“Good” Refugees, “Bad” Refugees: A Conversation in Paris with Viet Thanh Nguyen

Christine Buckley interviews **Viet Thanh Nguyen**

VIET THANH NGUYEN goes to bed early. Like 10 o’clock, before the sun goes down in the Parisian summer. Which was why we met for an apéro at 6:00 p.m. one hot evening, two days after a French team (most of whose members are the children of immigrants) brought the World Cup home from Russia.

Nguyen was waiting for me in a nondescript Vietnamese-owned cafe in the 11th arrondissement, the Paris equivalent to Echo Park. The place couldn’t be more French, with its red leather banquettes and shady terrasse — aside from a flyer in the window advertising “bo bun,” a Vietnamese noodle dish that’s been Gallicized. Steps from the quiet apartment where he is spending the summer as the inaugural writer-in-residence at the American Library in Paris, it has become what the French call his QG or quartier general — i.e., his local hangout.

He’s also here researching and writing the sequel to The Sympathizer (2015). The bar for the new novel has been set high: in addition to the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the first one also took home the Edgar Allan Poe Award, the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, and the Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger (Best Foreign Book prize), among many others.

My interest in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s work is not purely literary or journalistic. At the age of eight, I became a little sister to two teenaged refugees from Vietnam. My parents’ spur-of-the-minute decision to become foster parents radically altered the course of my life, just as global politics had interrupted my new brothers’ own destinies. I later had the opportunity to meet one of my brothers in Saigon in April 2000, as he returned home for the first time and the communist regime celebrated the 25th anniversary of the end of the “American War.” My planned two weeks in the country turned into five years living among my brother’s relatives, learning a bit about what it feels like to be seen as a người nước ngoài (person from an outside country).

Thus, I have long been attuned, both personally and professionally, to the lives of displaced people. My grandparents and father were economic and political refugees from Ireland, and as an adult I have inadvertently found myself to be one the world’s willfully displaced — neither exiles nor refugees, but something like what Caribbeans call “nowherians” and psychologist Gregory A. Madison has identified as “existential migrants.” Observing the chaos of “The Jungle” camps in Calais, as a volunteer stocking food or sorting clothes, and subsequently assisting individual refugees “lucky” enough to make it to the streets of Paris or Marseille, I have never been more aware of my privilege to choose the place I call home.

Our current “refugee crisis” has seen more than 68.5 million displaced persons flee violence and persecution from a myriad number of conflicts, a figure that dwarfs the number of European Jews and other persecuted groups who fled Europe during World War II. And yet popular sentiment has shifted since the days when “good” Vietnamese refugees were welcomed onto American, French, Australian, and Canadian shores — the shores of those Since the 1970s, the United States has been a leader in global refugee resettlement. When Barack Obama left office in 2016, the refugee quota was set at 110,000 per year. President Trump has more than halved that ceiling to 45,000, the lowest number requested by any American president in more than 30 years. Also factoring in his “Muslim ban,” the Trump who had arguably played an active role in their displacement.

cap will actually translate into far fewer refugees resettled in the country. In 2017, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that number at 24,559. In 2018, the United States is on track to welcome its lowest number of refugees since 1980.
In this context, Henry Abrams has recently published The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives, edited by Nguyen. The book gathers work by refugee writers from Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chile, Ethiopia, Hungary, Iran, Laos, Mexico, Pakistan, the Soviet Union, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe, who tell stories of starting their lives over in Canada, Germany, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Ten percent of the proceeds from sales of the volume (a minimum commitment of $25,000 annually) will be donated to the International Rescue Committee.

CHRISTINE BUCKLEY: Did you watch the World Cup the other night? Did you get any sleep afterward?
VIET THANH NGUYEN: No, I did not watch the World Cup! I just wanted to get home as fast as I possibly could. [*Laughs.*] I'm too old and I'm too American to care about this. I was here in '98 in Bordeaux when the French won, and I didn't care back then either.

