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UNSETTLING MIXED IDENTITIES IN VIET THANH NGUYEN'S *THE SYMPATHIZER*

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

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ABSTRACTUNSETTLING MIXED IDENTITIES IN VIET THANH NGUYEN'S *THE SYMPATHIZER*

BY EMILY M. KIM

Press reviews and scholarship have cast Viet Thanh Nguyen's 2015 novel *The Sympathizer* primarily as a Vietnam War novel; however, in examining its unnamed narrator's mixed race and its implications, I offer a reading in which a character's mixedness is not co-opted to represent something else, but read as deserving of its own analysis and the narrator himself as a self-representative mixed subject. In *The Sympathizer*, mixedness – what I define as the quality of being multiracial – acts as a mode that enables the unnamed Vietnamese and white narrator to move through physical, narrative, chronological, and embodied liminal spaces, thus embracing the concept of displacement as identity. In doing so, the narrator disrupts binary characterizations of mixed identities, rejects the post-racial idealization of mixed identities, and pushes back against valorized notions of home and wholeness. By demonstrating how the narrator inhabits Trinh T. Minh-ha and Homi K. Bhabha's "unhomely" liminal spaces, while also moving between and among the boundaries that delineate these spaces, my analysis refutes Sheng-mei Ma's assertion that mixed Asian characters are converted exclusively and statically to either an Asian or American identity by presenting mixedness as its own fluid category with unique challenges and experiences. Methodologically, I critique binary approaches to race and to literary criticism that aims to settle and parse something as amorphous as mixed identity, and instead invite the nuance and threats to racial hierarchy that unsettled, non-binary racial identities entail.

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INTRODUCTION

Many press reviews of Viet Thanh Nguyen's highly acclaimed 2015 novel *The Sympathizer* have characterized it as a "Vietnam War" novel – a ground-breaking work that offers American readers new perspectives about the Vietnam War that forgo traditional Americentrism.¹ Similarly, numerous literary scholars have focused on themes of representation and refugee memory, with particular emphasis on how we remember the Vietnam War. My thesis, however, explores a topic less considered – the anonymous narrator's mixed race² and its implications.

Whereas *The Sympathizer* has achieved both popular and critical acclaim, scholarship about the novel tends to gloss over the significance of its mixed protagonist in favor of reading it as a story exclusively about the Vietnam War. Nguyen's rare choice of a mixed narrator caught my attention as a mixed Asian person, compelling me to examine the ways in which mixedness, as spotlighted through the main character, play out on the page. In my thesis, rather than thinking about *why* the narrator is mixed, or interpreting his mixedness as a symbol for cultural hybridity or any other ethno-racial discourse, I interrogate how the novel's highly mobile narrator – one who moves often among physical places, narrative modes, times, and states of embodiment – positions mixedness as an unsettled identity to reject binary formulations of identity, as well as valorized notions of stability, home, and wholeness.

¹ Indeed, it has been called a "novel[] about the Vietnam War" ([Kirkus Reviews](#)) that "compels the rest of us to look at the events of 40 years ago in a new light" ([The New York Times](#)), and one that "captures the horror and absurdity of the Vietnam war" ([The Guardian](#)).

² In using the terms "multiracial," "mixed race," and "mixed," I employ Molly Littlewood McKibbin's definition: "when a person claims more than one ethno-racial heritage, most often through parents of different groups" (187).

The Sympathizer follows an unnamed mixed race Vietnamese and French Communist double agent who flees Vietnam after the fall of Saigon to the U.S. alongside his anti-communist childhood friend, Bon. There, he continues to report to his Communist handler – another childhood friend named Man, who remains in Vietnam – on the activities of former South Vietnamese anti-Communist military leaders, namely the unnamed General, with whom the narrator worked closely before departing Vietnam. Immediately after their evacuation, the General suspects there is a spy among them; the narrator identifies the nameless crapulent major as the mole and assassinates him on the General's orders. The narrator then later serves as a film consultant for the unnamed Auteur's Vietnam War film and travels to the Philippines. Upon his return to the U.S., the narrator reunites with pro-Communist college friend and journalist Sonny, whom he is forced to assassinate in order to join a Southern Vietnamese strike team charged with the goal of retaking Vietnam from the Communists. Shortly after arriving in Vietnam with the strike team, the narrator's Communist allies – including the faceless commissar, who is then revealed to be Man – capture and torture him for being Westernized and failing to help a fellow spy. Finally, Man releases the narrator, and he flees Vietnam once again – this time as an exile.

Conventional theorizations of mixed Asian figures in American literature and culture tend to conscript them to symbolize issues regarding race without engaging the specificity of mixed race. Historically, the mixed Asian figure has symbolized racial concerns and discourses such as Asian assimilability during the Yellow Peril as the “tragic Eurasian,” a figure that aspires to whiteness to affirm white cultural superiority before ultimately dying (C. Nakashima, “Servants of Culture” 37-38). Subsequently, the “super-Eurasian” emerged in the 1980s amid growing Asian influence in the world economy as the cliché embodiment of the “best of both worlds” and “worst of both worlds” (C. Nakashima, “Servants of Culture” 40-41). Most recently,

mixed Asian figures have become the idealized “children of the future” (C. Nakashima, “Servants of Culture” 42) during the multiculturalism debates of the 1990s. This trope has become increasingly popular as a pattern of representation in which mixed people, often kids, symbolize “the resolution of [cultural] conflict and, in most cases, the hope for a better future” (Martin). While seeming at first harmlessly optimistic, this trope co-opts mixed identities as fodder for post-racial arguments that ignore the realities of racism and the lived experiences of mixed people. This pattern of symbolic mixedness “object[ifies] mixed-race individuals and prioritize[s] narrative over the humanity of multiracial people” (Smith 3). In my research, I offer a reading of *The Sympathizer* in which a character’s mixedness is not co-opted to represent something else (even if that is the author’s stated intent³) but read as deserving of its own analysis as an exploration of what mixed identity can be, and the narrator himself as a self-representative mixed subject – a mixed person who represents only themselves.

In *The Sympathizer*, mixedness – what I define as the quality of being multiracial – acts as a mode that enables the unnamed Vietnamese and white narrator to move through physical, narrative, chronological, and embodied liminal spaces, thus embracing the concept of displacement as identity. In doing so, the narrator disrupts binary characterizations of mixed identities, as well as rejects the post-racial idealization of mixed identities as bridges to world peace by complicating and conveying the difficulties of inhabiting and navigating these liminal spaces. My mode of reading thus does not burden mixed race characters with the pressures of representing something else, but allows them to construct mixedness on their own terms.

³ In an interview, Nguyen’s second stated reason for including a mixed character “was the obvious symbolic dimensions of having somebody who was mixed race, French and Vietnamese, which would allow me to put into play all of these tired old notions of cultural division through this character” (Nguyen et al. 213).

My argument challenges Sheng-mei Ma's assertion that mixed race is "instantly converted to...the relatively steady phenotypes of American or Asian" (187), and that mixed characters function primarily "in the dystopian racist climates of either of the two cultures of origin" (166) – a notion that applies a limiting binary approach to mixedness. My reading of *The Sympathizer* tracks the narrator's moves through and within liminal spaces that enact Homi K. Bhabha's "Third Space of Enunciation," which other twenty-first century post-colonial theorists identify as an "intercultural space where hybrid identity is formed in a space of in-betweenness and liminality" (Kuortti and Nyman 8). Bhabha's Third Space is also therefore interstitial, as Trinh T. Minh-ha explains, a precarious space in between fixed subject positions that allows for new subjectivities that resist settlement along binary lines ("Other than myself/my other self" 37). As post-colonial studies of hybridity observe, Bhabha associates an "unhomeliness" with entrance into the Third Space; this discomfort is the "estranging sense of relocation of the home and the world – the unhomeliness – that is the condition of extraterritorial and cross-cultural initiations" (Kuortti and Nyman 8). By demonstrating how the narrator of *The Sympathizer* inhabits Trinh and Bhabha's unhomely liminal spaces, my analysis refutes Ma's assertion that mixed Asian characters are converted exclusively and statically to either an Asian or American identity by presenting mixedness as its own fluid category with unique challenges and experiences.

My thesis pushes back against three common stereotypes attributed to mixed figures: one: the mixed person as perpetually homeless, two: the mixed person as a child of the future, and three: the mixed figure as the illegitimate bastard. The mixed person as the perpetual outcast is a stereotype that originated during the second World War. This image characterizes mixed people as plagued by "conflicting cultures [that leave] them torn and confused," and the rejection by

their parental groups of origin renders them “pathetically marginal and outcast” (C. Nakashima, “An Invisible Monster” 171). The marginal mixed person is also considered dangerous, as their unique racial position enables them to “excel [] at betrayal and frontier espionage” (C. Nakashima, “An Invisible Monster” 172). As discussed earlier, the “child of the future” is a stereotype that paints mixed people as “bridges” across artificial boundaries of race that will unite people across the world and enable global cooperation (C. Nakashima, “An Invisible Monster” 173). And finally, the stereotype of the mixed child as the illegitimate bastard comes from a history of mixed children emerging from American militarism in the Asian diaspora, particularly through rape or prostitution (Teo 80). These often stateless children, disavowed by their fathers, are seen as inferior and untrustworthy; indeed, a 1937 text characterized “half-caste” children as “degenerate” and “scheming” with whorish mothers (Teo 86).

