

## Faculty Information Literacy Stipend Final Report

**Name:** Richard Hermes

**Course:** ENGL 2312: The Global Novel

**Semester:** Spring 2023

### INTRODUCTION

This report details how I incorporated a heightened focus on information literacy into two sections of English 2312, an introductory course on literary fiction. The topic of this course was “The Global Novel.” It considers texts that reflect and respond to the increasing interconnectedness of our globalized world, with the aim of building a set of skills for analyzing, researching, and writing about literature. These skills include close reading, familiarity with important elements of fiction, awareness of genre, and various skills relating to information literacy. By thinking deeply about not just *what* texts say, but *how* they say it, students learn how to participate effectively in critical conversations about these texts. As this report aims to describe, the information literacy skills that students practiced in the course enhanced students’ experiences of those critical conversations.

This spring 2023 semester, I made adjustments to the kinds of research and writing I ask my students to do in my sections of ENGL 2312. Because these adjustments asked students to write in a way that is less typical for an English literature course and that draws on nontraditional sources, I wanted to prepare them with the information literacy skills that could enable them to effectively find, evaluate, and use those sources.

### DESCRIPTION OF THE INFORMATION LITERACY ACTIVITIES

I redesigned three major assignments in the course with information literacy in mind: the major paper (a critical book review), an oral presentation on a secondary source from students’ research, and a research reflection essay.

#### 1. The **critical book review**:

In the past, I assigned a traditional literary analysis as my major writing assignment for my sections of this course. The literary analysis essay was written for a scholarly audience and required students to incorporate multiple peer-reviewed sources from the field of English literary studies. This past semester, I reconceived this major writing project by asking students to write a critical book review, a genre that the Williams College library research guide describes as “exist[ing] at a crossroads between journalism and scholarship.” These kinds of articles have traditionally been found in such publications as *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New Yorker*, or *The London Review of Books*, and now might also be found on scholarly blogs or newer outlets such as *LitHub*. The assignment asked students to imagine a different

audience—one that includes not only specialist-scholars but also a reasonably informed general public. This necessitated adjustments to students’ writing style that, in most cases, was new for them, as they attempted to make their argument more engaging and accessible. Importantly—and most relevant to this information literacy project—it also asked them to include **both traditional and nontraditional sources** in their research, which required them to put into practice a number of information literacy skills and concepts that did not come into play as acutely when they could limit their research to peer-reviewed sources.

Student learning outcomes for the critical review were selected and adapted from the Association of College & Research Libraries’ “Research Competencies in Writing and Literature” companion document to the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. I followed Terry Riley’s practice of using *Framework* “dispositions” as learning outcomes, adapting the “knowledge practices” as descriptors of what constitutes progress toward these objectives in a rubric. The following are the information literacy–related learning outcomes for this assignment:

After completing this critical review assignment, students should

- Recognize how aspects of a text such as style, tone, and citation style are determined by the expectations that readers have of its particular genre. Demonstrate an ability to meet those expectations in their own writing, including not only the critical book review but also the secondary source presentation and research reflection essay
- Understand the value and potential disadvantages of various types of resources (including both traditional scholarly sources such as journal articles and book chapters, as well as less traditional sources) depending on the writing task, while recognizing that literary criticism is being published in an increasing variety of forms and venues
- See themselves as participants in a critical conversation about literature in a way that leads them to value the skills, time, and effort needed to produce literary works, digital projects, scholarship, and knowledge;
- Realize that conversations about the interpretations of texts are fluid and multifarious; read literary criticism and other texts with a critical view that develops and revises research questions throughout the research and writing process
- Observe, ask questions of, and describe their own research practices
- Demonstrate mental flexibility, creativity, and persistence while conducting their research, pivoting to new search strategies if necessary, while realizing that information sources have varying relevance and value, depending on the research and writing task
- Develop an awareness of the biases and worldview they bring to their own literary criticism

(Selected and adapted from the Association of College & Research Libraries’ “Research Competencies in Writing and Literature” companion document to the Framework for

Information Literacy for Higher Education)

## 2. Oral presentation on a secondary source:

These seven-minute presentations, spaced throughout the latter half of the semester, were to be about a source that students found in conducting their research for the critical book review. They were asked to describe not only the source itself and its argument, but also the process involved in arriving at and evaluating the source. Thus, it included a discussion of students' search process, source analysis, and self-reflection on their process.

Because students were asked incorporate both traditional and nontraditional sources in their arguments, they considered scholarly blogs, chapters from books (for both scholarly and general audiences), podcasts, and even social media posts and threads as they drew upon elements of the larger critical conversation about the literary work they were interested in. In many cases, the search process for this kind of material looked rather different than it did for my students in the past, and it required them to identify which of these nontraditional sources were authoritative, accurate, and relevant—aspects of source evaluation that, especially in the case of the former two, might have been previously assumed to be guaranteed by the peer review system.

