

*Diasporic Vietnamese Literature in the U.S. From the Perspective of Identity,
and the Case of Viet Thanh Nguyen*

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Abstract

The paper inherits the views of Kevin Kenny, Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, Michelle Janette, and Viet Thanh Nguyen to analyze the development of diasporic Vietnamese literature written in English in the U.S. based on expressions of identity. Firstly, from generation 1 (writers who came to the U.S. when they were adults and predominantly wrote in Vietnamese) to generations 1.5 and 2 (writers who came to the U.S. as young ages or were born in the U.S., primarily wrote in English), their works covered subjects ranging from collective identity to personal identity. Secondly, the paper emphasizes that traumatic identity is characteristic of diasporic literature, regardless of the generation of their authors. Thirdly, it examines the way establishing hybrid identity became a discourse of resistance from American racial prejudice. In the case of Viet Thanh Nguyen, belonging to generation 1.5, he can be considered the most famous Vietnamese diasporic writer in the U.S. to date, further evidenced by his winning the 2016 Pulitzer Prize. In that context, the paper analyzes his ideological contributions in two aspects: Firstly, the writer redefines the ethnic identity and nationalism of the Vietnamese immigrant community; secondly, the writer provides new perspectives on Vietnam War. The research results are: clarifying the role of diasporic Vietnamese literature in English in the U.S., and affirming the way the writings of Viet Thanh Nguyen set a development milestone for this minority literature in general and for the topic of the Vietnam War in particular in the history of world literature.

Keywords: Diasporic Vietnamese Literature, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Identity

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Introduction

Researchers of diasporic Vietnamese American literature agree that this literature only emerges after 1975, following the end of the Vietnam War and the arrival of many Vietnamese refugees in the United States. It begins with the first generation of writers, who primarily write in Vietnamese, with a few writing in English (see Nguyễn Văn Trung, 1995, p. 4; Nguyễn Vy Khanh, 2005, p. 3; Sokolov, 2017). The works written in Vietnamese have a readership and social impact limited to the Vietnamese expatriate community. According to Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, a significant milestone indicating the American literary market's interest in diasporic Vietnamese literature is when major publishers begin to publish English-language works by first-generation Vietnamese immigrant writers. Two of the most notable works are the memoirs *A Vietcong Memoir* (1985) by Truong Nhu Tang, published by Vintage, and *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989) by Le Ly Hayslip, published by Doubleday (Pelaud, 2011, pp. 26-27). However, in general, “it has remained difficult to find Vietnamese American texts, especially those written before 1995” (Janette, 2011, p. x).

In the subsequent generations, diasporic Vietnamese American literature truly makes its mark on American literature. This includes the 1.5 generation, consisting of Vietnamese immigrant writers who arrive in the United States during or after their childhood or adolescence, and the second generation, who are the children of immigrants, born and raised in the United States (according to the classification agreed upon by most researchers, see Pelaud, 2011, pp. 33-40 and Janette, 2011, p. xxii). A common characteristic of these two generations of writers is that most of them write in English – a significant advantage that allows Vietnamese voices to be heard, primarily within the scope of American literature. The 1995 milestone mentioned by Janette refers to the emergence of the first prose and poetry anthology featuring entirely Vietnamese American authors from the 1.5 generation: *Once upon a Dream* (1995) published by Andrews & McMeel.

Viet Thanh Nguyen belongs to the 1.5 generation, born in Buon Ma Thuot, Vietnam, in 1971, and moving to the United States with his family in 1975 at the age of four. He has published a short story collection *The Refugees* (2017), two novels *The Sympathizer* (2015) and *The Committed* (2021), and a memoir *A Man of Two Faces* (2023). He is also the editor of a collection of 17 essays by authors writing from a “displaced” perspective, *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives* (2018). The work that established him as a professional writer and represents the pinnacle of his creative output so far is *The Sympathizer*, which has garnered numerous awards, most notably the 2016 Pulitzer Prize. Viet Thanh Nguyen also researches Asian American race and the Vietnam War in two important books: *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (2002) and *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (2016).