Broadly, my thesis intervenes in previous scholarship by elaborating on how immateriality appears in mixed race figures. Numerous scholars argue that the disembodiment and ambiguity of mixed race characters enacts the trope of the passing novel (Ho) and thus evokes the post-racial myth to then refute it (Poulsen). I extend Ho and Poulsen’s arguments to *The Sympathizer* and complicate this movement by examining it on multiple levels – physical, narrative, chronological, and embodied – and putting them in conversation with each other, rather than focusing on solely intertextual movements (Rody) or embodied movements (Poulsen). My reading also rejects valorized notions of home and wholeness – the idea that fractional and displaced identity is somehow lacking or unwhole – and instead presents the Third Space and cross-categorical movement as an area of rich study, engagement, and recognition as the shared legacy of mixed identities. I ultimately aim to critique binary approaches to race and to literary criticism that aim to settle and parse something as amorphous as mixed identity, and

instead invite the nuance and threats to racial hierarchy that unsettled, non-binary racial identities entail. And finally, I hope to create new readings of mixed Asian literary figures that avoid co-opting mixed race, but instead explore literary mixedness as deserving of its own analysis – an analysis that considers the complexities and lived experiences of mixedness.

“Unsettling Mixed Identities” is divided into four chapters. In Chapter 1, I argue that in *The Sympathizer*, the narrator’s displacement and physical movement between Vietnam and America suggests that physical displacement is a key element of mixed identities. This quality is related to Bhabha’s idea that the Third Space can be characterized through its “unhomeliness” and Trinh’s assertion that “the notion of displacement is also a place of identity” (*Framer Framed*, 157). In Chapter 2, I argue the protagonist’s physical movement is reflected narratively in movement among intertextual references, genres, and between a collective and individual “I,” creating layers of narrative that the narrator knowingly navigates. In Chapter 3, I argue the narrator’s movement between past and present through flashbacks and the ghosts of the crapulent major and Sonny enacts Bhabha’s postcolonial concept of time-lag as an intrusion of the past into the present that “trouble[s] the linearity of modernity by repeating the past” (Kuortti and Nyman 10) and associates mixedness with a fluid movement through time that defies fixed categorization. Finally, in Chapter 4, I contend that moments of embodiment and disembodiment and changes in self-referential pronouns during the narrator’s torture create simultaneous layers of fragmentation, selfhood, and wholeness to invoke liminality in association with the narrator’s mixedness.

I. Physical Movement & Displacement as Identity

The narrator's constant physical movement between countries associates his mixedness with physical displacement. While this might seem to play into the trope of the "forever homeless" mixed person, I contend this aspect of the text constitutes an argument for displacement as identity – an identity decoupled from any particular physical place and instead grounded in the lack of one constant place, and specifically the movement between places. By emphasizing movement between spaces/places, displacement as identity leaves room for the complexities of mixed identity formation and thus refuses any one single characterization of the mixed experience – such as the tragically homeless, or that mixed race people are harbingers of world peace.

What is "home?"

In locating identity, it is worthwhile to explore the loaded way in which *The Sympathizer* deploys the word "home." The narrator often refers to Vietnam as his homeland (183); yet, at various points, he expresses doubt that Vietnam is truly his home. At one point, his Japanese American coworker Sophia Mori asks, "Isn't this your home now, too?" (216), referring to the United States, and, upon being captured in Vietnam, the narrator wonders aloud, "Mama told me the bird always returns to its nest. Am I not that bird? Is this not my nest? My origin, my place of birth, my country? My home? Are these not my people?" (329). The narrator's home, therefore, is not so straightforward as a birthplace. Indeed, the series of short, interrogative "am I not" questions gestures to the narrator's simultaneous uncertainty at asserting that he belongs in Vietnam and contrasting incredulousness that he is compelled to justify belonging in the place he was born and raised. This uncertainty is due to his experience of repeated labeling and exclusion

as a “bastard” (18) – an illicit mixed race son of a Vietnamese woman and French Catholic priest. This race-based exclusion takes place, for example, when the General bans the narrator from dating his daughter due to the narrator’s bastard status (291), and soldiers and the narrator’s family members alike use the term to ostracize and bully him (18). “Bastard,” and thus his mixedness, becomes a means of ostracization that denies the narrator a full and unquestioned claim to Vietnam as his home. Moreover, even when he is physically located in a place where he “[feels] at home” (148) in the Philippines, the narrator is “conscious of [himself] as a privileged semi-Westerner in an impoverished country” (149), exemplifying simultaneous and paradoxical sentiments of feeling at home yet knowing he still does not belong due to his “semi-Western” status.

Upon receiving his assignment to follow the General to America, the narrator asks his handler Man, “When do I get to come home?” (30); the text later reveals that, on the General’s orders, he may only return to Vietnam upon killing his friend – the Communist-leaning journalist Sonny (264). The phrasing “when do I get to” suggests that “home” is something that the narrator must gain permission from a so-called true (or monoracial) Vietnamese person to return to, despite being Vietnamese himself. As such, access to “home” for the mixed narrator is at the discretion of monoracial gatekeepers like the General and Man, again complicating the narrator’s repeated claim to Vietnam as his homeland. Moreover, the narrator later remarks that “for displaced people, the first question was always about time: when can I return?” (199), citing the same question that he himself asks Man at the outset of the novel. In thus identifying himself as a displaced person – one without a clear home to return to – the narrator begins to identify himself in terms of displacement rather than in terms of a singular, physical home. Indeed, he finds himself in a situation similar to that of the displaced boat people, whom he describes as rendered

“homeless within their own country” (151). Perhaps his earlier self-comparison to the migratory birds is appropriate; just as the birds leave home, return, and leave again across hemispheres, the narrator must find a way to reconcile home with constant displacement, return, and exile.

But if Vietnam is not truly the narrator’s one home, then what is he referring to when he speaks frequently of “our homeland” (183)? This enduring uncertainty around where the narrator calls home reflects a wider sense of displacement that suggests “home” is not one physical place for those with mixed identities; perhaps, “home” can be found in the movements among the physical places one calls home.

Displacement as identity

In *The Sympathizer*, the mixed narrator undergoes physical displacement in which he moves often between countries. Traditional readings of this displacement through the lens of the “forever homeless” trope would suggest this perpetual movement and lack of a physical home is a tragic consequence of being mixed. Yet rather than conforming to tragic tropes, the mixed narrator finds belonging and thus “home” in his ability to move among different places, free from any “loyalty and subordination to specific ideologies, cultures, systems, and worlds” (Murphy-Shigematsu 24). In *Framer framed*, Trinh elaborates the notion of displacement as a place of identity:

Here the notion of displacement is also a place of identity: there is no real me to return to, no whole self that synthesizes the woman, the woman of color and the writer; there are instead, diverse recognitions of self through difference, and unfinished, contingent, arbitrary closures that make possible both politics and identity (157).

In applying Trinh's framework to *The Sympathizer*, the narrator's constant physical movement throughout the novel – to Vietnam, the United States, the Philippines, Thailand, back to Vietnam, and eventually away from Vietnam as an exile – presents displacement as a place of mixed identity for the narrator, in which parts of his identity are recognized in his movement among places. This absence of a single “whole self” – instead, one constructed through different physical places and the narrator's movements among them – is not an incomplete self, as Trinh rejects the valorization of home and wholeness and instead presents “fragmentation ... [as] a way of living at the borders” (*Framer framed* 157). She further describes fragmentation as “a way of living with differences without turning them into opposites, nor trying to assimilate them out of insecurity” (*Framer framed* 156).

Indeed, in one of the most vivid expressions of the narrator's home in a lengthy 100-word sentence, the narrator describes his hometown Ban Me Thuot as the “land where my mother and father died” (236), mimicking the lyric “land where my fathers died” in the patriotic song “America (My Country, 'Tis of Thee).” In weaving something deeply and inherently American into his proclamation of home, the text suggests that even when describing a specific Vietnamese town, he includes traces of his connection to America and the West in his definition of home. This is significant, given that he is technically Eurasian rather than Amerasian. By including America rather than France – his father's country of origin – the narrator complicates his conception of home as something that goes beyond nations of ethnic origin. Also fundamental to the narrator's conceptualization of home are the history and politics of Ban Me Thuot, as the sentence mentions the indigenous Gia Rai and concludes with, “Land where the heroic People's Army struck first in its liberation of the south during the great campaign of '75, land that was my home” (236). In tying the geography of home to its history and sociopolitical contexts, the

narrator moves beyond a merely physical definition of home. In doing so, he reflects Murphy-Shigematsu's conception of home and mixed identity as one "anchored in struggle and social movement" (24) rather than solely a physical place.

Yet even after this powerful declaration of home, the past tense of the final verb "was" speaks to the narrator's persistent sense of loss or displacement. Although these many disparate elements – America, Vietnam, Communist revolution, the land's history – comprise his home, he is somehow distanced from that place or cannot return to it. Perhaps it is due to the ephemeral nature of a composite, uniquely abstract home that, because of its amalgamate nature, can never be physically located in a singular place; as such, physical alienation and displacement appear built into his definition of home. Indeed, the sheer length of the sentence – at nearly 100 words – and the repetition of comma-separated phrases implies a waxing nostalgia that supports the notion of physical displacement from home, a longing that goes beyond simply being away from Vietnam.

The narrator therefore experiences home as not a single physical place, but in relation to his displacement from physical spaces amid the push, pull, and impossibility of return to a single physical home. It is here that mixed identity comes into play; the narrator's relationship with home promotes Trinh's concept of displacement as identity, in which his mixed identity is grounded not in homelessness, but instead in the movement among the physical places, histories, and social movements that he considers parts of his home. It is in this movement that the narrator recognizes different parts of his identity and emerges with a multifaceted, fragmented recognition of mixedness and of himself. In rejecting a single, categorical definition of physical home in Vietnam or America, the narrator enters Bhaba's Third Space as well as Trinh's interstitial space, in which the "binaries constructing cultural identities break down, constructing

a new hybrid identity” (Nyman 197). In doing so, the narrator’s lack of a place of belonging due to his bastard status promotes a non-categorical, hybrid mixed identity that offers him the freedom to move between spaces and paradoxically find belonging in states of unbelonging, thus rejecting the tragic “forever homeless” trope.