## 3. The research reflection essay:

This assignment, which students completed after writing their final critical review essay, asked them to consider both a) the moments in your research process where you encountered difficulty or uncertainty and b) the research-related learning goals for the essay assignment. Students were asked to choose a research-related learning goal that relates to the difficulties or uncertainties they identified and make an argument about whether or not they think they ultimately achieved the learning goal. They addressed areas where they felt they still had room to grow, and described how they approached the challenges they encountered in their research.

## METHOD OF ASSESSMENT & RESULTS AND IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING

To assess whether students achieved the learning outcomes for the critical book review assignment, I used a combination of evaluation of that essay itself and an evaluation of the accompanying research reflection essay.

In general, the vast majority of my students described how they did in fact feel like they achieved important aspects of the learning goals for this assignment. Their ability to offer evidence of this achievement, while also describing how their own processes related to key learning outcomes, served as an illustration for me that they were indeed understanding and putting into practice the skills we had emphasized over the course of the semester.

The most common learning goal that students discussed—and felt like they achieved, at least in

part--was the ability to “Demonstrate mental flexibility, creativity, and persistence while conducting research.” Several students reported that the requirement to incorporate nontraditional sources accentuated the necessity for them to practice mental flexibility and persistence, since it required them to venture into genres and methods of searching that they were not familiar with.

In the attached appendix, I have provided several examples of the research reflection essays that students produced in the course.

## SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

One of the unexpected benefits of this project for my teaching is that it prompted me to think of new ways to demystify the research process for my students, to encourage them to notice and reflect on their own processes, and to frame research as part of a critical conversation that is ongoing—indeed, *alive*—in the wider world.

Rebecca Graff’s visits to my classroom were especially helpful in emphasizing the above. My students found her in-class information sessions extremely valuable, and I appreciated her help in the brainstorming and refining stages of assignment design. In her conversations with my students, she helped them better understand what, in its “Research Competencies in Writing and Literature” document, the ACRL calls the “hybrid ecosystem” of contemporary literary scholarship, including “a growing number of hosts, platforms, formats, and even disciplines” (4). She helped students understand that it’s possible to find valuable sources of information in places they wouldn’t have expected, beyond the more familiar paths of scholarly research in English literature.

One aspect of the course that I might adjust in the future is the secondary source presentation. I was initially excited about the idea of these presentations as a scaffolding assignment for the critical book review, but my sense, informed by student feedback, is that this assignment was less successful than others in the course. If I were to include it again, I would try to do a better job of modeling the scope and focus of this kind of presentation for students, with a clearer articulation of the level of detail expected in the description the research process. It’s not a familiar assignment for students, and in this way, including means introducing a new genre for them to produce. That can be done successfully, of course, but I do believe that students need to be exposed to multiple examples of a new genre before being expected to work effectively within it. Time constraints didn’t allow for that as fully as I would have liked this semester.

It was also ambitious of me to design a major essay that asks students to rethink not only how they research, but also how they write—to attempt to write, that is, in a way that appeals to general audiences as well as scholarly ones. While it may seem that scholarly writing is the more difficult genre for students to learn, it is in fact the kind of writing that they have had the most exposure to in college. Writing in a scholarship-informed way that also appeals to a wider readership involves a more advanced level of skill that requires, it’s clear to me now, a time-intensive level of focus on those skills alone. In the next iteration of this course, I will likely keep

the emphasis on information literacy and self-reflection, but return to asking students to write in a more traditional scholarly style. Nontraditional sources could still play a role in students' research process—in the early, conceptualization stages of their argument, perhaps—even if they aren't featured prominently in the final written product.

APPENDICES:

A: Assignment Sheet for the Secondary Source Presentation

B: Assignment Sheet for the Critical Book Review

C: Assignment Sheet for the Research Reflection Essay

D: Example Critical Book Review with Secondary Sources

E: Example Research Reflection Essays

## Appendix A: Assignment Sheet for the Secondary Source Presentation

ENGL 2312: The Global Novel  
Spring 2023

### Secondary Source Presentation Assignment Sheet

Your 7 min. presentation will be about a source you found in conducting your research for your critical book review. You will describe not only the source itself and its argument, but also the process involved in arriving at and evaluating the source.

Depending on the kind of source you choose to present on, some of the questions below will be more relevant or interesting than others. Choose the questions that are right for you, but do aim to speak on each of the following three categories:

**1) Your search process.** This means you should talk about not only what you found, but *how* you found it. Be specific.

Describe the process of arriving at this source. What search strategies did you begin with (search tools, terms, browsing paths, etc.)? Why did this source seem interesting or useful to you?