This paper aims to achieve two objectives: to outline the diasporic Vietnamese American literature written in English from an identity perspective and to examine Viet Thanh Nguyen’s role in this literature, primarily in terms of his ideological contributions.

1. Identity Characteristics of Diasporic Vietnamese Literature Written in English in the U.S.

1.1. From Collective Identity to Personal Identity – Examining the Evolution of Genres and Themes

There is a noticeable shift in genres and themes from the first generation to the 1.5 and second generations. While the majority of first generation works belong to the memoir or autobiography genre (such as *The Land I Lost* (1982) by Huynh Quang Nhuong, *Miles from Home* (1984) by Anna Kim-Lan McCauley, *A Vietcong Memoir* (1985) by Truong Nhu Tang, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989) by Le Ly Hayslip, *Fallen Leaves* (1989) by Nguyen Thi Thu-Lam), the subsequent generations develop a diversity of genres. In addition to memoirs, there are novel (e.g., *Monkey Bridge* (1997) by Lan Cao, *The Book of Salt* (2003) by Monique Truong), poetry (e.g., *Song of the Cicadas* (2001) by Mông-Lan, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016) by Ocean Vuong), short story (e.g., *Fake House* (2000) by Linh Dinh, *Quiet As They Come* (2010) by Angie Chau), novella (e.g., *The Gentle Order of Girls and Boys* (2006) by Dao Strom), and graphic novel (e.g., *Vietamerica* (2010) by GB Tran, *The Best We Could Do* (2017) by Thi Bui). If the early works predominantly focused on the history of war, the later ones increasingly explore personal narratives.

For the first generation (and transitioning into the 1.5 generation) writing in English, the primary audience is American readers. Consequently, their main purpose is to narrate the correct story of the Vietnam War in contrast to the discourse prevalent in the United States, shaped by American literature and cinema. The American discourse portrays the Vietnam War as a conflict between the United States and North Vietnam, neglecting or erasing the role of South Vietnam, which is an ally of the United States. As a result, the predominant image of Vietnamese people in the eyes of Americans is that of the enemy on the opposing side. Therefore, when Vietnamese immigrants arrive in the U.S. from 1975 onwards, regardless of their political stance, they are often perceived as those whom America had fought against, rather than as refugee allies. Writing memoirs or autobiographies serves a dual purpose: to tell their own story and to present a more accurate history of their community. Michelle Janette refers to such writings as “tales of witness,” where the author is also the witness of the story (Janette, 2011, p. xix).

Alongside “tales of witness” is “tales of imagination,” predominantly narrated by the 1.5 and second generations. According to Janette, while the former type “have a preservational and didactic imperative” about traditional, historical, and cultural aspects of the community, the latter type tends to be more “adventurous” and focused on “introspective impulse” (Janette, 2011, p. xxiii). This indicates a shift from collective historical themes towards more personal and individual narratives. For example, conflicts within families between spouses or between parents and children (as seen in Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* or Lê Thi Diem Thúy’s *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*), the journeys to Vietnam by diasporic individuals (Andrew X. Pham’s *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam*), culinary stories (Bich Minh Nguyen’s *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, Monique Truong’s *Bitter in the Mouth*), LGBTQ+ love stories (poetry by Kim-An Lieberman, Hieu Minh Nguyen, Ocean Vuong). Despite the diversity of topics, these works share a common goal of defining and constructing personal identities amidst cultural, ethnic, and historical conflicts.

1.2. Traumatic Identity

One of the most characteristic types of inherent identity within diasporic communities is traumatic identity. Trauma can become a person's identity when it occurs in harsh circumstances (such as war, colonization, or refugee situations) (see Berntsen & Rubin, 2006, p. 22; Becker, 2021, p. 566). According to David Becker, a traumatic social context can damage psychological, belief, and hope systems, or even physical aspects — qualities that constitute a person's identity — and establish new value systems, psychological and spiritual outlooks, through a new perspective on life and oneself, and through how others perceive oneself in new circumstances (Becker, 2021, p. 566). In this turmoil, self-identification becomes more critical for these individuals.

