



THE RISING ASIA REVIEW OF BOOKS

REVIEW BY AURKO CHAKRABARTI
Independent Scholar

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF OTHERNESS The Other in I, I and the Other

Viet Thanh Nguyen, *To Save and to Destroy: Writing as an Other*.
Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University
Press, 2025, 144 pages, US\$26.95.

Viet Thanh Nguyen's work has consistently dealt with themes of otherness. His Pulitzer Prize winning debut novel, *The Sympathizer*, meditates over this through the lens of a half-French, half-Vietnamese spy for North Vietnam, who has infiltrated the South Vietnamese Army. His latest work succinctly elucidates the themes of otherness in relation to his personal experiences, literary texts—both historical and contemporary, and ongoing conflicts. *To Save and to Destroy: Writing as an Other* is an anthology consisting of six essays delivered as a part of Harvard University's 2023–24 Norton Lecture Series, which is percipient—blending scholarly intent with bouts of subtle humour.

Nguyen's own conflicting identities are shaped by his experiences of immigration and generational trauma, fleeing to the United States after the fall of Saigon in 1975 with his family having to start anew. He grapples with the idea of how otherness is impacted by the difficulty of

assimilation while reconciling with one's own past and heritage. Otherness presents challenges and opportunities to understanding oneself through the many perceptions—both internal and external—that shape an identity. It provides a latitude to both create and dispel narratives as he describes the “tragicomic joy” of being viewed as “the Vietnamese, the Asian, the minoritized, the racialized, the colonized, the hybrid, the hyphenated, the refugee, the displaced, the artist, the writer, the smart ass, the bastard, the sympathizer, and the committed” (p. 90).

Otherness does not exist solely as a phenomenon through which one is viewed by other individuals, groups, or systems but can also exist in the different ways one sees themselves and how to contend with it. “How we perceive ourselves is not how others see us” (p. 17) is how Nguyen describes his first encounter with his own otherness. Raised on American pop culture, he recounts how his first viewing experience of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979)—a movie depicting the Vietnam War—led to a “shock of misrecognition” (p. 17). Renowned as an antiwar movie, Nguyen sees the onscreen violence against Vietnamese people as a “renewed symbolic violence” (p. 19), although his objection is not primarily to the depiction of killing but the “silencing of others and rendering them purely as victims” (p. 19). He claims that there is a lack of range when depicting the other whose identity is not an amalgamation of various emotions and circumstances but rather the result of it. While the depiction of white characters has historically been molded by their good and bad deeds throughout literature of “high value” (p. 17), it has led to writers of various minority communities often rejecting holistic portrayals of individuals when depicting one's own people under the “burden of representation” (p. 21). This can result in writers telling stories which are often “idealized, sanitized, or



stereotyped” (p. 21), preferring moral adjudication over the ambiguity that resides in the human element.

When examining grief as a component of the other, Nguyen writes about how the other is both valued and devalued by their trauma, allowing only a certain amount of space when discussing their “allotted grief” (p. 17). He also refers to “capacious grief” (p. 25) in which he mulls over the betrayal of telling his parents stories in his memoir and in doing so speaking on their behalf. He recounts his parents’ own traumatic stories, stripping them of their right to privacy. He is perturbed by the complexity of being the other and writing on behalf of another but allays the fear of this dichotomy by insisting that any writer requires otherness when writing—even if it is about oneself. He reiterates this position throughout the book—even finding joy in the “otherness of the blank page” (p. 88)—with writing acting as a form of catharsis.