Describe moments in the research process where you encountered difficulty or uncertainty and how you approached those challenges. Describe, in other words, moments of mental flexibility, creativity, and/or persistence in your research process.

*Tips:* Take notes on your process as you do it. How long did your search take? What path, exactly, did you take to arrive at it? What questions arose for you along the way, and how did you answer them?

**2) Source analysis.** How did you assess this source's quality? Its relevance? Its potential disadvantages? Who is the audience for this source? What do you know about its author?

What argument is it making? How is that argument in conversation with other secondary sources? How might you use it in your own argument? How did it add to or change your view of the topic or research question?

**3) Self-reflection:** What questions can you productively ask about your own research process? For instance, what kinds of sources might help to round out your research on this topic? Where might you find them, that you haven't had a chance to explore yet? What else do you need to know to fully locate this source in a critical context?

If you're early in the conceptualization of your research question, what kinds of research questions might this source be valuable for? What research questions might it suggest (those

research questions should not be identical, but can certainly be related, to the research question implicit in the argument of the source itself).

*Note:* You will write a short essay reflecting on your research process to accompany your critical book review. This presentation will be great preparation for that reflection essay.

As you prepare your presentation, read the following learning goals for the critical review assignment. Use them to consider how your presentation (and your research reflection essay) could help to demonstrate that you've met aspects of these goals:

**Learning Goals for the critical book review:**

After completing this critical review assignment, students should

- Recognize how aspects of a text such as style, tone, and citation style are determined by the expectations that readers have of its particular genre. Demonstrate an ability to meet those expectations in your own writing, including not only the critical book review but also the secondary source presentation and research reflection essays
- Understand the value and potential disadvantages of various types of resources (including both traditional scholarly sources such as journal articles and book chapters, as well as less traditional sources) depending on the writing task, while recognizing that literary criticism is being published in an increasing variety of forms and venues
- See yourself as a participant in a critical conversation about literature in a way that leads you to value the skills, time, and effort needed to produce literary works, digital projects, scholarship, and knowledge;
- Realize that conversations about the interpretations of texts are fluid and multifarious; read literary criticism and other texts with a critical view that develops and revises research questions throughout the research and writing process
- Observe, ask questions of, and describe your own research practices
- Demonstrate mental flexibility, creativity, and persistence while conducting your research, pivoting to new search strategies if necessary, while realizing that information sources have varying relevance and value, depending on the research and writing task
- Develop an awareness of the biases and worldview you bring to their own literary criticism

(Selected and adapted from the Association of College & Research Libraries' "Research Competencies in Writing and Literature" companion document to the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*)

## Appendix B: Assignment Sheet for the Critical Book Review

ENGL 2312

### Final Paper: Critical Book Review with Secondary Sources

#### Due dates:

First Draft: April 14

Final Draft: April 28

**Length:** 1400-1600 words

**Task:** Your final paper will be an argumentative essay for which you will be required to use both traditional scholarly and nontraditional secondary sources in addition to the primary text(s).

A critical review is not the same as the general interest book reviews you might be familiar with, often published in newspapers and magazines (online or in print). They closer in form and content to the scholarly literary analysis essay, though they are not meant for an exclusively academic or specialized audience. Your essay should be interesting to that kind of audience, but also accessible and interesting to a more general audience as well.

Here is a good description of the critical book review from a research guide produced by the William College Library:

Critical reviews are written for an informed readership, and exist at a crossroads between journalism and scholarship. The authors are often experts in their fields, but they are writing for a general rather than a scholarly audience. These reviews are longer than general interest reviews, and might appear in such publications as the *New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, or *The Village Voice*.

***Your critical book review should not merely be a tour of what happens in your selected text(s),*** then. It should make an argument about an aspect of the text that you find particularly noteworthy; one that expands our understanding of the text or illuminates an interesting aspect of it that a casual reader may not have noticed.

**Texts:** You may write about any work of fiction you've been assigned this semester, with the caveat that if you write about the same *text that you wrote about in your close reading exercise, you may not recycle those arguments. You can write about one or multiple texts in your piece.*

#### Research & Sources:

Minimum of 3 **secondary sources** required. At least one of these sources must be a traditional, scholarly source, and at least one must be a nontraditional source. Quality popular sources are also an option.



Appropriate scholarly sources might include articles in scholarly journals, whether in print form or accessed through online databases such as JSTOR, or books published by university presses. Nontraditional sources might include scholarship-informed blog posts, social media posts or threads, online reviews at such sites as GoodReads, and much more. Wikipedia-type sites are fine for background but should not be counted as one of your three secondary sources. Avoid Sparknotes and similar publications or websites for high school students, and student papers available online.