The traumatic identity of the diasporic Vietnamese American community stems from central events such as war and refuge. The term “boat people” emerges post-Vietnam War, referring to those who flee their homeland in fragile boats across the sea. Consequently, refugees become a common character type in diasporic Vietnamese American literature, depicted on the seas, in refugee camps, or in the United States, as seen in works like Nguyễn Quí Đức's *Where the Ashes Are*, Andrew Lam's *Perfume Dreams*, Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Refugees*, Angie Chau's *Quiet As They Come*, Vu Tran's *Dragonfish*.

Speaking of the dead is a way for the diasporic community to remember the past, lost loved ones, and resist forgetting. According to Viet Thanh Nguyen, “the problem of war and memory is therefore first and foremost about how to remember the dead” (Nguyen, 2016, p. 4). Forgetting the dead means erasing the memories of war and trauma, which also means erasing the identity of refugees — a discourse that the United States seeks to create, using the “American Dream” narrative with the “model minority” or the success of typical immigrants to cover up the consequences of the wars caused by the United States. Therefore, speaking or writing about the dead becomes a form of resistance by refugees against the intentional forgetting of the United States. The boat person girl in *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* chooses to leave her family and pursue a career in writing as she grows up. The character in the short story *Black-Eyed Women* (from the collection *The Refugees*) by Viet Thanh Nguyen becomes a writer specializing in ghost stories. The storyteller in the short story *Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice* (from the collection *The Boat*) by Nam Lê chooses to write about his father's past linked to the My Lai massacre for the final assignment of a young writers' workshop.

Hence, traumatic identity is also the identity of the diasporic community, which is something that needs to be affirmed, not denied. The statement by Yen Le Espiritu, a renowned Vietnamese American scholar, “we [Vietnamese American writers] have to be willing to become tellers of ghost stories” (Espiritu, 2005, p. xix), aims to emphasize this point.

1.3. Hybrid and Ethnic Identity

In addition to trauma, hybridity is the most distinctive type of identity among immigrants. While trauma transitions from profound (in first and 1.5 generations) to fading (in 1.5 and second generations) as the impact of central traumatic events recedes further into the past, hybridity develops from faint (in the first generation) to pronounced (in 1.5 and second generations) due to deepening integration and conflicts regarding ethnicity and culture between the home country and the host country. In other words, hybridity emerges when immigrants are influenced by both their homeland's factors and the environment in which

they currently reside, combining ethnic and traditional elements from their minority community with the foreign and international aspects of the majority community. As the 1.5 and second generations come of age, they are forced to assimilate into the majority community, leading to conflicts and questioning of their own identity (Pelaud, 2011, p. 31).

However, this hybridity cannot be simply understood as multiculturalism or a bridge between two countries, two harmonized cultures. Instead, in the context of immigrants and refugees, hybrid identity is formed from the tense struggle and inequality between dominant discourse (of the majority community) and the marginalized characteristics of the subject (belonging to the minority community), most evident in issues of ethnicity. For example, in the verse novel *Inside Out & Back Again*, Thanhha Lai describes the experience of a Vietnamese American girl who, as a fourth-grader, must daily confront struggles with her native classmates. The Vietnamese identity stems from the ethnic characteristics of the girl being mocked and associated with cultural stereotypes (such as eating dog meat, being wild, uncivilized), which forces her to learn how to resist by striving to excel in English and seeking martial arts training from her brother, while also attempting to gain acceptance in the new community by attending church with her family every Sunday and joining the Christian faith. English and Christianity inevitably become the girl's American identity, imposed upon her for survival in the host country.

In *Race and Resistance*, Viet Thanh Nguyen explains that Asian American writers tend to resist the stereotypical view of race in the host country. These stereotypes often categorize Asians into two groups: the "bad subject," representing immigrants who cannot assimilate well into American society, becoming burdens or even threats to native culture and economy, and the "model minority," exemplifying successful integration and community development (Nguyen, 2002, p. 7). The "model minority" serves as evidence for a democratic, egalitarian America, always providing opportunities for everyone, regardless of their background, in contrast to the "bad subject" who fails due to their individual shortcomings. Consequently, the "model minority" becomes the representative voice for the entire diasporic community.