Nor does the narrator’s constant displacement fall neatly into the trope of mixed people as the connective tissue whose seamless ability to navigate their cultures of origin will bring world peace. Nyman reminds us that even as “the idea of fixed home gives way to more fluid ways of finding and narrating home in other spaces” in diasporic identity formation, that process involves fear, trauma, and ambiguity (192). Nyman thus rejects notions that it is easy for mixed people to act as idealized cross-cultural translators. Indeed, the narrator is denied total belonging from his own country of origin, and he still faces anti-Asian racism in the United States, making it difficult to act as a cultural bridge when both countries ostracize him.

In forgoing a single, straightforward definition of a physical home and entering Bhabha’s and Trinh’s Third and interstitial spaces, the mixed narrator finds paradoxical home in displacement, putting forth a representation of mixed identity unhindered by the tragic trope of perpetual homelessness or the cross-cultural ambassador. As such, in denying one simple definition of physical home, the narrator denies one single characterization of mixed identity.

From “home” to the map: Physical unsettlement as racial unsettlement

In addition to displacing home, *The Sympathizer* draws an analogy between the political bifurcation of Vietnam and the racial bifurcation of the narrator, thus using his mixedness to symbolize the geopolitics of Vietnam and effectively pinning his mixed body to physical place. While employing symbolism in this manner may appear contrary to the notion of displacement

as identity, the novel's invocation actually works to critique the categorical desire to "settle" mixed identity onto place (including the "divisions of self" this promotes) to ultimately advocate for displacement as a valid identity.

The parallel between the narrator and Vietnam is made most explicit when the narrator comes to this conclusion about Vietnam and himself amid torture:

Our country itself was cursed, bastardized, partitioned into north and south...we had not chosen to be debased by the French, to be divided by them into an unholy trinity of north, center, and south, to be turned over to the great powers of capitalism and communism for a further bisection... No, just as my abused generation was divided before birth, so was I divided on birth, delivered into a postpartum world where hardly anyone accepted me for who I was, but only ever bullied me into choosing between my two sides. (361)

The description of Vietnam as "bastardized" directly reflects the bastardized narrator, thus drawing an analogy between exploitative, violent French colonialism and the rape of the narrator's underage Vietnamese mother by his French priest father. Moreover, the use of binary pairs and halves – "north and south," "two sides," and "bisection" – further strengthens the analogy between the narrator's mixedness and the political division of Vietnam. Additionally, the narrator's divided political loyalties as a Communist double agent – his actions are sometimes Communist, and sometimes anti-Communist – mirror Vietnam's political divide. As such, the narrator metaphorizes the politics and colonial history of Vietnam, and the text uses the narrator to depict both Vietnam and the bastardized narrator as victims of colonialism.

Yet colonialism is not the only villain – categorical division is also at fault. The narrator characterizes Vietnam's physical binary partition into north and south as a "curse," implicitly due to the countless civilian deaths brought about by civil war. The narrator deploys a myriad of

negative words to describe the divide: “debased,” “bastardized,” and “unholy.” Importantly, it is this same binary mindset that results in the narrator’s ostracization as a child due to his mixed heritage. Thus, the use of the narrator’s mixedness as a symbol for Vietnamese geopolitics critiques categorical mindsets, as the text frames both the mixed narrator and Vietnamese people as victims to divisive categorical frameworks of race and politics.

Non-categorical conceptions of identity emerge as central to the formation of Bhabha’s hybrid identities. As twenty-first century post-colonial theorists observe, Bhabha’s Third Space, in which hybridity is formed, requires the dissolution of binary identities (Nyman 197). In turn, the Third Space prevents these hybrid identities from being settled into binary poles (Bhabha 4). If non-categorical mixed identities are formed in highly abstract and thus non-physical space such as Bhabha’s Third Space, then dislocating and displacing become central aspects of mixedness. Trinh concurs, as “to cut across boundaries and borderlines is to leave the maze of categories and labels. It is to resist simplistic attempts at classifying” (*When the moon waxes red* 107-108). According to Trinh, therefore, the narrator’s constant travel – cutting across literal borders of countries – is intrinsically tied with non-categorical modes of thinking, being, and identifying. Reading the displacing of the narrator’s mixed identity in terms of Bhabha’s Third Space and Trinh’s boundary crossings thus asserts the important role of physical dislocation in enabling the creation of non-categorical mixed identities. As such, movement among and displacement from physical places in *The Sympathizer* depict its narrator’s mixedness as a non-categorical identification; conversely, it is this non-categorical identity that enables the narrator to engage in physical movement.

The narrator’s constant physical displacement further reflects his critique of the binary and categorical settlement of mixed identities. As discussed earlier, the narrator moves

frequently between countries – beginning in Vietnam, attending college in California, returning to Vietnam, fleeing to Guam then California, to the Philippines, back to California, then to Thailand, back to Vietnam, and finally away from Vietnam as a permanent exile. This physical unsettlement mirrors the racial unsettlement that often comes with mixedness; indeed, Ho argues that “traveling becomes a trope for passing, a statement about moving in and out of spaces” (104). According to Ho’s argument, the narrator’s constant travel in the *The Sympathizer* certainly qualifies as passing – a strategy, Ho writes, “for dislocating one’s racial and ethnic identity” (97) as an untethered, mobile subject. As such, the narrator’s physical movement throughout the novel operates narratively as a means to deny others’ attempts to project binary racial identifications onto him, and the exclusion that inevitably follows. The text therefore articulates a mixed identity that is neither racially nor physically fixed. Indeed, perhaps this constant physical displacement outweighs the apparent fixity of using the narrator to symbolize the geopolitical divide of a physical country, as discussed earlier.

The Sympathizer deploys the narrator’s mixedness as a symbol for the ways Vietnamese geopolitics resists categorical frameworks in a manner that raises the possibility that Nguyen traffics in the use of mixed race characters to metaphorize other experiences. As Shostak observes, the narrator’s mixedness “allegorize[s] the contested history Nguyen explores” (175) in that his racial bifurcation represents binary “oppositions as West versus East, North versus South, personal confession versus national history, dialogic versus monologic storytelling, guilt versus innocence” (175). In following established patterns of reducing mixed characters to symbols, *The Sympathizer* runs the risk of “objectify[ing] mixed-race individuals and to prioritiz[ing] narrative over the humanity of multiracial people” (Smith 3). While Nguyen’s use of the narrator as a symbol can be read as harmful, this harm may be mediated in that the symbolism highlights the

failure of binary frameworks as a lens through which to understand mixed identities. In doing so, the analogy avoids the wholesale neglect of mixed identities even as Nguyen uses the narrator to make a point about colonialism and the politics of the Vietnam War.

Altogether, the lack of a single physical home to which to return, alongside frequent physical travel and being analogized to Vietnamese geopolitics, suggest the narrator's mixedness is grounded in displacement – an identity decoupled from physical place that instead embraces the movement among physical places. In mapping physical unsettlement onto racial unsettlement, the narrator demonstrates mixedness as non-categorical, and thus leaves space for multiple characterizations of mixed identities that defy binary limitations and reductive tropes – namely, that mixed people are forever homeless. Rather, by embracing displacement as identity and home within the movement among physical places, it is as Bhabha writes: “To be unhomed is not to be homeless” (9).

II. Intertextual and Meta-Narrative Movements

In addition to physical displacement, the narrator blurs the boundaries between reality/fiction and truth/falsehood, interweaves intertextuality throughout, and simultaneously embodies a singular and collective selfhood in acts of narrative unsettlement. In doing so, the text presents this narrative displacement, and thus displacement as identity, as a means through which to articulate mixedness. The text depicts this ability as neither boon nor pitfall; rather, it arms the narrator with unique ways of articulating his story, again rejecting extreme characterizations of displacement as wholesale tragic or advantageous. This unsettlement also promotes non-categorical, fractional ways of articulating mixed identity that resist conforming to valorized notions of wholeness, settlement, and belonging.

Truth and falsehoods, reality and fiction

In navigating multiple layers of narrative form and truthfulness, *The Sympathizer's* narrator ambiguates the boundaries between reality and fiction. In cutting across these boundaries, he enters a narrative Third Space that enables him to traverse different forms of narrative truth and ways of storytelling free of binary constraints of form or absolute, factual truth. Drawing upon Ho's argument that inter-genre movement can be read as passing, the narrator embraces narrative displacement as a place of mixed identity.

To begin, the nature of the text's truthfulness itself is ambiguous; from the first paragraph, readers know the book they are reading is fictional and is the narrator's confession (1). Yet as the novel unfolds, the narrator reveals that this confession has been rewritten multiple times until his Communist captors were satisfied (308). As such, the fact that the narrator is writing these words to appease his captors under threat of death invites doubt as to his reliability, and this narrative dishonesty contradicts the supposedly truthful nature of a confession. This contradiction blurs the lines between truth (what is expected from the confessional form) and falsehood (what is expected from the fictional form).