### **Learning Goals:**

After completing this critical review assignment, students should

- Recognize how aspects of a text such as style, tone, and citation style are determined by the expectations that readers have of its particular genre. Demonstrate an ability to meet those expectations in your own writing, including not only the critical book review but also the secondary source presentation and research reflection essays
- Understand the value and potential disadvantages of various types of resources (including both traditional scholarly sources such as journal articles and book chapters, as well as less traditional sources) depending on the writing task, while recognizing that literary criticism is being published in an increasing variety of forms and venues
- See yourself as a participant in a critical conversation about literature in a way that leads you to value the skills, time, and effort needed to produce literary works, digital projects, scholarship, and knowledge;
- Realize that conversations about the interpretations of texts are fluid and multifarious; read literary criticism and other texts with a critical view that develops and revises research questions throughout the research and writing process
- Observe, ask questions of, and describe your own research practices
- Demonstrate mental flexibility, creativity, and persistence while conducting your research, pivoting to new search strategies if necessary, while realizing that information sources have varying relevance and value, depending on the research and writing task
- Develop an awareness of the biases and worldview you bring to their own literary criticism

(Selected and adapted from the Association of College & Research Libraries' "Research Competencies in Writing and Literature" companion document to the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*)

### **Format:**

This paper must be in MLA style, typed and double-spaced in 12 pt. Times New Roman font, with 1" margins and a Works Cited entry at the end. All pages after the first page should be

numbered with your last name, both in the top right corner. Purdue Owl (online) is a good resource for details on MLA style.

\*\*I strongly encourage you to communicate with me via email to brainstorm, workshop your thesis statement, and/or to discuss your drafts. Also, take advantage of the Writing Center. Discuss your drafts often and with multiple sets of eyes! Writing *does not need to* be done in isolation.

## Appendix C: Assignment Sheet for the Research Reflection Essay

ENGL 2312  
Spring 2023

### Research Reflection Essay

**Length:** approx. 500 words (this is an estimate; as always, your mileage may vary)

**Task:** This short essay assignment asks you to reflect on your research process.

First, think about one or two moments in your research process where you encountered difficulty or uncertainty and how you approached those challenges.

Then, consider the research-related learning goals for your final critical review essay listed below. Choose one that relates to the difficulties or uncertainties you identified above. Make an argument about whether or not you think you ultimately achieved the learning goal. To what extent were you (or were you not) successful? Are there areas where you still have room to grow?

Your evidence for your argument should be derived from a detailed description of the moments in your research process where you encountered difficulty or uncertainty and how you approached those challenges.

**Be specific. Support all of your claims** with specific evidence.

At the top of your essay, include the learning goal you will be discussing. (Do not include this toward your total word count.)

Unlike your reading responses, this assignment will receive a letter grade, rather than be graded for completion.

A partial list of the **learning goals for your final essay:**

- Understand the value and potential disadvantages of various types of resources (including both traditional scholarly sources such as journal articles and book chapters, as well as less traditional sources) depending on the writing task, while recognizing that literary criticism is being published in an increasing variety of forms and venues
- See yourself as a participant in a critical conversation about literature in a way that leads you to value the skills, time, and effort needed to produce literary works, digital projects, scholarship, and knowledge;
- Realize that conversations about the interpretations of texts are fluid and multifarious; read literary criticism and other texts with a critical view that develops and revises research questions throughout the research and writing process

- Demonstrate mental flexibility, creativity, and persistence while conducting your research, pivoting to new search strategies if necessary, while realizing that information sources have varying relevance and value, depending on the research and writing task
- Develop an awareness of the biases and worldview you bring to your own literary criticism

**Appendix D: Example Student Essay: Critical Book Review with Secondary Sources**

ENGL 2312-005

5/1/2023

**The Audience of a Confession**

In Viet Thanh Nguyen's book *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, the author of *The Sympathizer* discusses how ethnic and/or minority literature written for an American/Western audience is expected to have an implicit message that "endorses The American Dream, the American Way, and American exceptionalism, the belief that no matter how bad it was over there, things are better here" (204). Aware of this expectation Nguyen sought to subvert this norm in *The Sympathizer* describing in an interview with NPR how he "did not want to write this novel with a first audience of white Americans. I wanted to write it with a first audience of Vietnamese people" (Nguyen, "Author Viet Thanh Nguyen Discusses"). As discussed by Ben Tran in his article "The Literary Dubbing of Confession," Nguyen uses the literary genre of confession to practice "ethical memory" and "target the Vietnamese reader as the primary audience... [while addressing] an English-language audience as secondary readers" even though he wrote the novel in English (414). Both Nguyen's use of the literary genre of confession and intended first audience have palpable effects on the novel's structure and content, conforming to certain expectations while subverting others.