What is your life like when you're in Paris?
My life here is mostly about trying to get up very, very early in the morning, around five o'clock, to avoid waking my son, who usually gets up anywhere from seven to nine. I try to get in as many hours of writing as I can in the morning, because once he's up, it's all over. I'm currently writing the sequel to *The Sympathizer* and discovering that, although I've moved all the way to Paris, my social calendar is even busier than it was in L.A.

Is that because people here know you're only around for a short period of time?
Well, I guess because I tweet about it and put it on Facebook, people know I'm here. And Paris is also a city everybody comes to, so I have no shortage of visitors. As it turns out – weird coincidence – a guy from my high school lives a few blocks from here and we hadn't seen each other in 30 years. But it turns out, here we are … He's an American working in Paris. It's kind of exciting sometimes – for instance, on Saturday I'll host Tommy Orange at my apartment. He's, like, the hottest new writer in America. I just started reading his novel [*There There*], and it's amazing. And I don't say that about very many books. He's the real deal. I think he's just having a vacation here or otherwise he's on a publicity tour. I'm not sure which.

I really want to talk about the essay collection and your new novel, but first, I have to hear about your five-year-old son's book deal …
[*Smiles.*] Yeah, so we went and spent a week together at Djerassi Resident Artists Program near Palo Alto, and I think he was just there absorbing everything that was going on with the other writers. He was already writing and drawing his own comic books at that point. And after the residency, he was so inspired, he just wanted to keep on doing it, because there were a couple of people there who were doing comic books, and I don't know whether he said to me or I said to him, "Let's collaborate." That wouldn't have been the word that he used, of course – maybe, "Let's work together and do a comic book" – and somehow that happened. He drew the story, and then I wrote the words for him. I described the project on Facebook, posting a picture of the cover – and, lo and behold, turns out one of my Facebook friends is a *McSweeney's* editor. She said, "Hey, would you be interested?" – and she was serious, so now we have signed the contracts and he is literally going to get an advance that is more money than I ever made before I was 16 years old and had a job. It's crazy! And now he says to me, "Uh, maybe we should write another book so I can get some more money!"

What's your son's name? And what does he plan to do with the money?
Ellison. And I don't think he has a real concept of that. I've told him, "You could buy as many Legos as you can dream of right now." So I'll let that sink in, and see if he'll remember …
So how did *The Displaced* come about? I've read a few conflicting versions of the story.
Abrams [the publisher] came to me. The editor there is Jamison Stoltz, and he came at me out of the blue, said, "I want to do a book about refugees." This was around the time Trump's Muslim ban had been announced, and he said, "It turns out that my wife is a refugee, and I never knew it until now." His wife is from the former Soviet Union; he has two kids, and I think he was struck by that. He was already opposed to the Muslim ban, but this recognition that he was married to a refugee made it more personal and of course brought up the issue, "Why did I not know this beforehand?"
He came up with half the writers, and I came up with half the writers. The criterion we used was that they had to be refugees *and* writers. Of course, if we wanted to do an oral history collection, we could have had tens of thousands of sources, but I think, for both of us, it was important that these be stories told by people in their own narratives. Obviously what is happening with the refugee crisis is a sort of dehumanization of people, and these people are dehumanized because they can't tell their own stories in widely available forms. Of course, they're telling their

stories to the UN, or to the US embassy or what have you, but they're not *writing* their own stories. And we thought writers who had been refugees could bring both the artistry and the emotion – and the history – to what they were telling.

I read the essay collection as an indictment not only of Donald Trump's Muslim ban and his "zero tolerance" policy but also of European countries' tendency to brush the problem off onto their southernmost neighbors, like Italy and Greece. In other words, a criticism of our collective closed-door policy. Is that about right?