As a double agent, the narrator inherently inhabits a position in which he ambiguates truth, whether it is through lying about his political loyalties, shifting suspicion onto the crapulent major as the mole (58), or dissembling to the film studio representative to get a larger settlement (202). The stereotype of the mixed person as the illegitimate bastard further enhances this ambiguation of truth and deception; according to it, illegitimate mixed children are more likely to be disloyal and "scheming" (Teo 86). As such, paternal disavowal and disinheritance mirrors mixed peoples' supposed tendency to turn their backs on their peers and undertake a

duplicitous profession like being a spy. In being disavowed by his father and becoming a double agent, the narrator of *The Sympathizer* thus follows in the tradition of the untrustworthy illegitimate mixed child. Yet even though he lies for a profession, it is in navigating and inhabiting these lies that he perhaps discovers a sort of truth about who he is. After all, it is through acting as a spy that he interacts with both American and Vietnamese cultures, travels to so many places, and undergoes the formative experiences that occur during the novel to ultimately learn who he is as a person. Paradoxically, personal truth for the narrator thus arises from living in constant falsehood, further blurring the lines between absolute truth and lies to introduce nonfactual narrative truth. He even remarks at one point that he “dreamed of trying to pull a mask off my face, only to realize that the mask was my face” (136), implying that his artifice and his true self have become entangled perhaps permanently.

The narrator’s constant blurring of truth and lies, both in his confession and as a double agent, cuts across the boundaries of true and untrue to introduce a nuanced, ambiguous discourse that exists outside of the binaries of truth and falsehood. In doing so, he embodies Trinh’s interstitial space as he enters a “precarious space where [he] constantly run[s] the risk of falling on one side or the other” (*Framer framed* 173), truth or falsehood. In doing so, the narrator promotes a non-binarist approach to narrative truth that provides a nuanced, non-essentialist way of capturing lived experience in describing identity, and particularly mixed identities. Indeed, as Toni Morrison writes, subjective fiction and objective fact are inherently entangled in the act of uncovering truths about the interior lives of marginalized group members, as “facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot” (93). Following Morrison, the narrator creates “a kind of truth” in the imaginative act of lying as a double agent. It is this non-categorical lens

– one that blurs fact and fiction – that allows for multiple conceptualizations of mixedness that do not adhere to set tropes or binary characterizations.

In addition to narrative truth, the narrator also blurs the lines between reality and fiction. When the narrator submits his confession to the commandant a final time, its last page lays atop “the other 306 pages that preceded it” (308). 306 pages is almost exactly the same number of pages that precede the page this sentence appears on, and therefore intends to reference the physical book that the reader holds. This notion is further supported by the fact that the number of pages quoted changes in editions of the book with different page numbers – in one online version, it reads “the other 294 pages that preceded it”⁴ – to ensure that the total number of pages is in clear reference to *The Sympathizer* book itself. These specific page numbers demonstrate the narrator’s meta-narrative abilities; in including the specific page numbers of the confession the readers now hold, the fictional character demonstrates awareness of the real world *The Sympathizer* book dwells in. In addition to the meta page numbers, the narrator describes his commandant captor as a “diligent editor, always ready to note my many errata and digressions and always urging me to delete, excise, reword, or add” (308). In explicitly characterizing him as an editor, the fictional commandant becomes a part of the real-world publication process – a real editing process that Nguyen undoubtedly undertook in publishing *The Sympathizer*. In interweaving reality and fiction, the narrator thus again obfuscates the line between them.

The Sympathizer’s continual blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction, truth and untruth, creates layers of narrative the protagonist consciously moves through. The practice of cutting across the borders that divide reality and fiction – usually two binarily opposed concepts

⁴ Here is the online edition that cites 294 pages:

<https://s3.amazonaws.com/arena-attachments/1675481/9423b686df1a12b3ef83911985321cae.pdf?1517360354>

– mimics the narrator’s ability to cut across physical boundaries, as discussed in the previous chapter. To extend the concept of physical displacement as identity to narrative, narrative movement between reality and fiction, truth and lies, prevents the narrator from being grounded solely in either. In the terms of Bhabha’s Third Space, the narrator inhabits a space outside of the binary poles of reality/fiction and truth/artifice; he instead interweaves, ambiguates, and travels between them as he enacts a meta-narrative.

Outside of obfuscating the boundary between fact/fiction and truth/lies, *The Sympathizer* embodies multiple narrative forms throughout, including screenplay (through dialogue formatted as a script in Chapter 22), the captivity narrative (when Communists capture the narrator), historical fiction (as fiction grounded in the real events of the Vietnam War), and the novel. The fact that this narrative movement is not limited to just reality and fiction, truth and untruth, again demonstrates the narrator’s disregard for narrative boundaries. But more importantly, it also demonstrates the narrator is not limited to two-directional movement between binary poles; his capacity to traverse multiple narrative forms extends to border crossings more widely, rejecting essentialist binary frameworks altogether.

This narratively unsettled form mirrors the racial unsettlement associated with mixedness, thus drawing a connection between the narrator’s mixedness and these narrative movements. In an essay on ambiguous movements, Ho demonstrates how two works by mixed authors “create mobile subjectivities for their narrators as each work moves back and forth – through genre, through identities, through countries – crossing multiple borders of form and content to create a passing story” (97). In positioning movement between narrative forms as characteristic of passing, which she identifies as a “strategy for dislocating one’s racial and ethnic identity” (97), the inter-genre movement of *The Sympathizer* is associated with the

narrator's racial unsettlement as a mixed person. Therefore, just as with physical displacement (Chapter 1), narrative displacement also becomes a place of mixed identities, as unsettled narrative forms allow for their diverse and non-binary articulations.

Intertextuality and narrative movement

Intertextual references to both Asian American and Western literary canons throughout *The Sympathizer* suggest the narrator claims a place in both Western and Asian American canons, refusing the common call for mixed people to "pick a side," whether in terms of racial identity or narrative tradition. The inclusion of both canons creates a sense of movement and unsettlement concerning the narrator's literary lineages, enabling the resulting narrative displacement to act as a mode of mixed identification.

Rody highlights several allusions *The Sympathizer* makes to other works, both in the Asian American and Western literary canons (398-400). From the Asian American canon, the text references Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (1976) ("You must not tell anyone what I am about to tell you" (208)); Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong's anthology *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974) (in revising the screams of Vietnamese extras in the Auteur's script (131)); Carlos Bulosan's "America is in the Heart" ("You must claim America...if America is not in your heart, America will throw you into a concentration camp" (274)); Trinh T. Minh-ha's film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) (the tortured female Communist agent proclaims, "My surname is Viet and my given name is Nam" (350)); and John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957) (both feature a Japanese American woman in a love triangle with two men as they converse about refusing the draft and internment (214-215)). Yet *The Sympathizer*'s allusions are not limited to the Asian American canon;

Western literary references abound. The text alludes to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) in its first chapter (both share a similar "I am/I am not" sentence structure, as well as the keywords "spook" and "movie" (1); both also open with the narrator being called a derogatory name (18))⁵, Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) (as the narrator masturbates using a squid that his mother then serves for dinner (78-80), just as Portnoy does with a liver), and even Socrates ("The unexamined life is not worth living" (311)).

This abundance of references creates what Rody calls a "sympathetic network of literary allusions" (398), in which the text "affirm[s] solidarity with, even constitution from, one's precursors" (399). In establishing solidarity with both Western and Asian American literary traditions, the narrator rejects categorical settlement into just one canon, just as he declines to pick a so-called racial "side" – a sentiment made clear when he wonders, "How could I choose me against myself?" (361). The narrator claims his place in both canons as he moves fluidly between them by incorporating intertextual references into his narration. The simultaneous belonging in and movement across canons creates a sense of narrative unsettlement, which the text therefore positions as a place of mixed identity.

Amid this abundance of allusions, I've selected two to examine more closely: the text's opening reference to T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and the reference to Chin et al.'s anthology.

The Sympathizer sets the narrative stage by declaring, "The month in question was April, the cruelest month" (1). This allusion to T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" draws the two works into comparison; both reference war and its fallout, as Eliot's poem was written in the aftermath of the first World War, and *The Sympathizer* takes place in the wake of the Vietnam War. Moreover, just as *The Sympathizer* does, Eliot's poem includes copious allusions to the Western literary

⁵ See Rody (400) for a more thorough side-by-side comparison of Ellison and *The Sympathizer*.

canon, from Dante to Shakespeare and Milton. Just as “The Waste Land” often changes speakers, locations, and times, *The Sympathizer* similarly employs shifts in locations (Chapter 1), an unsettled narrator that somewhat resembles unstable speakers (Chapter 2), and shifting times (Chapter 3), thus strengthening a comparison between the two works. In alluding to Eliot and highlighting such similarity, the narrator exhibits solidarity with the Western literary canon, positioning it as a key component of his unique narrative voice and thus cultural identification.

The Sympathizer also alludes to Chin et al.’s *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, a work that uncovered “forgotten” Asian American writers and helped establish the field of Asian American literature. It enters into *The Sympathizer* when the Auteur – a Hollywood movie director – calls upon the narrator to consult on his script for a Vietnam War action film. Much to the Auteur’s chagrin, the narrator criticizes the Auteur’s transcriptions of the Vietnamese villagers’ screams, which appear as “AIIIEEEEE!!!” (131). This spelling is a clear reference to Chin et al.’s work, whose title in turn references a stereotypical, one-dimensional portrayal of Asian people on screen. The narrator replaces that articulation with a more “realistic” scream; he remembers witnessing a Viet Cong agent being choked to death by barbed wire and “scream[s] for him” (131) by inscribing the agent’s scream “onomatopoeically across the cover page of the screenplay in big black letters: AIEYAAHHH!!!” (131).

By referencing Chin’s anthology, the narrator positions himself as part of the Asian American literary canon, rejecting stereotypical representations and reclaiming the means of self-representation explicitly through inscription, or writing. More widely, by situating himself in a network of both Asian American and Western literary canons through these allusions, the narrator claims solidarity with both Asian American and Western authors. In doing so, he remains narratively unsettled in terms of his literary influences and legacy; he denies belonging

solely to one literary tradition. This narrative unsettlement signals entrance into Trinh's interstitial space and Bhabha's Third Space, in which the narrator resists binary settlement to a single literary tradition – Western or Asian – that would correspond with just one half of his racial background. In refusing to “choose against [himself]” (361), either racially or narratively, he enacts narrative unsettlement across literary canons as a place of mixed identity.

