

Observing the ultimate boundary between victory and defeat in the work of Viet Thanh Nguyen.

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Nguyen's Pulitzer Prize novel, *The Sympathizer* (2015), returns us to what is arguably the homebase of contemporary war fiction: Vietnam. Its narrator informs us in the opening sentence that he is a man of two faces, and throughout the novel his identity as Amerasian troubles him. At one particular juncture, he draws up a comparison between ORIENT and OCCIDENT, the former, 'teacup is half empty', the latter, 'glass is half full'; 'usually quiet', as opposed to 'talkative (with a drink or two)'. This initially seems to follow the custom of defining culture by binaries, whether they be humorous, as in this case, or deadly serious, as would be the case of their most formidable modern instigator, Joseph Conrad.

Nguyen's work reads as far too complex to assimilate a binary pattern. To start with, if the Vietnam war is the American term, the Vietnamese term is the American war, but that, arguably in both instances, ignores the fact that both before and during American intervention, strife took the form of a civil war. Subsequently an Amerasian could be descended from the winning or losing side, or both, and live and mix in highly conflictive social circles. However, Nguyen's extended essay, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (2016), provides interesting points of departure for research, with its focus on memories, rememories, and postmemory. This paper analyses the content and potential of his theories, particular the assertion that memory is asymmetrical.