There are two kinds of refugees or immigrants that people are talking about, the political ones and the economic ones. People who are political refugees have an obvious moral claim according to the UN and to all of the countries that subscribe to the UN charter on refugees. And so there's a big incentive to try not to classify people as political refugees and instead call them "economic migrants" or "economic refugees" or whatever term you want to use. This justifies closed borders or closed-door policies; as if to say that these "economic refugees" are not fleeing for real reasons that we should take into account.

In my view, both of these stances are wrong. Political refugees, we do owe a lot to them, and we should have a much larger category of political refugees. But even if we say these people are economic migrants, the question is: *Why* are they economic migrants or refugees? And I think the justification for closing borders and doors is based on this idea that we don't owe people who are so-called "economic refugees" anything. It's their countries that are at fault. But, if we take a more global and historic view of things, in many cases people have become refugees economically or politically because the West – often the United States – has gone and screwed with their countries directly in the past or in the present in ways that Western European or American citizens are not aware of, or are screwing them now through climate change, which is a direct result of Western lifestyles. So we need to understand how we are connected as human beings across borders, and of course the people who are living in more privileged countries are invested in not seeing that, and their governments are invested in not seeing that, and this is only a foreshadowing of what's going to happen in the next few decades or century.

You've started to answer my next question, which is: I know you take issue with some of the terminology used in the migration debate, going back as far as the use of "boat people" – or, as you prefer, "oceanic refugees" – and today's distinction between an "official" refugee, who is fleeing war or political persecution and therefore "deserves" food and shelter, and the "economic migrant," who is fleeing poverty or hunger and is therefore welcome only if she fulfills certain conditions. The latter often end up stigmatized as purely "illegal" or "undocumented" immigrants. Can you speak to the way that the terminology has become politicized and what we can do about it? And a corollary question would be: What is the role of the storyteller in all this? Is it enough to just tell refugee stories and hope that they motivate people to change policies?

I'll take that first from the perspective of writers, of fiction or nonfiction – that is, what's our obligation? It is to try as best we can to connect things that don't seem connected. Because when it comes to the refugee issue, if we don't see war, drugs, and climate as being connected to migration, then we're never going to be able to solve the problem to begin with. So it's necessary for books like *The Displaced* to appear, it's necessary for writers and journalists to talk about climate catastrophes and the connections to our consumerist lifestyles, because this is all part of the necessary work to broaden people's understandings.

People often react to immigration or refugee policies by saying, in essence, "Well, you can't connect what's happening now to what's happening somewhere else because they're not connected." Michiko Kakutani just wrote an article describing what life was like for her family in a Japanese internment camp, connecting it to what's happening with undocumented migrants at the US border, and people in the comments section responded: "Those two things are not the same!" *Of course they're the same!* Refugees and climate catastrophe, they're linked phenomena. So that's the first step: expand the consciousness.

Second step: What do we do? Fuck if I know! My job is to be a writer. That takes up all my time. The politicians should be doing something about it, and every citizen should be doing something about it. We need to be mobilized politically, no matter what. And the more we see that all these issues are connected, the more we see that the local actions we take could have a broader impact if they're part of a larger agenda. The average citizen who just sees, "Oh my God, there's a refugee crisis and a global climate crisis," obviously feels he can't do anything about it as an individual person. These issues are just too large. But, if you feel politically motivated, you start with the local and you connect that to the rest.

So I would say: Find the issue that matters to you and then make sure you understand how that issue resonates globally. That's how all activism begins. If you start by saying, "I can't stop the global problem," of course you can't. You have to start with the local problem and make sure you understand that these things are all connected together.