Between the singular and collective “I”

Throughout *The Sympathizer*, the narrator moves between using the singular “I” and collective “I” to refer to himself, creating movement between the embodiment of a singular self and multiple people (particularly other displaced peoples). The narrator's namelessness generalizes him, establishing him as a collective subject. In positioning the narrator as moving between one and many selves, the text creates a link between mixedness and states of displacement and unsettlement, refusing the binary “choice between” Asian or white identity.

The namelessness of the narrator generalizes him by positioning him as an “everyman,” which in turn contributes to his status as a collective subject. Names, as Daniel A. Nakashima writes, are “a site of political struggle where conventional racial classifications can be transgressed, accepted, or ignored” (113). Specifically, in obscuring or modifying parts of their names, mixed people may “attempt to gain some control over the process by which they are racially and ethnically categorized” (D. Nakashima 119). In withholding his name, the narrator refuses to be subjected to the ways names trigger racial and ethnic categorization. This refusal confers a certain agency, enabling the narrator to sidestep conventional binary racial classifications and attempts to settle his racial identity. Moreover, because one's name is seen as symbolic of unique individuality, the narrator's anonymity enhances his status as a collective

subject capable of embodying many other people and selves.

More tangentially, the narrator refuses to individually name many other characters in the novel, including the crapulent major, the General, the commandant and commissar of the prison camp, and the Auteur. Instead, he identifies them by their rank or occupation in a categorical manner that similarly denies them individuality. Shostak characterizes the use of categories to identify characters as the narrator “reenact[ing] his father’s refusal to recognize him, placing him in the position of a subject denying subjectivity to others” (183). In this sense, the narrator’s categorical naming of others reenacts others’ categorical racing of himself. In this way, he reverses and resists the traditional binary racing of racially ambiguous people, denying these other characters autonomous subjectivity just as they have done to him in attempting to racially settle his mixedness into an exclusively white or Asian identity.

The Sympathizer’s conclusion is marked by a paradoxical expression of individuality and multiplicity when the narrator moves from using first-person singular pronouns to third-person plural pronouns. He begins by referring to himself as “we” when he is released from the prison camp, with the plural pronoun referring to “that man of two minds, me and myself” (376). This plurality represents the narrator’s psychological fracturing as a result of torture, as well as his two racial “selves” – “me and myself.” Yet the narrative transition to “we” also suggests a newfound subjective multiplicity, in which the narrator takes on the collective voice of the displaced boat people as he joins their ranks at the end of the novel. Indeed, Rody declares the narrator’s collective narration becomes “an honored collectivity of the abject, a “we” of stateless migrants” (402). In taking on a collective voice of migrants, the narrator thus comes to embody one self – himself – and multiple migrant selves, as he speaks from an individual position staked in collective identity. Throughout *The Sympathizer*, the narrator similarly employs the “our”

pronoun often and ambiguously, referring to South Vietnam's government as "our state" (25) and the South Vietnamese military as "our troops" (3), despite the fact that he is a Communist agent. When asked why he employs the "our" pronoun so often to refer to his enemy in his confession, the narrator responds that it is "in those moments when I identify with the southern soldiers and evacuees on whom I was sent to spy" (36). In doing so, the "our" pronoun thus enables the narrator to represent a collective of his supposed enemy – the Southern Vietnamese – simply as a people who share his Communist ideals.

The movement between the individuality and multiplicity of self characterizes the narrator's subjectivity as paradoxical and unsettled across the binary poles of one and many. This unsettled selfhood becomes a place of mixed identity for the narrator, just as he is racially unsettled between the binaries of whiteness or Asianness. Moreover, the narrator's embrace of a fractional self rejects valorized wholeness in terms of selfhood, racial identity, and national identity as he joins the displaced boat people. He reflects, "the true optical illusion was in seeing others and oneself as undivided and whole" (374), suggesting that no one – mixed or monoracial – is completely "whole." Thus *The Sympathizer* affirms that the ambiguation of self, along with fracturing and displacement, are valid ways of articulating identity.

The text further suggests this movement between the individual self and multiplicities as the narrator likens himself to a nation composed of millions of citizens. While being tortured by the constant sound of a screaming baby, the narrator visualizes the moment of his own conception, when his "cells divided, and divided, until I was a million cells and more, until I was multitudes, my own country, my own nation, the emperor and dictator of the masses of myself, commanded by mother's undivided attention" (367). In aligning the millions of individual cells that comprise his physical body with millions of a nation, the narrator again simultaneously

embodies a collective self – composed of multiple individuals – and an individual self – as himself, the narrator. Although this moment occurs before the pronoun changes to “we,” the narrator’s “I” pronoun nevertheless represents many selves, as Rody argues the narrator “opens his uniquely porous I to a diverse collectivity” (400) through rich intertextuality throughout. The paradox of individual and collective displaced subjectivity thus positions the narrator as an unsettled subject refusing to dwell narratively in either one or many selves, just as he refuses to settle racially within the binary structure of Asian or white identity. This unsettlement and displacement of narrative self, along with physical displacement (Chapter 1), therefore becomes a place of mixed identity.

To assert the narrator represents many displaced selves resists post-racial ideas that mixed people represent all people because of their multiple cultural backgrounds. Rather, the narrator’s affinity with the stateless boat people he eventually joins metaphorically functions to position displacement as a place of mixed identity.

Altogether, narrative techniques such as the blurring of reality/fiction and truth/falsehood, intertextual references, and oscillations between a singular and collective “I” create a deep sense of narrative unsettlement throughout *The Sympathizer*. Indeed, the text’s indeterminate status forces readers to dwell in a psychic space strongly resembling that of the unsettled narrator. This unsettlement in turn presents narrative displacement as a place of mixed identity, rejecting valorizations of wholeness to instead promote fractional, unsettled, and ambiguous mixed identities. Moreover, narrative displacement arms the narrator with unique ways of articulating his story – for example, through intertextuality and meta-narrative – to prevent displacement from becoming characterized as stereotypically tragic.

III. Chronological Movements: Between Past and Present

In moving between past and present through flashbacks and the appearance of ghosts, *The Sympathizer* troubles Western, linear time and associates mixedness with a fluid movement through time that defies fixed categorization. In associating such movement with mixedness, the text supports the notion of displacement as identity; the narrator is not tied to a particular past or present, promoting an unsettled mixedness that oscillates among chronological as well as spatial and narrative binary poles.

Cyclical time and Homi Bhabha's time-lag

The Sympathizer frequently characterizes time as cyclical and infinite rather than linear, blending the past and present such that the narrator experiences both at once; in doing so, he becomes temporally unsettled. When the narrator enters the General's new restaurant in the United States, he notices that the clock – shaped like Vietnam – is set to Saigon time. The narrator reflects, "Displaced people also lived in two time zones, the here and there, the present and the past, being as we were reluctant time travelers. But while science fiction imagined time travelers as moving forward or backward in time... we were only going in circles" (199). The narrator outlines binary structures such as the spatial "here and there" and the temporal "present and past" to establish himself and other displaced people as traveling outside of binary structures of time and space. Yet he ultimately concludes that time for displaced people is cyclical, as the clock only "go[es] in circles," rejecting Western conceptions of time as a unidirectional line in favor of non-linear time that collapses discrete categories such as "past" and "present." Cyclical, non-categorical time aligns with Bhabha's notion of time-lag, in which the past intrudes upon the present. Intrusions of the past into the present allow "non-Western temporalities... [to] counter

the aspirations of Eurocentric narratives of modernity” (Bhabha 11) by resisting the “contemporary compulsion... to move beyond, turn present into past” (Bhabha 18). The concept of cyclical time-lag is commensurate with how the narrator – displaced spatially as a refugee and racially as a mixed person – perceives time: untethered to a stable, discrete present. Rather, he remains temporally unsettled, as he “live[s] in two time zones” (199) at once as a metaphorical time traveler. In this way, the text offers the concept of chronological displacement as a place of mixed identity, in which the narrator’s racial displacement as a mixed person aligns with his temporal displacement.

The narrator later experiences the cyclical nature of time when he is tortured by the soundtrack of a screaming baby. Amid torture, he muses, “Time no longer ran straight as a railroad; time no longer rotated on a dial; time no longer crawled under my back; time was infinitely looping, a cassette tape repeating without end; time howled in my ear, screaming with laughter at the idea that we could control it with wristwatches, alarm clocks, revolutions, history” (366-367). While reaffirming the cyclical notion of time as “infinitely looping,” the narrator also suggests time cannot be controlled by symbols of industrial Western modernity. Time “no longer rotated on a dial” as it does on a clock, in which clocks are associated with industrialism due to their role in standardizing time and regulating factory productivity. Nor does time run “straight as a railroad,” in which railroads were a key element of the U.S. industrial revolution. Rather, the text’s personification of time depicts it as untamed and mocking, as it “howl[s] in [the narrator’s] ear” and “scream[s] with laughter.” By smugly escaping its linear Western conceptualization, time refuses to assert a discrete and linear past, present, and future; instead, it offers endless cyclicity, undivided and nondirectional.

