary?⁸⁷

84 Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, p. 482.

85 Ibid., p. 490.

86 Chong, p. 376.

87 Ibid.

It is notable that implicit in Chong's discussion are a number of potential positions that the reader of the novel might take, including identification, bearing witness to confession, and acting as moral judge and as artistic critic. Thus, while *The Sympathizer* does risk falling into the trap of perpetuating harmful tropes in the name of critiquing them, this range of possible positions is evidence of the way that novelistic form induces in the reader a divided interpretative position not dissimilar to that of the Captain.

For this reason, the Captain's fictional testimony reveals the capacity of literature to 'imagine contradictions, and convey unresolved emotions and motivations', as Bird suggests.⁸⁸ The Captain concludes his account on a note of ambiguity, asking 'had he chosen the right side or the wrong side of history?'.⁸⁹ The Captain's re-writing and re-reading of his confession, a process carried out under the demands of an audience determined to produce and perpetuate a monologic discourse of purity, produces the opposite of this intended effect and creates a multiplicity of interpretations that depend on the ideological position of the reader. The uncertainty that the text induces with respect to these positions creates a reflexivity around reading testimony, and around the judgments that this involves, that serves to prompt the reader to question their own basis for attributing labels such as perpetration and victimhood to any given account.

Conclusion

My claim that *The Sympathizer* turns scrutiny and judgement back on the reader may look like a typical postmodern reversal of emphasis from the observed object to the observing subject, and therefore be regarded as a further iteration in efforts to demonstrate the constructed nature of social phenomena, in this case testimony and complicity. However, I read the novel more in the context of what Nancy Partner calls an

Ongoing process of stocktaking [which] involves revisiting postmodernism, worrying over the apparently unsolvable problem of fiction undermining history, seeing what the implications of acknowledging the "constructedness" of knowledge in every humanist area actually involves.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Bird, p. 302.

⁸⁹ Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, p. 482.

⁹⁰ Nancy Partner, 'Narrative Persistence: The Post-Postmodern Life of Narrative Theory', in *Refiguring Hayden White*, ed. by Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domanska, and Hans Kellner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 81-104 (p. 81).

The novel illustrates the constructed nature of testimony through the coercion under which it is produced. In this way, the novel re-figures a type of account associated with truth claims as one that is complicit with a monologic ideological project.

In *The Sympathizer*, however, the way that testimony is used to construct ideological frameworks that determine the 'truth' never results in discourse entirely supplanting material and lived experiences; indeed, testimony remains an important means of accessing these. Moreover, to question the categories by which judgements are made, and the frameworks that inform the process of such judgements, is not to deny the need for moral condemnation and praise. It is often the case, however, that the constructed nature of the categories appended to testimony, particularly 'victim' and 'perpetrator', is not sufficiently acknowledged or interrogated in the theoretical literature. Nguyen's novel, which employs formal flexibility while deferring the drive for judgement created by real-world testimonies, makes visible the way in which testimony is used to produce particular categories. Moreover, it reveals how these categories, and the discourse of purity of which they are a part, are used to perpetrate further harms. Shotwell writes that 'the metaphysics of purity is necessarily a fragile fiction',⁹¹ and the process of reflection induced by *The Sympathizer* seeks to counter the erasures of historical contingency and complexity that are created by the desire to impute purity onto the act of testimony.

91 Shotwell, p. 16.

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