Awarding Our Alienation
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Viet Thanh Nguyen is the first Vietnamese American novelist to win a historic Pulitzer Prize in fiction for his 2015 debut novel The Sympathizer. Presented as the written confession of a bi-racial Viet Cong revolutionary working deep undercover in the South Vietnamese military, Nguyen's novel artfully examines the devastating consequences of US and western interventions into the Vietnam War, ultimately mapping his narrator's increasing nihilism: "I understood, at last, how our revolution had gone from being the vanguard of political change to the rearguard hoarding power. In this transformation, we were not unusual. Hadn't the French and the Americans done exactly the same? Once revolutionaries themselves, they had become imperialists, colonizing and occupying our defiant little land, taking away our freedom in the name of saving us […] We, too could abuse grand ideals!" (376). Written in a verbose literary style (Nguyen regularly enjoys employing chiasmus) from a masculinist perspective, The Sympathizer adroitly marries wit with existential calamity, moving from the theater of war to producing a film for American theaters while maintaining taut espionage intrigue before ending in a horrifying reeducation camp. His work is an impressive, historic accomplishment and was widely recognized as such; The Sympathizer was nominated for 10 other US literary awards and won 5, including the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction.

And yet, The Sympathizer is fascinatingly not the only Asian American novel of this kind to win broad critical support and literary acclaim. Richard E. Kim's 1964 novel The Martyred, lauded by Pearl S. Buck and Philip Roth, was nominated for the National Book Award and a Nobel Prize in Literature. Its spare literary style elevated its deeper existential themes. The Martyred nestles a politicized Korean identity crisis within a Christian crisis of faith. Set during the brief occupation of Pyongyang by US/South Korean forces, the novel structures its investigation of Korean subjectivities in a historical framework of Western/US interventions into the peninsula. The plot follows South Korean Captain Lee's investigation into the North Korean execution of twelve Korean Christian ministers. Two ministers survive and one in particular, Pastor Shin, holds the secret as to whether or not the executed ministers denounced their faith. The truth emerges over a series of confessions that Pastor Shin makes to Captain Lee. The novel makes it clear that determining the ministers' faithfulness can either bolster or demoralize morale in an intensely difficult war. At stake is not just the martyrs' faithfulness, however, but also Pastor Shin's and Captain Lee's understanding of their roles in holding Korean identities together. In the end (SPOILER ALERT) we learn that the ministers did recant their faith, which Pastor Shin lies about to his congregation. Shin continues to act as a minister, despite confessing to Captain Lee that he no longer believes in God.

The lack of public comparisons between Nguyen's The Sympathizer and Kim's The Martyred is a striking silence, given the incredible resonances between these two works and the immense

global acclaim The Martyred garnered at the time of its release. Both novels focus on US wars in Asia, both are narrated from the perspective of an Asian military agent whose faith in his efforts grow increasingly troubled. Both novels feature US forces abandoning their military footholds. Both novels make the act of confession--of narrating a secret wrong in order to make it right--the engine driving the work. Both novels ultimately highlight the false consciousness of their main characters, though The Sympathizer dives headlong into a deep nihilism that The Martyred skirts.

By interrogating these works' broad critical acclaim, I suggest that despite their clear and evident literary merits, the reception of The Sympathizer and The Martyred betray the troublingly persistent palatability of Asian / American nihilism. Published half a century apart, the parallels in their reception make me wonder: are we celebrated for our alienation? By staging these texts in the midst of western military interventions into Asia, Kim and Nguyen certainly sought to demystify and trouble the terms by which Asians continue to be seen as foreigners here in the US, and to humanize Asian characters for their readers. And yet the cultural receptiveness to these existentially despairing works leads me to fret at how these expressions potentially re-inscribe or affirm the terms of our collective oppression. At the heart of anti-Asian oppression here in the US is the sentiment that we don't and never belonged; that we're alien.

My comments are not to disparage the novels or their impressive merit in any way. Kim's exploration in confession and allegiance illustrates how the neat dichotomies which zero-sum conflicts require--whether between enemy and alien or faithful and faithless--become impossible to uphold. Nguyen's novel is a scathing expose of how inflexible ideologies digest our humanity, of how the line between oppressor and oppressed often becomes a line of symmetry the moment an iota of power is grasped. But it concerns me that their acclaim re-centers Asian / Americans as impossible subjects whose homelands have been devastated and re-composed through proxy warfare and who find that they cling to nothing. Are these narrators' pain what makes our literature palatable?

In the end, both works walk an unsteady line between nihilism and liberation. Rather than clarifying "the truth," both novels' confessions point to the infinite malleability of truth for ideological purposes. And they suggest that the betrayals of their main actors--whether it be the faithless Pastor lying to his congregation or the double agent who no longer believes in his war--are in fact liberations, moments through which these men saw the grand illusion that they were mere actors in. Yet when the stage is a war escalated by colonial and neo-colonial western interests, what are we to make of this illusion, its revelation, and the sweetly bitter Nothing resounding from these characters' hearts? Perhaps we are most beautiful and of merit when we are torn down, emptied out, evacuated of an integrated sense of ourselves, our homelands demolished along with our dreams.

My comments here say more about the awarding communities than they do about Asian / American literature, but it's a quandary that we must still press up against. I deeply recognize how the context of war is in many ways an origin myth that roots so many Asian / American experiences, and yet I long for us to stridently claim other roots and centers for ourselves and our

souls--and to have such work lauded. These books matter greatly--I am grateful for how they narrate a particular complex pain. And yet, does their fanfare also illustrate a broader cultural appetite for our abjection?