Upon this reflection on time, the narrator then imagines the moment of his own conception, as “the Chinese acrobat of time bent impossibly back on itself so that I could see the invasion of my mother’s womb by my father’s dumb, masculine horde, a howling gang of helmeted, hell-bent nomads intent on piercing the great wall of my mother’s egg” (367). Here, time is again personified – this time as an acrobat – to ascribe to it a flexibility and mobility unrestrained by conventional physics. This flexible, unrestrained time aligns with the rejection of linear time described above. Moreover, the text describes the moment of the narrator’s conception as a violent intrusion into his mother, as the narrator characterizes it as an “invasion” led by his father’s sperm, which are in turn described as “helmeted, hell-bent nomads.” The helmet descriptor and “masculin[ity]” of the horde recalls the helmets of male soldiers, and the word “invasion” suggests military aggression. As such, the act of the narrator’s conception comes to resemble the violent intrusion of French colonialism, as well as the American military, into Vietnam. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that the narrator’s father is a French Catholic priest who raped the narrator’s underage Vietnamese mother, thus reenacting the same violence of French invasion into Vietnam. The narrator’s conception is therefore inherently tied to colonialism and military imperialism – a notion supported by the fact that many mixed children, called “dust of life” (C. Nakashima, “Servants of Culture” 148) emerged from the Vietnam War, frequently abandoned by their American soldier fathers and sometimes also their Vietnamese mothers.

Tying colonialism into conversations around nonlinear time further aligns the novel with Bhabha’s time-lag, in which it is specifically the colonial past that recurs in the post-colonial present to “trouble the linearity of modernity by repeating the past” (Kuortti and Nyman 10). In recalling the colonial past of Vietnam and placing it back into the present as the narrator

imagines his own conception, the narrator experiences time-lag as past and present collapse into one and occur simultaneously via cyclical time. By remaining temporally unsettled across an unstable past and present, the mixed narrator is displaced in time, thus associating temporal displacement with mixedness and offering it as a place of mixed identity.

Ghosts of the past and present

The ghosts of the narrator's victims (Sonny and the crapulent major) intrude from the past to trouble the present, positioning both the narrator and the ghosts as liminal beings, both temporally and in terms of subjecthood. This liminal temporal space demonstrates nonlinear, cyclical time, which in turn unsettles the narrator across a non-discrete past and present. In displacing the narrator temporally as he re-experiences dead figures from his past, the novel offers chronological displacement as a place of mixed identity.

When the narrator returns to Vietnam near the end of the novel as part of a task force to fight the Viet Cong while still undercover, he is haunted by two ghosts of people he has killed: the crapulent major – whom he framed him as a mole – and Sonny – a Communist-aligned journalist. The ghosts maintain a persistent physically proximate relationship to the narrator; as he flies to Vietnam, he shares his plane seat “with the crapulent major on one side and Sonny on the other” (280), and when he tries to sleep, both ghosts “[l]ie on the ceiling above [him]” (290) and address him directly (326). The ghosts of the crapulent major and Sonny primarily function as embodiments of the guilt the narrator feels from murdering them, thus dragging the consequences of his past actions into the present and undermining notions of discrete and unidirectional time. Specifically, the narrator's lingering guilt – and its embodiment as ghosts

– aligns with Bhabha’s time lag in that it resists the modern desire to persistently move forward in time.

Likewise, the ghosts invoke liminality by existing in a space between life and death. Indeed, Sean James Bosman affirms the ghosts “are liminal and defy easy categorization” (4) by “troubling the boundaries that distinguish [presence] from absence” (4), along with the boundaries between life and death. Additionally, the ghosts’ tendency to hover on the ceiling – both in the narrator’s hotel room (290) and when he leaves the prison camp (279) – alludes to the liminal space they inhabit as dead figures that cannot “ascend” (or reach the metaphorically heavenward afterlife), as they are paradoxically bound by an object of the material world – a ceiling. In inhabiting the liminal space between life/death and past/present, the ghosts of Sonny and the crapulent major demonstrate Bhabha’s time-lag as figures of the past and death, repeatedly intruding into the present of the still-living narrator and reenacting the past in the present. The constant intrusion of the past into the present suggests nonlinear, cyclical time, which in turn temporally displaces the narrator across the past and present. Just as he is racially unsettled as a mixed person, he is also temporally unsettled; as such, temporal displacement becomes a place of mixed identity.

After Communist forces capture the narrator, the ghosts of Sonny and the crapulent major continue to observe and mock him as he undergoes torture. They react gleefully to the narrator’s tortured confession (“Hush, said the crapulent major. I want to hear this. It’s going to be rich!” (345)), becoming an eager audience of live – and gruesome – entertainment. This audience comparison is further strengthened when *The Sympathizer* takes on a Q&A script-like format in Chapter 21, in which the ghosts comment on the torture parenthetically – “(This is going on for far too long, said the crapulent major. He’s had enough. No, said Sonny. He’s really sweating

now. We're starting to get somewhere!)" (348). The use of parenthetical interjections amid a script-like narrative format positions the ghosts as a real-life audience existing outside the world of the script as expectant spectators – much like an audience at a television sitcom recording – present only to consume the entertainment. Indeed, the ghosts even “applaud[] in approval” (360) when the narrator’s torturer draws his gun on the narrator, mimicking the applause of a crowd at the end of a performance.

Because *The Sympathizer* positions the ghosts as an eager audience to the narrator’s torture, the narrator becomes the object of the ghosts’ entertainment, temporarily reversing the dynamic in which the ghosts embodied the narrator’s guilt. This offers the ghosts some agentic subjecthood, as they finally enact their revenge if only as observers; the ghost of the crapulent major even seems to gain some materialism as he appears to physically nudge the narrator’s leg, before it is revealed that it is the narrator’s torturer doing so. Needless to say, the narrator loses his prior agentic subjecthood during torture; he is physically restrained and cannot take action to save himself. Even when offered the opportunity to commit suicide, the narrator remarks both he and his torturer “had bodies but could not shoot” (365), and the narrator can only “moan in protest” (326) in response to the ghosts’ goading, signaling his lack of agency to act or speak. In blurring the line between who is a subject and who is made an object, the text positions both the ghosts and the narrator as liminal beings, unsettled across poles of subjecthood as well as time.

As such, the ghosts of the narrator’s victims not only move from passive objectivity to agentic subjectivity, but also from the past into the present by doggedly reminding the narrator of his shameful past actions. In constantly bringing the past into the present, time becomes cyclical and omnidirectional, unsettling the narrator across a non-discrete past and present. This

chronological displacement mirrors the narrator's racial unsettlement as a mixed person, thus positioning temporal displacement as a place of mixed identity.

Intrusive memory and childhood flashbacks

The Sympathizer depicts frequent flashbacks to the narrator's childhood that position him as temporally unsettled. Many of these memories concern the narrator's mother and experiences of exclusion due to his mixed heritage. In some episodes, the narrator recalls receiving half as much red envelope money as his cousins because he is only half-Vietnamese (140), his friends Man and Bon standing up for him when he is bullied for being mixed (233), learning that the priest is his father and imagining his parents as dogs having sex (207-208), and hearing of the death of his mother (153-154). In constantly experiencing these flashbacks, the narrator's past continuously intrudes into the present as he re-experiences it, resisting what Bhabha identifies as the modern urge to move beyond the past and thus enacting time-lag. The fact that so many of these flashbacks specifically concern mixed heritage suggests mixedness' association with the recurrent past and thus unsettled, nonlinear time. This constant return to the past via flashbacks implies not only that his identity as a mixed person is foundational to his present self, but that the childhood isolation that resulted from his exclusion as a mixed person extends into his adult present as he contends with his ongoing displacement. In the unsettled space of frequent returns to the past, the narrator experiences continual temporal displacement.

The narrator often ends recollections with irony or a didactic connection to the present. For example, after describing the humiliation of only receiving half as much red envelope money as his fully Vietnamese relatives, he only remarks, "One must be grateful for one's education no matter how it arrives. So I was grateful, in a way, for my aunt and my cousin, whose lessons I

remember much more than many nobler things that passed before me in school” (141). The narrator’s tone is one of detached sardonicism, as he attempts to downplay the lingering humiliation of exclusion by expressing ironic gratitude. Yet even as the narrator attempts to dismiss these lingering insecurities, they emerge whenever racial exclusion occurs in his adult life. For example, when a drunk marine calls him a bastard at the outset of the novel, the narrator draws a gun on him even as his voice “tremble[s]” (18) in an apparent overreaction to being called a name. Additionally, when the General forbids the narrator from dating his daughter because he’s “a bastard,” the narrator bitterly reflects that “bastard” is the one word “that could silence me...It was stuck in my throat and had the taste of a woolen sock sodden with our homeland’s rich mud” (291). The narrator further recalls a past incident in which the man he is torturing calls him a bastard, to which he repeats, “I was not a bastard, I was not a bastard, I was not, I was not, I was not, unless, somehow, I was” (193). Here, the repetition suggests his extreme sensitivity to the painful label even as an adult, which in turn implies the lasting humiliation of being labeled as a bastard and excluded.

As is evident from these extreme reactions to being called a bastard, the narrator harbors childhood insecurities related to his mixedness (and illegitimate status) even as he tries to dismiss the incidents with humor and didactic ties to the present. In this way, his past interrupts his present as childhood moments of racial exclusion not only affect him in his adult life but recur, as the exclusionary episodes with the marine and General demonstrate. In reenacting the past in the present, the novel demonstrates Bhabha’s time-lag, disrupting linear time by repeating the past and employing non-linear, cyclical time. Cyclical time displaces the narrator temporally across past and present as they collapse and merge. This unsettled temporal space is

characteristic of the one that mixedness inhabits, making temporal displacement a place of mixed identity.