On July 4, you read from your own essay, which introduces *The Displaced,* at the American Library in Paris, and it was very emotional right from the first line, which is: "I was once a refugee although no one would mistake me for being a refugee now." You and several other writers in the collection are taking on this concept of so-called "good refugees" from certain countries versus "bad hombres" from others. How do we combat that? And how do we get a Donald Trump or an Emmanuel Macron to read these stories?
I don't think we're going to get that. Politics is not necessarily always about changing the minds of the people you oppose or your enemies, because they're not going to change their minds. They have their own convictions, even though they're wrong [*Laughs*], and they're going to do what they believe. So the only way to make political change is to get them out of office! That's just the reality of it.
And so that's why I do think that local actions matter. If you don't support Macron, if you don't support Trump, then you have to work from the bottom up, just as the Republicans have apparently been doing very well for the past 30 or 40 or 60 years – or for however long the conservative agenda has been plotted. The conservative agenda needed the billionaires but couldn't have come about without the foot soldiers working in grassroots organizations. So those of us who aren't billionaires have to get involved at the grassroots level. And that's where you change minds. You change minds at the grassroots level and you affirm the beliefs of the people who share your convictions.
That's why I think speaking up isn't always a wasted effort, even if you're speaking to people who share your convictions. Because we need to have that affirmation of what it is we believe in, to be able to continue hearing that message and to articulate it more effectively to ourselves and to others.

Although all of the essays struck a chord for me, I was particularly taken with Dina Nayeri's "The Ungrateful Refugee." She explores the expectation that a refugee should "make great" in order to succeed in his or her adopted country [which brings to mind French President Macron awarding citizenship to Malian "Spiderman" Mamadou Gassama in May 2018], while at the same time remaining "less capable than the native, needier. He must stay in his place." Nayeri makes a case for our human obligation to provide refugees access to the same options granted to native-born citizens of developed countries not in war zones. Why do you think this idea is so difficult for many people to accept?
Well, it goes back to your previous question about "good" and "bad" refugees, and the same goes for "good" and "bad" immigrants, or "good" and "bad" minorities. If you are not in power in your society because you're marginalized in some way, the terms of your representation are not up to you. And, as always, the terms of your representation are always going to be polarized into "good" and "bad." Because you're always in danger of being suspected as "bad," you always have to prove that you're "good," and being good means being exceptional.
Now, this is a problem, obviously, because people in the dominant group, whatever they are, never have to be accepted. They can rest in their mediocrity, in their averageness, and there's no problem with that. That's the privilege of privilege, which they take for granted. They can be mediocre and they're not going to be deported, for example. And so the challenge is to trouble those assumptions of "goodness" and "badness," that viewpoint held by the majority or dominant group but also held by the minority population. Because a lot of people in the minority population adhere to that same polarization, because they've internalized it. They don't want to be cast as "bad," so they're invested in being "good" and in making sure that everyone in their community or their race is "good," too.
This is why you will find people who are immigrants or refugees turn against other refugees or other immigrants. Because they are afraid of more so-called "bad" people being let in, which will rub off on them, and make their own situation even more precarious. We have to challenge these assumptions; those of us who support refugees and immigrants and those who are refugees and immigrants ourselves, we have to challenge that dichotomy, challenge that internalization. We need to do what Dina is saying, which is to refuse the burden of gratitude. Of course we should be grateful. Everybody should be grateful. But the refugee or immigrant shouldn't have an undue burden of gratitude, which is what she is talking about, beyond the normal expectations of gratitude for whatever privileges we have. We should recognize why gratitude is used as a tool to reinforce that "good" versus "bad" dichotomy. Because if you *are* a good refugee, you're grateful. And if you're not grateful, you're a bad refugee: "Get out, go back to where you came from." That's the next step in her analysis, which every refugee or minority knows is waiting for them. If they're not good, someone's going to tell them, "Go back to where you came from," regardless of whether they came from this country or not.

Which is the experience that one of my brothers, who came to the United States almost 40 years ago as a refugee from Vietnam, has started to have since racism has come back out of the closet. Over the years, he got used to hearing stereotypes about "good Asians who work hard," yet recently he's actually been told, "Go back to your country."