*The Sympathizer* is not shy about its status as a confessional narrative. One need look no further than the first page of the novel where the narrator begins with four "I am" statements and an explicit reference to the confessional framing ("this confession") (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 1). As the novel continues the reader is reminded of this framing at the beginning of several of

the chapters and is gradually given more details about the narrator's situation, a prisoner in all but name being forced to write a confession by "the Commandant" (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 36, 72, 111, 194, 244, 308-310). However, contrary to what one might expect of a prisoner being forced to write a confession, it is made clear that the narrator is not interested in simply telling the commandant what he wants to hear stating "I suspect, my dear Commandant, that this confession is most likely not what you are used to reading... I will do no less than explain myself, in a style of my own choosing, regardless of how you might consider my actions" (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 72). The Commandant is clearly frustrated and perplexed by why the narrator will not write a confession which conforms to the expected style, even if he acknowledges that those who do are merely telling him what they think he "[wants] to hear" (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 311). This confrontational relationship between two Vietnamese characters over the content of the narrator's confession can be seen as a reflection of Nguyen's intentions with the novel as a whole. Nguyen, who is writing for a Vietnamese audience, does not intend to merely commiserate with his fellow countrymen, but actively critique both the expected parties (Americans and their allies) and the unexpected (the Northern Liberation Front and Vietnamese society in general) crafting a confessional narrative which attempts to, in his own words, "offend everyone" (Nguyen, "A Conversation About Creativity").

The previous paragraph may imply that the departure from the norms of the confessional genre is the sole way Nguyen levies his criticism. This is by no means the case and there is certainly a wealth of criticism and commentary in the passages which conform to the expected tropes of confessional literature. For example, the narrator recounts being discriminated against by his extended family because of his mixed ancestry, an experience he admits to having shared "with only two people, Man and Bon," his two closest friends (and even to them, a censored

version) (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 140-41). This private anecdote from the narrator's upbringing is textbook confessional material and he uses the story to praise his friend Man for stoking his revolutionary attitude, turning his unfortunate situation into an example of how he can see the world in a unique, revolutionary way (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 141-42). This passage comes off as pro-communist and pro-revolution on the whole, but that is not always the case. At times the object of criticism is not clear or more ubiquitous. For example, a passage no reader is likely to soon forget involving the adolescent narrator, hormonal urges, and a squid points out how people who do not blink at descriptions of violence are made uncomfortable by descriptions of, admittedly somewhat unusual, sexual acts (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 78-80). To quote, "Some will undoubtedly find this episode obscene. Not I! Massacre is obscene. Torture is obscene. Three million dead is obscene" (Nguyen 80). While this passage certainly has the honesty expected from a confession in spades, it does not clearly attack any particular side of the conflict, instead offering a perspective which criticizes warmongers on both sides.

The novel is also replete with examples of the narrator quoting communist thinkers or discussing them in a positive light, thereby offering an implicit endorsement to some degree. For example, while working on the production of the fictional movie *The Hamlet* and discovering the difficulty of securing proper representation of Vietnamese people in the Hollywood system the narrator begins to have doubts about agreeing to work on the project (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 172). After a reminder from Man to "remember Mao at Yan'an" (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 172), the narrator expresses his admiration for Chairman Mao, the Chinese Communist leader, concerning his discussions of how "Art [and literature] could not be separated from politics" and how they could be "crucial to [the] revolution" or "tools of domination" (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 172-73). The narrator also makes sure to point out that American presidents did not

take the time to write about art and literature (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 172-73). Within this passage is a critique of American cinema considered by the narrator not unreasonably to be “propaganda... America’s way of softening up the rest of the world” (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 172). The critique is framed in a way typical of a Communist confession where the writer has a doubt (in this case working on an American film), finds reassurance in the wisdom of a Communist thinker (Chairman Mao), and manages to critique American hegemony and cultural imperialism showing their dedication to Communist ideals.

While there is plenty of worthwhile critique and commentary in the sections of *The Sympathizer* which adhere more to the norms of confessional narratives, the departures from those norms provide a complex perspective that contains Nguyen’s most interesting insights. To start, near the beginning of the novel the narrator describes how he feels sympathy for the citizens of South Vietnam and those he had worked with as an undercover spy in the secret police (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 3-4). The narrator fully acknowledges that “perhaps it was not correct, politically speaking for me to feel sympathy for them” (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 3-4), but he includes those thoughts along with numerous other sympathetic depictions of those who he, politically speaking, should consider enemies. Another example of departures from the expected content is when he uses an anecdote about receiving a tax refund from the IRS to offer simultaneous praise of the USA and the NLF (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 88). His praise of the USA exists in comparison to the previous “midget-minded government” of Vietnam that would never “give back to its frustrated citizens anything it had seized” (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 88). But, perhaps to soften the rather substantial blow his praise of American society may strike to his Communist readers, he describes how he feels comforted knowing that “our country was being born again, the accretions of foreign corruption cleansed by revolutionary flames” (Nguyen, *The*



*Sympathizer* 88). This dual praise and criticism invites the reader, either the primary (Vietnamese) or secondary (American), to consider the merits and demerits of their home country and the nation foreign to them.

