

Historians' Fictions and U.S. Foreign Relations: Challenging Dominant Historical Narratives of the Vietnam War

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Introduction

This summer, I worked with Professor Shanon Fitzpatrick to research the role that novels have historically played in crafting understandings of U.S. foreign relations events, especially those characterized by stark international asymmetries. One of these events was the Vietnam War. I was particularly interested in the effects of U.S. militarism, such as enduring displacement and slow violence.

Research question:

- How can novels challenge existing historical narratives about the Vietnam War?
- What individual and familial stories do dominant historical narratives eschew?
- What insights can graphic novels illuminate about complicated historical events through their unique pictorial and textual format?

Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*

In the chapter "The Brother in Vietnam" in *China Men*,

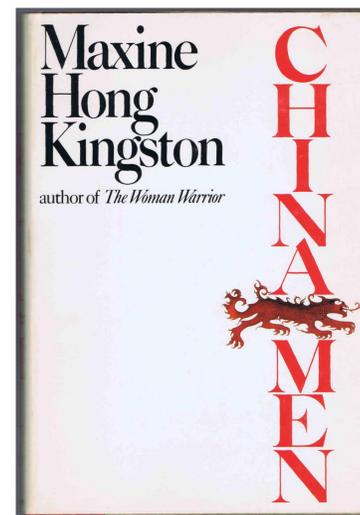
Maxine Hong Kingston writes about her brother's experience as a navy sailor in the Vietnam War. She writes about the Vietnam War as a total war embedded into the fabric of American life and consumerism:

"Whenever we ate a candy bar, when we drank grape juice, bought bread (ITT makes Wonder bread), wrapped food in plastic, made a phone call, put money in the bank, cleaned the oven, washed with soap, turned on the electricity, refrigerated food, cooked it, ran a computer, drove a car, rode an airplane, sprayed with insecticide, we were supporting the corporations that made tanks and bombers, napalm, defoliants, and bombs."

- Maxine Hong Kingston

Furthermore, Hong Kingston reveals the complex positionality of Asian Americans, enlisted in the war. In addition to fears that he would be treated harsher if captured, the brother is frightened that his family would be deported during a military security check. Though he enlists for the war, the

brother's status as an American is questioned, revealing the fraught nature of "loyalty" and citizenship.



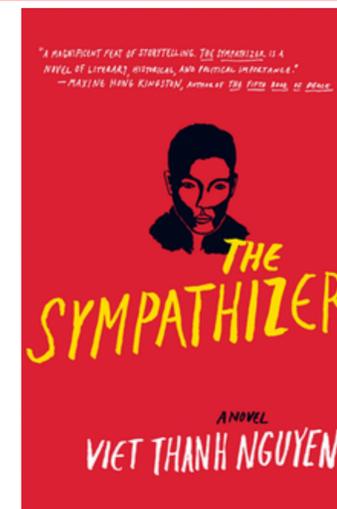
Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*

Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel *The Sympathizer* features a communist agent in the South Vietnamese Army who flees Vietnam and arrives in the U.S. as a refugee. A critical scene in *The Sympathizer* emphasizes the role of sexual violence in U.S. warfare and the following silence of this trauma. This silence is in part due to a dominant culture industry that can narrate the meaning of the Vietnam War and other U.S. wars.

"[F]or this was the first war where the losers would write history instead of the victors,

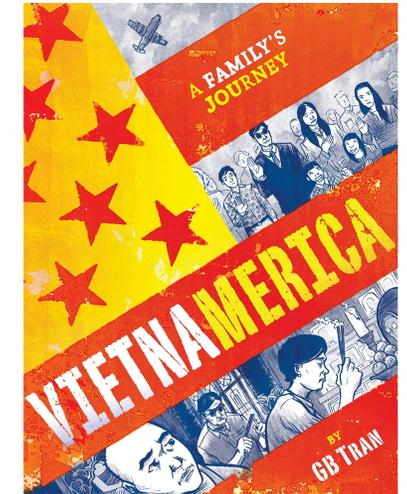
courtesy of the most efficient propaganda machine ever created (with all due respect to Joseph Goebbels and the Nazis, who never achieved global domination)... In this forthcoming Hollywood trompe l'oeil, all the Vietnamese of any side would come out poorly, herded into the roles of the poor, the innocent, the evil, or the corrupt. Our fate was not to be merely mute; we were to be struck dumb."

- Viet Thanh Nguyen



GB Tran's *Vietnamerica*

Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey by G.B. Tran is a longue duree graphic memoir about the author's family history and eventual move to the U.S. as refugees. Jeffrey Santa Ana argues that the



environmental imagery of *Vietnamerica* evokes the slow violence of French and U.S. militarism in Vietnam. Slow violence occurs gradually and invisibly across time and space, and is not understood or viewed as violence. For example, after returning to her childhood home, GB Tran's mother, Dzung, finds a tree she remembered from her childhood is now gone, which evokes flashbacks of violence in her childhood, including her father's death. Long after the gunfire ended, the trauma and dispossession of militarism in Vietnam endures.

Bibliography

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