His parents play a significant role in the book in helping the reader understand his upbringing, his foray into the profession of writing, and how they continue to shape his identity. A child of hardworking immigrants, he praises their courage and dedication to provide for him but also describes how they became another to him, and how at times he longed to have his own freedom. This is not out of contempt but a more natural angst that develops within many who feel constrained by the borders of their own home. When talking about the expectations of an immigrant child, he notes how his brother became a medical doctor but he jokes about how he also became a doctor—but in English. His parents’ bewilderment over his choice of profession was remedied by the monetary gains he enjoyed through his success. While trying to understand his place as an other in American society, he relays how he did not fully comprehend the stress otherness placed on his own

parents—the different traumas they experienced through repeated displacement and the cost of war. His mother suffered from severe depression, which required extended psychiatric care, eventually passing away, while his father continues to suffer from memory-loss issues. Nguyen ponders over how to “separate” (p. 36) between personal trauma and the shared trauma of all Vietnamese people who were affected by the war and became refugees. How does one keep hold of their individuality, while also being affected by a shared experience?

In the chapter, “On Palestine and Asia,” Nguyen takes a didactic approach to the connotations of being Asian American while also voicing his opposition for Israel’s war in Gaza. He discusses how he felt compelled to speak out about Palestine given the similar imperial justifications that had been given for the American war in Vietnam. He uses the work of Edward Said, especially *Orientalism* (Said, 1978) to explain how Western countries (Occident) justify their colonization of the East (Orient). He describes the misconstrued portrayals of Arabs in the United States, who have been largely depicted as terrorists in mainstream media, referring to the “good other who is willing to die for the West, while the bad other must be killed by the West” (p. 43).

When analyzing what it means to be Asian American, Nguyen writes about how Asians of different backgrounds “practice a solidarity aimed for inclusion” (p. 45). While at one time enemies, the Japanese and Chinese now identify under the broad umbrella of being Asian American to provide them with greater agency through collective support. South Asians have also come under that umbrella, facing “overseas colonialism and domestic racism” (p. 47). While united in fighting against Asian American hatred, Nguyen is also puzzled by the fact that the existence of tribes in Hawai’i and across the Pacific Islands positions him as both a “citizen and a colonizer at the same time” (p.

48), a perplexity he shares, when discussing America's exploits in his home country, making him "an insider and an outsider" (p. 39) at the same time. He questions if in assimilating and becoming more American, he is also helping to reaffirm the exploitative nature of the American empire.

In the chapter, "On Crossing Borders," this dichotomy is further explored when Nguyen reviews Jhumpa Lahiri's short story, "The Third and Final Continent" from *The Interpreter of Maladies* (Lahiri, 1999), which focuses on the assimilation of Indian immigrants within the United States, and the sense of belonging one can feel even as the other. In contrast, Nyugen mentions Gloria E. Anzaldúa's book *Borderlands/La Frontera* (Anzaldúa, 1987), which holds a more somber viewpoint while discussing the borders which prevent "people from moving freely" (p. 59) and are reinforced by "languages and religions, gender and sexuality" (p. 59).

The book is full of such dichotomies which goes to show that the "other" can sometimes exist in the grey, with the black and white merely obfuscating the definition of belonging. The book walks this line by understanding the importance of definition while also realizing some things are best left undefined. The book contains a lot of emotion and theory while relying on the viewpoints of many different voices throughout history to support or reject certain narratives. The book is not dense but it provides so much perspective that readers interested in exploring the topic of otherness further have vast amounts of references—some obscure—to read. For anyone interested in writing—regardless of genre—the book provides much depth in the significance of writing as another. Nguyen mentions that a book review of *The Sympathizer* termed him as "a voice for the voiceless" (p. 32). He quotes Arundhati Roy in reply, "There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless.'"

There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard” (p. 32). For, not every story need be related to, but sometimes only heard.

Note on the Reviewer

Aurko Chakrabarti is currently an independent scholar who worked at the Advanced Study Institute of Asia (2022-2026), where he worked since the organization’s founding as an Applied Geopolitical Researcher, and served as the editor of the quarterly *Decypher Journal*. He began his professional career in 2022 as a Narrative Designer at the Sanrachna Foundation, following an internship with the *Economic Times* in 2020 and earlier volunteer work in Kolkata. He holds a Bachelor’s degree in Media and Communication from Swansea University. Aurko has more than four years of research experience working on a range of projects and contributing to various conference discussions.