Another way *The Sympathizer* differs from what one might expect from a confession is pointed out by The Reluctant Psychoanalyst in their blog post “Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer* – Confession, Torture, and the Psychoanalytic Process.” They describe how the narrator writes the confessional portion of the novel as though he has done nothing wrong, at least in the eyes of his intended communist readers, since everything he did was on behalf of the revolution and therefore justified (The Reluctant Psychoanalyst). The lack of sincere remorse in his confession is unexpected from a prisoner such as himself. The Reluctant Psychoanalyst continues their analysis pointing out how this assumption of justification allows the narrator to “freely and openly confess to all sorts of sins.” However, as the reader discovers in the last section of the novel, the narrator’s confession is incomplete, having omitted his inaction during the horrific sexual torture of a communist agent (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 348-52). It is this omission and the subsequent admission that he is guilty of doing “nothing” (Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* 363) that cut to the core of Nguyen’s message. As described by The Reluctant Psychoanalyst, the three main characters, each representing in a way the various factions of the Vietnam conflict, are guilty in their own way, the narrator for his inaction, Man for torturing one of his closest friends, and Bon for “allying himself with the Americans and the South Vietnamese government” against his countrymen which leads to his wife and daughter’s death (The Reluctant Psychoanalyst). This portrayal of guilt without exception among the primary characters invites the readers to more closely examine and critique their own actions and the actions of their countries.

Nguyen's framing of *The Sympathizer* as an atypical confession helps create a narrative which is numerous and varied in its critiques. By speaking to a primary Vietnamese audience, he does not exclude his American or Western readers, but merely turns them into secondary readers who can still read and interpret the novel without being addressed directly. Regardless of their position as primary or secondary audience, *The Sympathizer* offers an opportunity for all readers to ponder what it means to be guilty, to sympathize, and, of course, nothing.

Works Cited

- Nguyen, Viet Thanh. "Author Viet Thanh Nguyen Discusses 'The Sympathizer' And His Escape From Vietnam." Interview by Terry Gross. *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio, Inc. (NPR), 2016.
- Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. Harvard University Press, 2016.
- Nguyen, Viet Thanh. SMU Department of English: A Conversation About Creativity, 22 Feb. 2023, Southern Methodist University, Dallas.
- Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *The Sympathizer*. New York, Grove Press, 2015.
- The Reluctant Psychoanalyst. "Viet Thanh Nguyen's The Sympathizer – Confession, Torture, and the Psychoanalytic Process." *TheReluctantPsychoanalyst*, 7 June. 2017, <https://thereluctantpsychoanalyst.blogspot.com/2017/06/viet-thanh-nguyens-sympathizer.html>. Accessed 1 May. 2023.
- Tran, Ben. "The Literary Dubbing of Confession." *PMLA : Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. 133, no. 2, 2018, pp. 413–19. <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.2.413>. Accessed 9 Apr. 2023.

## Appendix E: Example Research Reflection Essays

Student 1

Dr. Hermes

ENGL 2312-003

21 April 2023

647 Words

### Research Reflection: Improving Source Context and Integration

Learning Goal: Realize that conversations about the interpretations of texts are fluid and multifarious; read literary criticism and other texts with a critical view that develops and revises research questions throughout the research and writing process.

In every novel we have read this semester, female characters have either been sexualized, infantilized, or criticized by their male counterparts. After reading *The Vegetarian*, I knew I wanted to discuss female characters through a male character lens in my essay. I encountered articles about biased male authors, but never much information on male character bias. Seeing that there was a gap in the conversation, I chose to investigate male bias in characters, rather than authors. This foundational decision in my research led to a domino-effect of source choosing, analysis, and argument building, eventually creating the first draft of my essay. Upon reflecting on this research process, I believe that I both achieved and allowed room for growth in the third learning outcome by revising my research question based on more relevant and improved sources and continuing to work towards a more cohesive integration of source context into my argument.

