



# RIFLESSI DI GUERRA. STORIA E ANTIREALISMO NELLA NARRATIVA DI VIET THANH NGUYEN

## BY GIACOMO TRAINA

(A Book Review)



“All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory” (4), asserts Pulitzer Prize-winning Vietnamese American writer and scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen, a statement that not only addresses the never-ending struggle over historical narratives but also encapsulates the unresolved legacy of the Vietnam War, a conflict whose historiography—at least in the public imagination—remains incredibly fraught and obscure. As the fiftieth anniversary of the conclusion of the United States’ involvement in Vietnam approaches,

Giacomo Traina’s *Reflections of War: History and Antirealism in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s Fiction*<sup>1</sup> emerges both as a timely and thorough reassessment of the experience of the Vietnam War and its postmemorial legacy in contemporary times, and as a stimulating critical reading of Nguyen’s literary work, particularly *The Sympathizer* (2015), which stands at the center of this study.

Published in Italian by Ombre Corte at the end of 2024, Traina’s work situates itself within an emergent field of American Studies in Italy that seeks to bring attention to the literary production of the Vietnamese diaspora, a long-overlooked subject matter within Italian academia. Within the broader Italian cultural landscape, the Vietnam War has been largely understood through an “all-American” lens, predominantly shaped by Hollywood films, which have solidified and crystallized the war as an exclusively American trauma, a catastrophe that could have been easily avoided, but cost the United States an entire genera-

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<sup>1</sup> Both the title and the following quotations from Traina’s work are my own translations.

tion of young American men. Yet, the other side of the story, namely the experience of the Vietnam War from the point of view of Vietnamese people, as well as the subsequent tragic diasporic ordeal of the “Boat people,” has been disregarded or unexplored for the longest of times. In recent years, however, Italian scholars such as Vallone (2021) and Arioli (2024), following in the footsteps of proliferating US-based academic studies,<sup>2</sup> have begun to redress this imbalance by critically engaging with counternarratives emerging from the Vietnamese American literary production, a trajectory with which Traina’s previous works (2021; 2022; 2023) and the present volume seamlessly align. In *Reflections of War*, Traina delves deeper into these themes, tracing the complex interplay of history, myth, and memory in the post-memorial literary representations of the Vietnam War, with a particular focus on Nguyen’s work.

The book is divided into two distinct yet interconnected sections. The first part offers a historical and sociocultural introduction to the Vietnam War, which provides a critical lens through which Viet Thanh Nguyen’s fiction—at the center of the second section of this study—can be ultimately understood. Indeed, at the core of Traina’s work lies the assertion that Vietnamese American literature cannot be fully examined without acknowledging, interrogating, and problematizing Vietnam’s troubled twentieth-century history, whose recent past, rather evidently, is not reducible to the war alone, but encompasses the decades that preceded and expedited the conflict as well as the years that followed, including the dramatic dislocations of Vietnamese refugees. This is why the first section of this study undertakes a rigorous reconstruction of Vietnam’s twentieth-century trajectory, outlining the nation’s slow yet steady descent into war by charting key historical events and political figures, both on American and Vietnamese sides, whilst recalling the genesis of the conflict in anti-colonialist movements—either nationalist or communist—that emerged during the 1930s under French colonialism, as well as the far-reaching consequences of its aftermath. Besides examining the military history of this major event, this study, in fact, also devotes particular attention to the climate of terror and repression that pervaded the newly reunified Socialist Republic of Vietnam after the DRV won the Western-allied South Vietnam, as well as to the economic and migratory crises that followed the reunification of the country, shedding light on the hor-

2 For reference, see Truong (1997), Janette (2003), Chan (2006), Yu (2009), Pelaud (2011), Janette (2018), Nock-Hee Park (2019).

rifying forced mobilities that dislocated thousands of Vietnamese people all over the world, and particularly to the United States.

Drawing on an extensive body of scholarly works belonging to the “new Vietnam War scholarship” (Asselin 2018; Goscha 2016; 2022; Guillemot 2012 and 2019; Nguyen 2012; Vu 2017)—much of which has hitherto remained largely inaccessible to the broader Italian readership—Traina’s *Reflections of War* applies a “Vietnam-centric approach” (Tran 3) to the history of the Vietnam war and, as such, not only aspires to reconstruct the convoluted history of twentieth-century Vietnam, emphasizing both the agency of Vietnamese actors and the transnational dimensions of the conflict and its aftermath, but also appropriately portrays this event as a “multilayered” war, at the same time an international conflict and a civil war that involved, affected, and forever altered the lives of the entire Vietnamese population and nation. Ultimately, Traina problematizes the notion of a singular or definitive history of the war, contending instead that competing interpretations, myths, and counternarratives have started to emerge even before the DRV invaded Saigon in 1975 and have continued to evolve ever since. More appropriately, this study proposes reframing the conflict as the “war of *Vietnams*” (in original, “la guerra *dei* Vietnam,” [Riflessi di guerra 7]), an expression that includes both the war first physically fought to assert one idealistic vision—or myth—of the nation over several others and then the “metaphorical” one fought later on in the memory of the various communities involved, one way or the other, in those tragic events. Even when the conflict is over, the fight perseveres in the collective imagination of those who survive, as their interpretations and narratives of the Vietnam War are continuously renegotiated to explain and comprehend the experience that inevitably determined and changed their lives altogether.