In *The Sympathizer's* fictional climax, the protagonist is induced to remember something forgotten – another forceful intrusion of the past into the present. During the novel's final torture scene, the narrator confesses to having witnessed the rape of a fellow Viet Cong spy; his crime was not intervening, as doing so would have revealed his status as a Communist spy. This recollection becomes so traumatic that the narration moves to a third person limited point of view as the narrator's torturer forces him to "remember what you forgot" (330). In some respects, the narrator's present torture mirrors the torture undergone by the Viet Cong agent; both are strapped down onto a mattress under bright lights. This visual similarity suggests the recurrence of the past in the present, in that the narrator is now enacting his colleague's past torture in his own present. However, the female Viet Cong agent's torture was characterized by violent physical intrusion – penetrative rape – whereas the narrator's is a forceful temporal intrusion of the past into the present. Moreover, the fact that this scene is the climax of the novel elevates the importance of this intrusion of the repressed past into the present; indeed, it is only by re-experiencing this memory that the narrator is able to leave the prison camp and express hope for the future, as his release depends on his confession to witnessing her rape. The narrator's reenactment of the Viet Cong agent's past torture destabilizes linear time and presents it as cyclical and unsettled. This unsettled time chronologically displaces the narrator, thus offering this non-categorical temporal space as a place of mixed identity.

Throughout, cyclical descriptions of time, the presence of Sonny and the crapulent major's ghosts, and frequent childhood flashbacks to experiences of racial exclusion characterize time as nonlinear and cyclical, in which a recurrent past collapses binary categories of past and

present into one. In presenting time as unsettled and non-categorical, the novel rejects Western conceptions of linear and unidirectional time with discrete notions of past and present. The mixed narrator often exists in movements within this unsettled and nonlinear time, untethered to a discrete past or present. In doing so, the text thus offers temporal displacement and the movement within non-discrete time as another dimension of mixed identity, in addition to physical and narrative displacement.

IV. Movements Between Embodiment and Disembodiment

The narrator's experience of torture underscores a movement between embodiment and disembodiment, particularly when he mentally disassociates during his own torture. There is likewise movement between fragmentation and wholeness as the narrator takes on plural pronouns and characterizes his identity as both fractional and whole, unsettling him across binary poles of material existence and non-existence. This movement positions mixedness as a materially unsettled identity, offering material displacement and fragmentation as a place of mixed identity and undermining valorized notions of wholeness. Moreover, the narrator's rematerialization post-torture enables him to become a self-representative mixed race subject, in doing so resisting traditional conscriptions of mixed identities.

Fragmentation and (dis)embodiment

Moments of disembodiment and binary fragmentation during the narrator's torture at the end of the novel position him as oscillating between binary poles of embodiment and disembodiment to invoke material liminality in association with the narrator's mixedness. As he is tortured, the narrator is "divided, tormented body below, placid consciousness floating high

above” (271), thus “simultaneously subjugated and elevated” (271) in this “vivisection” (271); he is “the supernatural Holy Spirit, clairvoyant and clairaudient” (271) as his torturers reach towards his “subhuman self” (271) on the table. The language of “divided” and “vivisection” connote a hard separation; “vivisection” in particular implies a clinical separation internally within the body, even as the narrator’s divided consciousness and injured body suggest another external layer of separation – one of disembodiment. *The Sympathizer* underscores this sense of disembodiment when the reader learns the narrator himself is mentally absent from this scene of torture, only realizing what has occurred later when the commissar “play[s] the patient a tape recording of his answer...He heard this stranger’s voice say, I saw everything” (349). Here, the use of the third-person singular pronoun “he” to refer to himself while also identifying himself as a stranger enhances the sense of disembodiment as the narrator’s mind appears to distance itself from itself. Furthermore, the notion of his “subjugated and elevated” selves indicates a binary fragmentation, as does his simultaneous depiction as both the Holy Spirit and as subhuman. These multiple layers of separation and movement between their binary poles – externally and internally, mentally and physically, spiritually and mortally – create a sense of multidimensional unsettlement based around binaries within the tortured narrator, enhancing his status as a materially unsettled figure.

During this final scene of torture, the narrator appears at times to take on ghostly qualities, thus adopting a disembodied state. In describing his tortured self as “the supernatural Holy Spirit” (271) that floats above his body, the narrator takes on physically liminal qualities of a ghost in that he is both disembodied and floating. Bosman similarly characterizes the narrator as ghostly due to the change to third-person limited point of view during the final scene of torture; this change “repositions the narrator, locating him as an audience member, and renders

him spectral” (9) as he occupies the same extradiegetic narrative level inhabited by the ghosts of Sonny and the crapulent major. Here it is worth recalling the novel’s beginning, when the narrator introduces himself as a “spook” (1), both identifying himself as a spy and alluding to its informal meaning, “ghost.” As a spy, he inherently makes a living by being invisible and overlooked, much like a ghost; for example, when the narrator exits an apartment building after murdering Sonny, a passerby “walk[s] by as if [the narrator] were invisible, a ghost or, more likely, just another unremarkable white man” (278). In tying the narrator’s circumstantial ability to pass as white to his ability to take on ghost-like qualities of invisibility, the text associates the racial unsettlement of his mixedness with the ability to move physically unimpeded, as ghosts do – an ability enabled by disembodiment. And finally, after being injured in a graveyard set explosion while filming the Auteur’s movie in the Philippines, the narrator wakes to hear “ethereal voices” (183) amid the whiteness of an unfamiliar hospital. The deployment of whiteness and the use of the word “ethereal” evoke conventional depictions of heaven, suggesting the narrator has died in the explosion and awakens in the afterlife. If read as such, the narrator momentarily takes on a ghostly embodied form – somewhere between embodiment and disembodiment as a dead-yet-living person. *The Sympathizer* therefore endows its narrator with ghostly qualities throughout the novel, initiating moves between states of embodiment and disembodiment and rendering the protagonist a physically liminal figure unsettled across binary poles of materialism and immaterialism.

The narrator’s ability to pass between fragmented states of embodiment and disembodiment defies categorical and fixed material binaries and positions him in Bhabha’s liminal Third Space. In this Third Space, the narrator’s hybrid selfhood is pulled apart and reconstructed; indeed, the narrator’s ability to hear the inaudible and see the invisible as

“clairvoyant and clairaudient” (271) positions him as occupying a liminal space outside of fixed realities, in which he has access to sensory knowledge that defies material reality. Yet this Third Space is also uncomfortable, or, as Bhabha describes it, unhomely – an “estranging sense of relocation of the home and the world” (Kuortti and Nyman 8). Indeed, the text evokes the liminal state in a scene of intense torture (as well as in a dangerous graveyard explosion), creating an association between discomfort and entrance into the interstitial space in which mixed identities are forged. As such, the narrator’s mixedness becomes associated with his ability to move between states of embodiment and disembodiment, positioning him as a materially unsettled subject. In aligning material unsettlement with racial unsettlement as a mixed person, the text offers material displacement as a mode of mixed identity.

Fragmented selfhood

In addition to movement between disembodiment and embodiment, the shift of pronouns from “I” to “he” and “we” throughout the torture scene similarly references fragmented selfhood, indicating the narrator’s mixedness is unsettled across racial binaries. As the narrator recovers from torture, he begins referring to himself in the plural first person, using “us” and “we” rather than “I” and “me” (285). Immediately before the pronoun change begins in the text, the narrator seems to hint that the plurality of the pronoun refers to the two subjects “me and myself,” as he reflects, “I was that man of two minds, me and myself. We had been through so much, me and myself. Everyone we met had wanted to drive us apart from each other, wanted us to choose either one thing or another” (285). The self-referential “we” thus reflects a fracturing of self into multiple parts, resulting in a sense of disembodiment (as his mind appears to be distancing itself from itself). Furthermore, these halves of “me and myself” are implicitly the narrator’s racial

halves, as underscored by the fact that, throughout *The Sympathizer*, the narrator reports others “wanted us to choose one or another” – including his Vietnamese family (112-113), Vietnamese soldiers (20), and the General (222). In fact, in the novel’s most explicit call to choose one racial half, the commandant overseeing the narrator’s confession tells him, “The only cure for being a bastard is to take a side” (314).

The narrator’s refusal to settle into the binary poles of Asian or white identity, as well as the unhomely sense of disembodiment that comes with this rejection, suggests entry into Bhabha’s liminal space between mind and body, self and other – or, more appropriately, between a supposed and imaginary “Asian self” and “white self.” The narrator’s self-division into “me and myself” further rejects the binary framework other characters use to frame his Asian and white racial identities because “me and myself” are not binarily opposed; essentially, they mean the same thing. The narrator positions himself simultaneously in a state of wholeness and division through the use of “me and myself” to signal movement between binaries and across Bhabha’s liminal space. In doing so, the text asserts this dynamic movement as characteristic of mixed identities, as well as critiques the use of binary frameworks as a lens through which to read mixed identities.

Not only does the change in pronouns invoke fragmented selfhood to refuse settlement into one of two constructed racial selves, but the narrator’s use of both ambiguous and fractional descriptions of mixedness likewise refuses the binary settlement of mixed identity. For example, while the narrator uses both types of terms to describe his mixedness, other characters generally resort to using only fractional terms to do so. According to the commandant, the narrator is “three-quarters of the man I used to be” (322); to his cousins, he is “half-blooded” (141); and to

his mother, he is “not half of anything” but “twice of everything” (139) – an identification that, while not fractional, is still a quantitative, numerical summation of his identity.