Asian American writers strive to counteract this discourse. In reality, the diasporic community is diverse (Kenny, 2013, pp. 13-14). The voices of the successful and the unsuccessful, the rich and the poor, the politician from the immigrant group and the unemployed relying on social welfare—all are equally important. Specifically in Vietnamese American literature and Asian American literature in general, it is crucial to depict this diversity to truly reflect the identity of the community, rather than accepting a uniform identity of model minority as perceived by the United States. This orientation leads critics of Asian American literature to highly appreciate works that express the voices of the "bad subject." From this perspective, works such as *The Book of Salt* by Monique Truong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong, and *The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen succeed in portraying non-stereotypical Vietnamese characters. The main characters in the former two novels are homosexual, while the narrator in *The Sympathizer* is a bastard who embodies "a man of two minds" (Nguyen, 2015, p. 1) as he views the Vietnam War from both sides.

2. Viet Thanh Nguyen and Diasporic Vietnamese Literature Written in English in the U.S.

2.1. Viet Thanh Nguyen's Perspective on Ethnic Identity and Nationalism in the Diasporic Community

In agreement with Kevin Kenny on the diversity of diasporic communities, however, Nguyen emphasizes a different focal point: diversity lies not only in the backgrounds and statuses of individuals within the community but primarily in ideology. A community does not possess a singular unified ideology; describing the conflict or diversity of ideology among members of the same community reveals the vitality and existence of that community. Nguyen pursues this idea in his works, such as *The Refugees* and *The Sympathizer*, where he depicts conflicts of political ideology within the Vietnamese community. Similarly, in *The Committed*, the conflict between Vietnamese and Algerians within French society demonstrates the complexity of the post-colonial issue, not just between the colonizer and the colonized but also among colonial communities themselves. This represents the diversity of ethnic identity.

The inevitable reaction of minority communities to the dominance of the majority group is to assert their own ethnic identity. However, this also means falling into the prejudice attributed by the dominant discourse, that the minority community is homogenous, lacking diversity. This is the trap of nationalism. Therefore, Viet Thanh Nguyen advocates for a different perspective: hybridity is fundamentally inherent to the ethnic identity (Nguyen, 2002, p. 12). In section 1.3, we discussed the hybrid nature of the diasporic community, primarily expressed in racial and cultural hybridity. With Viet Thanh Nguyen, he emphasizes even more the hybridity in terms of ideology. This approach, shared by Nguyen and like-minded authors, resists nationalism within their diasporic community and combats racial discrimination in the discourse of dominant culture. This perspective becomes how Nguyen creates the main character in *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* with “two minds,” standing on both sides: as an ally of America and as a communist. Through his writings, Nguyen seeks to transcend the position of an “ethnic writer,” erasing boundaries, especially those concerning history and race.

To further elaborate on the case of Vietnamese ethnic identity, Viet Thanh Nguyen is candid in expressing his viewpoint about “authentic” Vietnamese person through the concept of “home”:

Home was a comforting place, where people always welcomed you, made sure you had enough to eat, knew how to say your name. Home was also the place where people knew you enough to put you in your place, dislike you, hate you, have enough of you, take out their frustrations and rage on you [...] This was the other side of authenticity. (Nguyen, 2011)

The dual nature of “home” — both a safe haven and a place of harm — is also the dual nature of ethnic identity. The short story *War Years* by Viet Thanh Nguyen (in the collection *The Refugees*) is encapsulated within the space of the Vietnamese community revolving around the New Saigon grocery store (hinting at Little Saigon in reality), but this community space becomes tense and divided by Mrs. Hoa's political activism. Mrs. Hoa regularly engages in political campaigns and fundraises for the fight against communism within her community, and anyone who does not contribute is accused of being sympathetic to communism, not an “authentic” refugee Vietnamese (originating from the prejudice of extreme nationalism, that

anyone who fled Vietnam after 1975 must hate communism). Meanwhile, the owner of New Saigon store opposes this viewpoint: “I’m not giving you any money” – “I work hard for my money. What do you do? You’re nothing but a thief and an extortionist, making people think they can still fight this war” (Nguyen, 2017, p.65). Despite narrating the story of Vietnamese people in post-war America, the story is titled *War Years*; although they have resettled in a place they can call “home” surrounded by their own people, peace does not come.