At the heart of what Traina terms the “war after the war” (Riflessi di guerra 9) stands, of course, the experience of the Vietnamese American community, whose “strategic memory projects” (Aguilar-San Juan 88) and idealization of the past have “fix[ed] in time an alternative Vietnam to the one celebrated at home by the communist victors—an imagined Vietnam that may have never existed, made up of alternative heroes, victories, and symbols” (Riflessi di guerra 54). Within this intricate process of negotiation between memory, perfectly crafted foundational myths emerging out of a displaced community, and the mainstream and authoritative historiographical account of what occurred, the post-memorial literary production of Vietnamese American writers emerges as a crucial site of exploration of historical traumas and cultural identity, dedicated to the reconstruction and *a posteriori* remembrance

of the complex genealogies of the war and the forced mobilities that lead up to the dislocation of Vietnamese people in the United States (Espiritu 2014). In the closing chapter of the first part, Traina traces the different phases and turns of the Vietnamese diasporic literature, revising scholarly studies of the early 2000s that, to this day, already appear updated (e.g., Pelaud 2011). Traina, in particular, focuses his attention on the literary production of the so-called “Generation 1.5,” the one born in Vietnam yet raised in the United States, amongst whose ranks one can find the likes of Thi Bui, Monique Truong, Ocean Vuong, and, of course, Viet Thanh Nguyen.

As anticipated, the second part of this volume is entirely dedicated to Viet Thanh Nguyen’s fiction, with a particular focus on his most-renowned work, *The Sympathizer*, and, to a lesser extent, the short story “War Years” from *The Refugees* (2017). Drawing upon theoretical frameworks from the Critical Refugee Studies field (Espiritu 2006; 2014; Espiritu et al. 2018), Traina’s reading of Nguyen’s oeuvre aims to shed light on the author’s re-reading of the past as an ongoing cycle of imperial and colonial violence, a political act of interpretation that seeks to bring to the fore the invisible links between memory and power structures in action within the US. Seeking to draw connections between real-life places, historical events, and communities that may seem completely disconnected from one another yet are bound as by-products of wars and imperialistic projects, Nguyen represents the Vietnam War as a crucial moment in time within a much longer and over-arching historical continuum of violence—as Traina puts it, borrowing from Evyn Le Espiritu Gandhi, “nothing more than an island within an ‘archipelago’” (*Riflessi di guerra* 79). Bearing this in mind, Traina pays close attention to how Nguyen’s fiction posits the sequence of events that both led up to the conflict and followed its aftermath (the diaspora as well as the postmemorial fight for the imposition of a singular narrative over what happened) as inextricably concatenated, the Vietnam War being a single fragment within a much broader context. As a result, in Traina’s reading, *The Sympathizer* does not only appear as an all-encompassing narrative of the Vietnamese post-war years up until the 1980s but is also described as “a thriller of ideas” (*Riflessi di guerra* 120) that puts into question every account and memory of the conflict, and that favors, instead, a surreal and antirealistic narrative, coherent with the illogical and surreal nature of the Vietnam War itself. In the second half of this study, particular attention is ultimately devoted to the multiple strategies of implausibility enacted by Nguyen within the novel, such as the Hollywood subplot, which seeks to address the biased

and imperialistic nature of memory industries operating in the US, both in the past and nowadays.

Traina's *Reflections of War* not only provides a thorough historical and cultural investigation of both the Vietnam War and Vietnam's twentieth-century trajectory, a rigorous reconstruction that will surely be extremely helpful for Italian readers who intend to approach this topic for the first time, but also offers a compelling and original contribution to the ongoing scholarly debate on Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*. By focusing solely on Nguyen's most renowned work, this study leaves a critical gap within Italian scholarship, creating an opportunity for further inquiries into his broader literary corpus, as well as the works of other Vietnamese American authors. In doing so, *Reflections of War* lays the groundwork for future research that may further illuminate the complexities of Vietnamese diasporic literature and its role in shaping narratives and discourses surrounding the Vietnam War.

*Abstract:* Giacomo Traina's *Reflections of War: History and Antirealism in Viet Thanh Nguyen's Fiction* (Ombre Corte, 2024) offers a timely and meticulous reassessment of the Vietnam War and its enduring postmemorial legacy. Framed through Viet Thanh Nguyen's assertion that "all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory," the study interrogates the competing historical, political, and cultural narratives surrounding the conflict, foregrounding the long-neglected Vietnamese perspective. Divided into two complementary sections, Traina's volume first reconstructs the complex twentieth-century history of Vietnam, tracing the nation's descent into war and its aftermath through a Vietnam-centric approach that restores the agency of Vietnamese actors and emphasizes the transnational and multilayered dimensions of the conflict. The second section offers a sustained analysis of Nguyen's fiction—particularly *The Sympathizer* (2015)—through the theoretical framework of Critical Refugee Studies, illuminating how Nguyen's antirealistic narrative strategies challenge imperial historiographies and expose the entanglements of memory, power, and representation within the American cultural imagination. By conceptualizing the Vietnam War as both a physical and metaphorical "war of Vietnams," Traina situates Nguyen's work within a broader genealogy of diasporic memory and cultural negotiation, wherein the "war after the war" continues to be fought through competing myths, counternarratives, and postmemorial reimaginings. In bridging historical reconstruction with literary analysis, *Reflections of War* not only enriches Italian scholarship on Vietnamese American literature but also lays the groundwork for further studies into the transnational reconfiguration of war memory, identity, and narrative form.

*Keywords:* Vietnamese American literature; Vietnam War; Viet Thanh Nguyen; postmemory

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