The most explicit example of others’ fractional characterization of the narrator’s mixedness occurs when he speaks with the department chair of Oriental Studies while at college in the U.S. The department chair asks him to index himself by dividing a page in half, labeling one side “Orient” and the other “Occident,” and categorizing his traits according to which racial “side” they match (64). Although the narrator plays along by listing these traits according to racial stereotypes – for example, “self-effacing” appears under “Orient” and “occasionally opinionated” appears under “Occident” – this indexing seeks to make the fluid, uncategorical nature of mixedness more digestible and classifiable for others by reverting to easily sortable stereotypes. Moreover, the department chair’s belief in the benefits of indexing demonstrates a fractional view of the narrator’s mixedness, as it is through this exercise that the department chair believes the narrator can be separated evenly into his “Oriental” and “Occidental” halves. The apparent clinical precision of this indexing also suggests an impersonal aspect to fractional ways of reading mixedness – a notion supported by the department chair’s use of the detached, scientific term “symbiosis” (65) to refer to the narrator’s mixedness. This clinical perspective depersonalizes and dehumanizes the mixed narrator, marking him as a subject of objective scientific study and returning to earlier demeaning scientific readings of mixed race in accordance with theories such as hybrid degeneracy and hybrid vigor (C. Nakashima, “An Invisible Monster” 165, 170).

Although others consistently use fractional language to describe him, the narrator uses both fractional and ambiguous words in self-descriptions of his identity. His repeated references to himself as a “man of two minds” (1) and as “divided” (361) suggest that he does view his

identity fractionally, or at least quantitatively; however, he also describes his heritage as “muddled” (21) as his parents “blur[] the line between us and them” (36) in conceiving him – words that are unified and ambiguous rather than quantitative and divisional. In doing so, the narrator places an emphasis on being both unified and divided; he melds fragmented and whole identities into an ambiguous mess that refuses settling into binary or purely fractional ways of defining mixed identity. Indeed, at the conclusion of the novel, the narrator states he has achieved his post-torture recovery goal of “the reunification of me with myself” (372), presenting simultaneous wholeness (with the term “reunification”) and fragmented selfhood (with the self-referential “we” pronoun) as a desirable destination. This positions simultaneous wholeness and fragmentation as something to aspire to, in doing so welcoming fragmented, paradoxical identity while avoiding the conventional valorization of wholeness.

As such, it is through embracing Bhabha’s liminal Third Space that the narrator’s fragmented selfhood rejects absolute and valorized notions of home and wholeness when it comes to articulating mixed identity. The narrator thus implicitly suggests mixed identity may be unstable or fragmented, but its lack of wholeness is not something immoral, pitiable, or incomplete. In fact, the narrator’s survival despite torture and exile suggests that mixed identity thrives in liminal and unstable movement between binary poles, and that this instability is something to be celebrated rather than associated with tragedy and a perpetual lack of belonging. This conception of mixed identities as dynamic and unsettled therefore refutes Ma’s argument that mixed Asian characters are depicted exclusively and statically as either Asian or white, as well as presents a nonbinary, unsettled way of reading mixedness.

Rematerialization and resistance

The narrator's survival despite fractured selfhood is powerfully metaphorized in his battered copy of *Asian Communism and the Oriental Mode of Destruction* – a book used as a cipher to transmit the narrator's secret messages to his Communist allies. By the end of the novel, the book is “nearly falling apart, creased deeply at the spine. The binding had finally torn apart, and a rubber band bound the book's two halves” (285). The division of the book into halves symbolizes the narrator's racial halves, and the tearing of the binding reflects the dissolution of the narrator's selfhood as signaled by the change to “we” and “us” pronouns, reinforcing the mental dissolution and distancing discussed above. By symbolizing the narrator via the book, the text reverses the conventional literary dynamic that deploys mixed race characters to symbolize other racial matters. In doing so, the text responds to and resists conventional conscriptions of mixedness via symbolism and instead empowers mixed people by presenting them as the subject of symbolism rather than the object.

Most notable in the novel's symbolic book is the tenuous rubber band that keeps the halves together, enabling its survival. Melissa Eriko Poulsen argues that dematerialization is an emerging mode of representation for Asian American writing on mixed experiences, wherein dematerialization is “an enactment of post-racial discourse” (34) which “renders immaterial the lived reality of multiracial individuals and families, a lived reality circumscribed by...race and racism” (34). Accordingly, refusals to render mixed race experiences immaterial “recover[s] mixed-race pasts and open[s] mixed-race futures” (Poulsen 40). As such, rematerialization refuses post-racial distortions of mixed experiences. To apply Poulsen's argument, representing the narrator with a material object – such as a book – effectively rematerializes him after he is disembodied and dematerialized in the final scene of torture. This rematerialization of the narrator as the book thus reclaims his autonomy and resists the tendency of post-racial discourse

to co-opt mixed identities by emphasizing the survival of the narrator despite hardship – a sentiment supported by the state of the book, which, like the narrator, is damaged but nevertheless survives.

The damaged book is not the only piece of writing that survives the narrator's journey; the narrator's confession itself survives, presented as the text we read. At the novel's end, the narrator offers his confession as "our best attempt to represent ourselves against all those who sought to represent us" (380), thereby suggesting that *The Sympathizer* as a text is an antidote to the obstacles that have prevented the protagonist and fellow Vietnamese subjects from representing themselves (as he quotes Marx: "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (144)). In finally becoming a self-representative subject through the confession, the narrator achieves narrative autonomy and resists the conscription of mixed identities to symbolize cultural hybridity (Brennan 9), the assimilability of Asian immigrants to the United States (C. Nakashima, "Servants of Culture" 37), and post-racial "children of the future" (C. Nakashima, "Servants of Culture" 42). Indeed, writing the confession itself becomes a way of healing, as it is through transcribing his story that the narrator mentally recovers after torture (372). The act of writing thus symbolizes self-representation as restorative and necessary for the health and autonomy of marginalized peoples against misrepresentation and the co-optation of identities for others' agendas. Copying the confession itself therefore becomes an act of rematerialization that resists the disappearance of the narrator's story, and by extension, his identity. In transcribing his experience through the confession, the narrator is able to represent himself and his mixedness on his own terms, denying conventional conscriptions of mixed identity and becoming a self-representative mixed race subject.

Finally, the narrator's survival is itself an act of rematerialization and thus resistance to the settlement and conscription of mixed identities. The narrator concludes the novel with the promise that as a revolutionary, he "lie[s] in wait for the right moment, the just cause, which at this moment, is simply wanting to live" (382) and resolutely promises, "We will live!" (382). Indeed, when mixed race characters are "threatened by the disappearance of their bodies" (Poulsen 32), the act of retaining one's material body itself – particularly after the disembodiment that the narrator experiences in torture – becomes an act of rematerialized resistance. As such, the narrator's emboldened promise to live is itself revolutionary; he refuses dematerialization and with it, the conscription of mixed identities that has "effaced mixed-race pasts and co-opted mixed-race futures" (Poulsen 34). He becomes a self-representative mixed subject. The narrator's movement between the binary poles of dematerialization (in torture) and rematerialization (in his own survival, the book's symbolic survival, and the transcription of his confession) rejects Ma's static and categorical depiction of mixed Asian figures and instead empowers the narrator's rematerialization and survival.

Throughout the final torture scene, the narrator moves between embodiment and disembodiment as his mind separates from his body and he takes on ghostly qualities; he also moves between fragmentation and wholeness in using self-referential plural pronouns post-torture and characterizing his mixed identity as both fractional and ambiguous. The narrator becomes a self-representative mixed race subject through his rematerialization post-torture, thereby resisting traditional conscriptions of mixed identities. The movement between the binary poles of embodiment/disembodiment and wholeness/fragmentation characterizes mixedness as materially unsettled, thus positioning it in Bhabha's liminal Third Space. *The Sympathizer* offers material displacement and fragmentation as a place of mixed identity, resisting conventional

valorizations of wholeness and instead celebrating paradoxically fragmented-yet-whole, self-representative formulations of mixed identity.

CONCLUSION

In inhabiting and moving among liminal physical, narrative, temporal, and (dis)embodied spaces, the narrator of *The Sympathizer* offers unsettlement and indeterminacy as its own mode and articulation of mixed identity. In embracing displacement as identity, the narrator disrupts binary conceptions of mixed identities by refusing to settle into one binary pole, thus inhabiting Bhabha's indeterminate Third Space and Trinh's interstitial space. This mode of identification rejects the post-racial idealization of mixed identities as bridges to racial reconciliation by conveying the difficulty and precarity of navigating liminal spaces.

By analyzing this displacement across four dimensions – physically, narratively, temporally, and in terms of embodiment – my thesis builds on Rody, Poulsen, and Ho's work in that it considers multiple ways in which mixedness may be articulated as an unsettled and mobile identity. The sheer abundance of this unsettlement and mobility, when considered through four different analytical lenses, affirms the validity and applicability of reading mixedness as ambiguous and indeterminate. Moreover, this indeterminacy recognizes the traditional valorization of home, wholeness, and belonging does not apply to everyone, nor is it everyone's reality; instead, displacement as identity emerges as a more inclusive mode of analysis.

Reading mixedness in this way, as radical indeterminacy, suggests there is no single way to categorize mixed identity statically, nor can something as mobile and paradoxical as identity be read through a binary lens. Yet that is not to say that mixedness and mixed literature is so mobile and multiplicitous as to be formless. *The Sympathizer's* mixed narrator still has roots in

the Asian American and American literary canons; as such, literary mixedness remains moored by relevant literary and cultural influences that anchor narrative construction.

More broadly, this thesis argues that mixed race has more substance as a literary form and as critical practice than how it has been conceived in the past. Mixedness is not limited as a symbolic mode; rather, it is a dynamic mode of articulation that can be used to resist imperialism, critique binary structures, and construct new ways of thinking about identity. Most importantly, considering mixedness as deserving of its own analysis by reading *The Sympathizer*'s mixed narrator as a self-representative mixed race subject upholds the humanity of mixed people, especially against the depersonalizing reading of mixed people as symbolic avatars. And finally, my thesis offers a methodological critique of the binary as a frame through which to read something as complex and paradoxical as identity. Rather, it advocates for nonbinary readings that decenter hierarchy and division and make room for mobility and indeterminacy.

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