My research question quickly evolved from a broad, character driven claim to a narrower argument based on formal aspects of the literature, due to my discovery of Pandey's article "Women Palava No Be Small, Women Wahala No Be Small." I began with the term "male gaze," which I had discovered earlier this year through a Twitter commentary on the sexualization of female *Game of Thrones* characters. From there, my research continued rather broadly, with search terms such as "male gaze in Asian literature," "depictions of females in literature," and "male bias in literature." However, my research question, which currently focused on characteristics of female characters as described by male characters, never narrowed until my discovery of Anita Pandey's article, which described the linguistical differences in female and male characters in West African literature. This shifted my focus towards how female character depictions came across as biased through the author's writing, through such methods like point of view and diction. Pandey's article became a perfect springboard for nailing down my thesis, connecting my argument about the pervasiveness of the male gaze, the authors' commentary on the topic, and the formal aspects of writing used to create said depictions.

While I only incorporated sources into my writing that I had read and analyzed first, I still need to improve upon reading each source in a manner of "critical view" and incorporating sources in their most accurate depiction, rather than cherry-picking sentences out of context that benefit my argument. After clarifying my thesis and uncovering Pandey's article, I quickly found several other sources both in support of and countering my argument, including James Bloom's "Reading the Male Gaze in Literature and Culture: Studies in Erotic Epistemology," Cynthia Wolff's "A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature," Catherine's blog discussion *So What Is The Male Gaze And How Can You Tell When It's Happening*, and Cheryl Lange's "Men and Women Writing Women: The Female Perspective and Feminism in U.S. Novels and

African Novels in French by Male and Female Authors.” While I only ended up using Pandey’s, Wolff’s, and Catherine’s ideas in my paper, I don’t feel I utilized these sources to their full potential. I tended to pull single use quotes from the articles to support my analysis of *The Vegetarian* or *The Sympathizer*, rather than explaining the article’s claims, analyzing its integrity, and then connecting it to my argument. For example, in paragraph seven of my essay, I quoted Pandey’s words, “Language is a powerful weapon,” to support my argument that gendered language can imbue negative connotations onto female characters (135). However, I never give context for this quote, or Pandey’s overall argument in this passage. In my revisions, I plan on placing a heavier emphasis on quote and paraphrase context, incorporating my sources’ arguments into and around mine, and including less direct quoting. With these changes, my essay will have stronger secondary source support and an overall more cohesive argument.



Works Cited

- Bloom, James. *Reading the Male Gaze in Literature and Culture: Studies in Erotic Epistemology*. Springer International Publishing AG, 2017. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.libraries.smu.edu/lib/southernmethodist/detail.action?docID=5097014>.
- Catherine. "Discussion: So What Is The Male Gaze And How Can You Tell When It's Happening?" *Cups and Cards and Books*, 16 Aug. 2021, <https://beesandbooks.home.blog/2021/08/16/discussion-so-what-is-the-male-gaze-and-how-can-you-tell-when-its-happening/>. Accessed 15 April 2023.
- Lange, Cheryl. "Men and Women Writing Women: The Female Perspective and Feminism in U.S. Novels and African Novels in French by Male and Female Authors." *UW-L Journal of Undergraduate Research*, vol. 11, 2008, pp. 1-6. <https://www.uwlax.edu/globalassets/offices-services/urc/jur-online/pdf/2008/lange.pdf>.
- Pandey, Anita. "Woman Palava No Be Small, Woman Wahala No Be Small": Linguistic Gendering and Patriarchal Ideology in West African Fiction." *Africa Today*, vol. 50 no. 3, 2004, pp. 113-138. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/at.2004.0029.
- Wolff, Cynthia G. "A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature." *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 13, no. 1/2, 1972, pp. 205-218. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25088222>.



Student 2

Professor Richard Hermes

ENGL 2312-003

21 April 2023

### Research Reflection

My research process for the final essay has been challenging, but through it I have broadened my understanding and interpretation of *The Vegetarian*. Figuring out my thesis has been a particularly challenging task as through my research I learned new socio-political terms and got to understand aspects of the book from other point of views. I put a lot of stress on knowing my thesis before I began researching, but that proved to be counterproductive. Therefore, there was so much that I found interesting and wanted to write about, but figuring out how to narrow it down to a cohesive topic was harder than I expected. I decided to dive straight into the primary source to start my research as I had a faint idea of what I wanted to talk about but wanted to consult the book to refresh my mind. I then began my search for secondary sources and found a lot of content on *The Vegetarian* with topics of feminism. At this point I was mainly looking at scholarly sources from the library database and I started to become overwhelmed with all the roads I could travel on when writing my final essay. As a result I wasn't sure what to focus on. This meant I had several great sources, but I didn't know how to use any of them. While writing the first draft I also found it difficult to see where I could incorporate my secondary sources. This may be because I was still unsure if my essay was going in the direction that I wanted it to go. During my research process, I additionally noticed that it was a lot easier to find scholarly and popular sources discussing the novel, as opposed to non-traditional sources.

Due to my lack of non-traditional sources, I turned to the website “goodreads”, which I found had a lot of interesting reviews of the novel that would be useful to bring up in my paper.