But it's totally predictable, because, if you were Asian 150 years ago in this country, you were the "bad" immigrant – people wanted you to leave. Now, times have changed; there are newer, "badder" populations. So the way that racism works is to divide people up and say, "Okay, there are these 'bad' immigrants over here but there are these 'good' immigrants over there. You 'bad' immigrants, you should be more like these 'good' immigrants." That makes the "good" immigrants feel better, but of course, underneath, they have some kind of suspicion that this is a very temporary embrace that's being offered to them. That's why they need to have those other "bad" immigrants. But now that the United States is getting very good at kicking out these so-called "bad" immigrants, the circle is being drawn closer and closer to the center. Which means that people like your brother, who were once in a safe zone, find this zone retracting beneath their feet. Obviously, it's already happening. The next step for the current administration is to go after the so-called "good" immigrants.

There are many compelling moral as well as economic arguments for open borders, but it's hard to imagine them being taken seriously in our current political climate. I know you're a proponent of open borders. You said the other day [at the American Library] that otherwise it's like we're saying, "Beyond that line people are not like us." Do you think we could see a future without borders, where national identities are relegated to the past or at least to the back burner?

I believe that we will get there. I don't know how long it's going to take us to get there, but we will get there, because past experience has told us. If we look back over the centuries, yes, we've always slaughtered people across the border who are different from us, but these borders have been gradually expanding so that our definition of who is our "near and dear" has expanded. Even here in France. French national identity is a relatively recent phenomenon, the last couple of centuries or so; likewise in the United States.

Okay, so the optimistic view is we will get there. The problem is that, as always, the human capacity for greater love and empathy works in parallel with the human capacity for destruction. So we may kill ourselves first before we get to the point where we have a greater human community. Because there are nuclear weapons and climate catastrophe – so any kind of optimism has to be layered with great pessimism. I don't know what the outcome is going to be. I know we have the capacity to do it; I also know that we have the capacity to destroy others and ourselves, and I don't know which one is going to win.

You said a couple of things at your Fourth of July talk at the American Library that I'd like to explore more deeply. First, you referred to France's universal republicanism versus the United States's multicultural democracy and pointed out that neither system can solve its country's problems. Your words were, "We have to address the fact that slavery, genocide, colonization, and conquest are all part of our story." How do you think we, as a society, can go about doing that more effectively? What can Americans do about our tendency to overplay our heroism and look away from the blood on our hands?

I think that the United States has actually done an okay job at least acknowledging some of the terrible aspects of American history. It's not as though we don't know these things. The question is whether we're disseminating that knowledge sufficiently through society and whether all Americans are willing to hear it. Obviously many Americans are not willing to. But it's not as if that knowledge production isn't taking place in some way.

I think the issue is not really greater knowledge but rather greater cultural and economic transformation. In the sense of changing American culture in such a way that more and more Americans would be willing to accept that American history is fundamentally contradictory and that two things can exist at the same time – i.e., American idealism, American exceptionalism, all that kind of stuff, along with the fact that those ideals were born out of genocide and slavery. There's nothing wrong with saying that. It's just a fact.

The Founding Fathers had slaves.

Yes, and all kinds of other terrible things. And we wouldn't have the United States unless we had wiped out the people who were there to begin with. So you have to accept those facts. And if you can't, then nothing's going to change. Now, besides that, if we acknowledge those facts, we acknowledge that the inequalities of American society – just like the inequalities of French society, as far as I can tell – come out of this long, contradictory history where ideals and bloodshed are completely mixed together. You can't disentangle those things. The only way to do it is to, number one, acknowledge those facts and, number two, structurally redress those problems, which means economic redistribution. And a lot of Americans don't want to hear that. That sounds like communism or at least socialism; now at least people are willing to talk about these kinds of issues, but there's no other way around it.