To transcend the identification of being authentically or inauthentically Vietnamese, according to Nguyen, requires a transnational perspective with other communities:

These people are a part of the Vietnamese American community, but there are so many more people with so many more ideas, feelings, and ways of seeing the world [...] So let’s forget the word “community” and replace it with “communities.” There isn’t one Vietnamese American community, there are many Vietnamese American communities, just as there isn’t one America, but fifty United States and multitudes upon multitudes of American communities whose stories need to be told. (Nguyen, 2009)

Therefore, unlike most first generation writers and some 1.5 generation writers who often emphasize ethnic identity and establish authenticity for Vietnamese identity in their works through cultural traditions and conflicts with American identity, Viet Thanh Nguyen advocates for a more universal approach, transcending the narrow concept of “ethnic” and “racial” identity, by portraying both the bright and dark sides of the community, and by depicting solidarity with other communities, rather than solely narrating stories within the internal space of the community. On the other hand, unlike some 1.5 and second generation writers who lean towards American identity or advocate for “not writing about Vietnam,” Viet Thanh Nguyen still affirms his Vietnamese identity in a familiar topic but with a new perspective: the topic of the Vietnam War.

2.2. Viet Thanh Nguyen’s Perspective on the Vietnam War

Regardless of whether it is about Vietnam or the United States, or whether it concerns refugees or their descendants, diasporic Vietnamese literature, in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s view, is often intertwined with war (Nguyen, 2016, p. 200). That is why all of Viet Thanh Nguyen’s fictional works revolve around war. At least until now, when the voice from Vietnam regarding the war issue has not been sufficiently heard worldwide¹, the Vietnam war remains the main theme of diasporic Vietnamese literature in general.

In section 1.1, we discussed the movement of themes in diasporic Vietnamese American literature, from the history of war in the works of the first generation to personal stories and deeper exploration of inner thoughts in the 1.5 and 2 generations. However, Viet Thanh Nguyen’s works show a reverse flow: Although belonging to the 1.5 generation and leaving his homeland at the age of four, the writer chooses to directly confront Vietnamese history, exploiting the theme of war to clarify the identity of his community. But unlike the first generation, Nguyen writes to reimagine the identity of the community beyond nationalist perspectives.

¹ Even though losing the war, the United States succeeded in imposing its perspective on this war into world history, primarily due to the power of language, and secondly due to economic power, both of which Vietnam is weaker in comparison to the U.S.

2.2.1. The Vietnam War Through the Portrayal of Characters

To accomplish this dual task of portraying collective identity while transcending narrow ethnic boundaries, Nguyen constructs the image of the bad subject as opposed to the model minority.

Firstly, there is a distinction drawn between “refugees” and “immigrants.” In an interview with *The Nation*, Nguyen asserts: “Call me a refugee, not an immigrant” (Wiener, 2018). This statement arises from a clear stance: According to Nguyen, Americans seek to transform the stories of refugees (from war) into success or failure narratives of immigrants; because “refugees” pose a threat to American culture and economy, while “immigrants” embody assimilation and seamless integration into native culture. Conversely, stories of “refugees” always serve as a reminder to Americans of the traumas of the Vietnam War that they caused (Nguyen, 2019, pp.13-14). When recounting the “refugee” narratives, Viet Thanh Nguyen delves deep into what America wishes to forget: the Vietnam War (Nguyen, 2016, p.220). Through such resistance and perspective, the diasporic Vietnamese community finally finds its voice. The title of Nguyen’s short story collection, *The Refugees*, along with stories of memory, ghosts, refugees, is the writer’s response to America, asserting that the refugee community has its own identity and must be remembered for the wounds inflicted by the war caused by America.