One of the research goals that I believe I have achieved throughout this non-linear process was to “develop an awareness of the biases and worldview you bring to your own literary criticism.” As I encountered so many interesting articles and reviews of *The Vegetarian*, I found myself resisting some of the ideas about feminism (which was a largely covered topic in the literary conversation). I have never considered myself a modern-day feminist because I was under the false impression that feminists hate men (which I myself do not hate men). However, I thought to myself, “Have I ever actually researched what feminism is and what their ideologies are?” The answer was, I hadn’t, so I decided to find out about what feminism really is. After educating myself, I understood that feminism isn’t about the hatred of men, but about resisting the dominance that men have historically had over society that has unfairly and disproportionately affected women in so many ways. Once I understood this, I began reading the texts over again with an open mind. I even learned about “ecofeminism”, a term I had never heard of until this research process. After becoming aware of what my worldview is and what previous biases I may have, I feel like I have been able to expand my ideas and have a clear vision of how to connect my research to what I find interesting about *The Vegetarian*. The process has been slow, and at times frustrating, but overall it has been rewarding and I look forward to writing my final draft.

Student 3

ENGL 2312-003

April 21, 2023

Word Count: 685

### Research Reflection

Learning Goal: Understand the value and potential disadvantages of various types of resources (including both traditional scholarly sources such as journal articles and book chapters, as well as less traditional sources) depending on the writing task, while recognizing that literary criticism is being published in an increasing variety of forms and venues

Throughout my essay, I discovered various challenges brought forth through the unique circumstance of including non-traditional sources. Though I enjoyed searching through these sources, many of them, such as Reddit posts, and other blog posts, led to sparsely useful information. To begin my search on these sites, I looked up “The Vegetarian Discussion”, “Feminism in the Vegetarian”, or “Ecofeminism in the Vegetarian”. I found myself scrolling through lots of these user-led posts for what felt like hours, and typically, I would just run into somewhat meaningless discussion, like on Reddit, such as people just talking about how they don’t understand the novel and they usually take the events at face-value rather than exploring deeper meaning. In reference to the above learning goal, I found that many non-traditional sources, in the form of social media, are borderline irrelevant and it usually takes 1 or 2 thoughtful users to form anything worth delving into. For example, in “r/bookclub” under the post “The Vegetarian - Han Kang - Whole book discussion”, I counted 3 separate comment threads of users simply discussing the events in the book, while the original post prompted a

deeper read/discussion. However, what was amazing about this post was that I found a few threads, with the help of the OP (original poster) facilitating further discussion into themes and meanings hidden behind the text. This proves that while social media sources are potentially unfruitful, select users may actually engage the discussion.

While the social media sources were somewhat helpful, I needed to find juicier reviews of the novel, with unique insights, so I turned to blog posts on websites like “medium.com” and “goodreads.com”. This is truly where I discovered good discussions about the novel, especially on GoodReads, as its design facilitates educated discussions. Firstly, I’ll begin at medium.com with a blog by “dczook” titled “A vegetarian perspective on Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*”. (For context, this is my first useful non-traditional source I came across before going into scholarly sources.) Dczook discusses their perspective, a vegetarian, on some of the key events in the novel and even gives me newfound insight as to why Korean culture looks down on vegetarianism. Dczook also delves further and brings up an excellent theme (that I won’t go into detail due to the nature of the assignment) that I will use for my final draft: ambient violence. My goal for this source is to build off Dczook's discoveries and claims and further integrate them into my ecofeminism arguments. Lastly on my search in the non-traditional side of research, I came across a Q+A of *The Vegetarian* on Goodreads.com. There were approximately 15 questions and they typically had around 20-30 answers underneath. To me, this was a gold mine for discussion and I discovered the “popular” arguments and interpretations of the events at the beginning, middle, and end of the novel. This truly helped clear up any confusion I had for the novel and it really had me thinking about the deeper meanings. This kind of literary criticism truly reveals the discussions amongst the non-scholarly general audience and it was deeply insightful.

For my research on scholarly sources, I got very lucky after coming across “Eating and Suffering in Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*” by Won-Chung. This source was one of my first discoveries while browsing the libraries and it is truly amazing in how much detail Won-Chung goes into while supporting her claims about the book. This particular source is also very long, around 10 pages, and it gave me many ideas to expand upon, further contributing to the overall discussion of the novel. The other scholarly sources I found but didn’t use typically had very niche arguments not pertaining to my essay. Overall, I learned that non-traditional sources have the potential to encapsulate the general audience’s opinions and interpretations, though I’ve learned it’s dangerous because of the vast amounts of emotional biases of users. In scholarly sources, a danger I found was that many sources are very niche; they could potentially derail my own argument; sticking to sources that are related to my argument are ideal.