My mom, who with my dad fostered two Vietnamese refugees, voted for Trump. And now she seems to be afraid someone like Bernie Sanders is going to come and take away her sofa and redistribute it to someone else. She's not a racist, and yet …

Well, I think the point is: divide and conquer. I mean, working-class, middle-class Americans think redistribution is about coming for them. Redistribution for me is about going to the corporations and the one percent and enacting a fair tax policy. That's not about cutting off people's heads, taking away people's Social Security – that's not it at all. But the people who are worried about losing their sofas are siding with the people who have billions of dollars. That means the people who have billions of dollars have done a very good job of influencing those folks, and they've been doing that since the beginning of slavery, when rich white people got poor white people to believe that their whiteness was more important than their affiliation with Black slaves.

One more thing you brought up during the July 4 talk was that more than half of the "oceanic refugees" from Vietnam didn't make it to their destination alive. One of my brothers lost his older brother and a cousin on that journey across the South China Sea. "Those are worse odds than astronauts," you said. "We call astronauts heroic and we call refugees pathetic?" Do you have anything more to say on that?
It's exactly why Jamison Stoltz and I wanted refugees who are writers in the book, because at least one reason refugees are "pathetic" and astronauts are "heroic" is because astronauts have stories told about them by people who can see from their point of view, and refugees don't get that benefit. That's because the people who write about refugees see them from the outside, as objects, not from the inside. They see them as foreigners and not being a part of their culture. Trust me, if Americans suddenly had to take to the seas and faced 50 percent survival odds, there would be Hollywood movies made about them as incredible heroes. What that speaks to is not simply the fact that there aren't enough storytellers but that refugees are completely disempowered. They don't have access to Hollywood, and astronauts do. That's an outcome of radically different economic and political opportunities.

What were some of the joys and the difficulties of editing this collection?
The difficulties were mostly trying to get all the writers to accept our invitation. We did not get everyone, which was unfortunate. We got the majority we were seeking, though, and it was heartening to see that there were a lot of writers who wanted to participate. Then it was all pretty much joyful. I mean, this was a really easy editing job. It was the easiest book I ever did. The writers are good. I didn't have to edit. In some cases, they didn't want me to edit, and that's fine. [*Laughs.*] So it was a joyful book from beginning to end because it happened very quickly, and the stories were very powerful and the writers didn't need guidance.

Are there any plans for it to be translated?
Yes. We hope there will be a French edition, for example, and we're in talks about that. And if the French publisher wants to have some French writers in there, that's fine. The paperback edition and the foreign editions will actually look a bit different from this original version.

And what about a translation into Vietnamese? I've read different things about the Vietnamese translation of *The Sympathizer*. I understand that the material could be problematic or sensitive for the Vietnamese government, particularly certain sections of the book. Is there an underground edition?
Well, we sold the translation rights to a major Vietnamese publisher, and the translation is done. It's been under "government review" of some kind, last I heard, since April. So it's a very sensitive matter, and I'm just letting my editor handle it, because she knows how delicate it is.
But this book, *The Displaced*, I don't think would pose as many problems for them…? Uh, maybe aside from the three contributions from the Vietnamese writers. [*Both laugh.*]
Yeah, including my introduction! [*Laughs*.]

What can you tell us about the sequel to *The Sympathizer*, which you're working on now? I know it picks up where the last novel ends, on a refugee boat leaving Vietnam in 1981, only the narrator doesn't end up in the United States but in France, where his father comes from …
Because he didn't want to go back to the United States, for reasons that will become obvious if you read *The Sympathizer*, and because, as a writer, I wanted to talk about French colonialism and French race relations in addition to hopefully writing an exciting novel. And I wanted to get a better understanding of what's happening here, since I'm colonized. I mean, why did I choose France? Because I'm mentally colonized. In addition to all the Francophilic stuff that's universal, being Vietnamese means that we have absorbed elements of French culture, and I want to understand a little bit more about that myself and try to figure out to what extent I've been mentally colonized. [*Laughs.*]

And are you figuring it out, by being here?
I am figuring some of that stuff out. The more time I spend in France, the less regard I have for French people – or, I should say, for French culture – in some ways, which is a good thing, because I can see them more as just normal.