Secondly, to resist the discourse of the model minority imposed by the host country, Nguyen’s refugees are depicted as bad subjects. Like the protagonist in *The Committed*, who voluntarily becomes a gangster specializing in drug trafficking and prostitution brokerage, with the aim of terrorizing French politicians, as an allegory for post-colonial resistance. By choosing this kind of character, the writer not only resists the dominant discourses from the U.S. and France but also resists the common discourse within the diasporic Vietnamese community: Instead of discussing the “authenticity” of the community, it presents “ugly” portraits that are not representative.

2.2.2. The Vietnam War Through Perspective and Tone

In addition to the works on the Vietnam War theme written by both Vietnamese and American authors, Nguyen’s works bring a hybrid perspective — both insider and outsider both Vietnamese and American — which makes the wars in *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* different from the classic war works in Vietnam and America, which only have a one-sided perspective (such as *The Sorrow of War* by Bảo Ninh and *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien). For instance, the main character in *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* is excluded from his own people for being a bastard who has a French father, a priest, and a Vietnamese mother, a servant. This forbidden love serves as a metaphor for Vietnam as a victim, being physically and mentally oppressed by the French, who were the perpetrators, during French occupation. Later, he is further alienated from his communist comrades due to suspicions of his sympathizing with America. The hybridization of bloodlines has naturally become a hybridization of ideology, making both novels a journey for the character to discover his identity. After experiencing all the historical events associated with modern Vietnam wars, the character ultimately realizes that his identity is a “sympathizer,” transcending all factions and hatred. This perspective, emphasizing a personal history of each individual, contradicts the trend of seeking a single, most common and authentic collective identity.

Regarding tone, Viet Thanh Nguyen also chooses a unique tone. According to Janette, Vietnamese American literature in English adopts a tone of “empathy” and “reconciliation” when discussing about American issues (Janette, 2011, pp. xvii-xviii). However, Viet Thanh Nguyen chooses a tone of “anger” directly aimed at the United States, as he stated in the interview “Viet Thanh Nguyen: Anger in the Asian American Novel”:

There’s not a lot of rage, at least not in the past few decades. And if there is anger or rage, it has to be directed at the ignorant: the Asian country of origin or Asian families or Asian patriarchs. While all that is important, I sensed a reluctance to be angry at American culture or at the United States for what it has done. (Tran, 2015)

Alongside this perspective and tone, the writer delineates the role and impact of the Vietnam War on modern America, asserting that America has not yet moved past the war after the Vietnam war. War is not merely about the brutal past on the battlefield or the post-war traumas. America has created an enormous war machine that permeates almost every social sphere: from sculpture, arrangement, architecture, film, forming an “industry of war” (Nguyen, 2016, p.106). Nurturing what the writer calls the “identity of war” in Americans has led the country to be consistently involved in wars: from the Vietnam War, American youth have again found themselves in the Iraq war. Though different battlefields, the U.S.’s approach to these wars with the mindset of a superpower and heroic ideals seem hardly different. From an American perspective, this can be seen as the message that Viet Thanh Nguyen wants to convey to America in general and Americans in particular, through his works.

Conclusion

Through the method of historical criticism, we delineate the development of diasporic Vietnamese literature written in English in the U.S. from the first generation to the second generation from the perspective of identity. The issue of identity is particularly significant in diasporic Vietnamese literature as it intertwines with the history of the Vietnam War, shaping refugee community, ethnic community, model minority, and bad subject in post-war America. Within the diasporic Vietnamese literature written in English, the perspectives of Viet Thanh Nguyen on issues of ethnic identity, nationalism, and the Vietnam War further contribute to asserting the identity of the diasporic community in both aspects. The first aspect is outward-facing, aimed at resisting the imposition of imperial and colonial discourses. The second aspect is inward-facing, aimed at transcending the narrow, racialized perspective within the community itself. These contents provide the groundwork for a profound understanding of the writer’s works. In this paper, we only mention about Viet Thanh Nguyen’s contribution to the ideological aspect, while detailed analysis of the writer’s works will be reserved for another study.

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