Which means I can still respect them for the great things they've done and can also see that they are sometimes just as dumb and trashy as Americans. Which is no insult to the French. It just means they're normal people.
In addition to trying to figure out my own mental colonization, my Francophilia, what I'm also trying to figure out is my own Americanization. You know, I bring my American viewpoints to France, and sometimes that produces insight but maybe also it produces blindness. I'm sure French people would look at some of the things I say and would respond, well, "That's because you're an outsider. You don't understand how France works." Could be true. It could also be true that, if I'm an outsider, I can see things French people don't see or have accepted that are still problematic. That includes the Vietnamese in the Asian community here, which is a major subject of the novel.

That's an interesting problem many of us find ourselves faced with. You've said that you feel more American than Vietnamese because you've spent more years living in the States versus your first four years in Vietnam. Can you talk a bit about the Vietnamese diaspora and how you're received in France compared to the United States? I know certain Vietnamese in L.A.'s Little Saigon, being generally anticommunist, refused to read *The Sympathizer* based on the title alone.
I think the reaction varies. After the novel won the Pulitzer Prize, that introduced a completely different element besides the literary, which is simply that Vietnamese people who feel themselves to be Vietnamese take pride in Vietnamese accomplishments. So that made a big difference for Vietnamese Americans, even those who think they would be politically opposed to this book just by the concept of it. Now they're proud of it.
In France, it's a little bit different. Here I'm discovering – also reaffirming – that the Vietnamese community is very different than the Vietnamese-American community. There's a Vietnamese community here that identifies as such and hangs together, but the type of people who would be equivalent to the Vietnamese Americans who love my novel – that is to say, the liberal, educated class – don't really identify as Vietnamese. The liberal, educated, assimilated Vietnamese people here see themselves as French. So that means that the racial politics are different. In other words, there are no racial politics for Vietnamese people here. That's what they're telling me.

Just like there's supposedly no racism in "colorblind" France because it can't be counted, or officially documented, because there are no quotas, no affirmative action (which is termed "positive discrimination" in French). Whereas, up until a couple of years ago, you were expected to include a photograph on your résumé when applying for a job, which shocked me when I first arrived.
That's part of the contradiction. You're supposed to *not* see difference in this country, and I've met Vietnamese people who say, "I've never been treated differently by the French." By the rest of the French, let's say. And yet, obviously, French people *do* see difference; it just depends on what they choose to see. Racism is always a matter of perception. It's not something inherent in us, on our surfaces. It's a matter of how people *see* us. And so, by whatever optical trick, the French people look at some Vietnamese people and don't see any difference, but they will look at someone who's Arab or Black and see that difference. And I will look around, and sometimes I can't tell if someone's Arab or whatever, I can't tell the difference, because I don't have a clue, I wasn't raised here. But French people obviously would. So that's what I'm going to try to tackle with the next novel.

I'm looking at the book on the table by an author I know and love. Tell us about that, and whatever else you are reading right now?
I'm reading two books right now. I just finished an as-yet-unpublished manuscript of Anna Moï's *Butterfly Venom* [published in French as *Le Venin du Papillon*] in an English version. She actually wrote it originally in English, and it's a novel that touches on a lot of the same themes *The Sympathizer* does, which I thought was fascinating. And now I'm looking at Anna Moï's *Le pays sans nom* [*The Country Without a Name*, which has yet to be translated into English], but I think my French is good enough to read it. The other book I'm reading is, as I mentioned earlier, *There There* by Tommy Orange. I just read the prologue, and it kicks ass. I'm very excited about that book.

Christine Buckley is a journalist, editor and translator raised in New York and based in Paris. She is currently revising a memoir entitled People From an Outside Country: Vietnam, America, and the Places in Between.