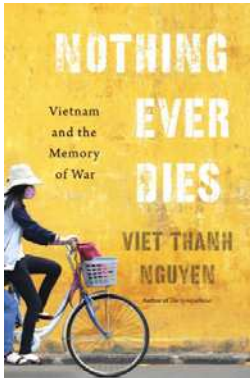


BOOK REVIEW

***Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War***

Author: Viet Thanh Nguyen

Publisher: Harvard University Press

Year of Publication: © 2016

ISBN 978-067-466-034-2

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Power, Memory, Industry: Nguyen's Search for Justice

How we remember the past is a delicate matter; the by-gones exist in us like a stack of film stored at the back of our brain, waiting for its turn to be summoned; to be reeled in the theater of our mind. Most of us trust our memory, particularly when the said memory is harmonious with a collective remembering of our community. The human find it unnecessary — perhaps through years of restraint, conditioning, denial? — to dwell in a crucial, yet often neglected question: *how was the past brought to us?*

Collective memory is a complicated subject; forged by the simultaneous act of remembering and forgetting, molded by the choice one makes and made for; the past is a constant battleground. For Nguyen, a Vietnamese-American writer brought to America as an immediate result of Saigon's fall, the relationship between power, remembering, and identity is one that is almost too familiar. Moreover if one has to continually wander around the confusion of having a double body to inhibit; one that is American and one that is Vietnamese, a dash in between the names indicating the systematic refusal to let it merge entirely, no matter how much one desires; and *Nothing Ever Dies*, what he refers to as “a book on war, memory, and identity,” (4) is born from this confusion. The non-fiction work is a mediation that results from witnessing how, through the working of its “industries of memory”, both America and Vietnam had tried to manipulate the memory of Vietnam and the war

that becomes almost synonymous with its name. The monograph investigates how memory of war — in this case, the Vietnam War — is ‘manufactured’ in lieu of how we understand our identity vis a vis the identity of war itself, and the resisting actors who try to insert their voice through the limited cracks in the factory walls.

IN SEARCH OF JUSTICE

Nguyen's project is based on at least two formulations: First, that memory is highly mediated in its making, guided by the ideology and goal of the “industry of memory” (a term that I will elaborate more in the coming section). And secondly, that it is time that we engage in a new ethic of remembering; to aim for a ‘Just Memory’ and ‘Just Forgetting’ — an ethic where the weaker, silenced voice is brought to influence the said industry. Central to Nguyen's contemplation on memory is also the word ‘*just*’. The two key chapters that open and close the book are titled “Just Memory” and “Just Forgetting”; both which are also key terms stringing the monograph. What is ‘*just*’ in his formulation? Is it justice? What, then, does he consider as just and in contrast, unjust?

In his contemplation of the notion of injustice, Nguyen is borrowing Paul Ricoeur's conception of an unjust remembering as “memory abusively summoned” by those in power” (17). The appeal to justice implies that an injustice had been done, and Nguyen is resolute in this issue. There are two keywords here; “abuse” and “power.” The silencing of the marginalized voice, including their memory, involves a violation that is made possible by an imbalance of power. In Nguyen's formulation, unjust forgetting “involve leaving behind a past that we have not dealt with in adequate ways. We ignore that past, we

pretend it did not exist, or we write its history to serve a prejudicial agenda” (279). The past’s present existence is skewed, manipulated — some fragments are omitted, some details are added — to serve a political, economic, social — all kind of purposes. Of course, forgetting is understandable; but a deliberate forgetting whose aims is anything but recalling the past in its purest essence is unjust. In line with this idea, a ‘Just Memory’ for Nguyen “strives both to remember one’s own and others, while at the same time drawing attention to the life cycle of memories and their industrial production, how they are fashioned and forgotten, how they evolve and change” (12).

The book is largely divided into three sections— ‘*Ethics*’, ‘*Industries*,’ and ‘*Aesthetic*,’—each title representing what Nguyen argues as essentials to the making of a Just Memory: the ethical awareness of both the humanity and inhumanity within ourselves, the seizure of the industries of memories by the marginalized and forgotten, and the aesthetic imagining of a world where no one and nothing is excluded.

The first section of the book, *Ethics*, is arguably the most thought-provoking part of the monograph as it is more theoretically dense. Heavily dealing with the formulation of ethics of recollection; of remembering the self, other, and of recognizing the human and the inhuman in our remembering; the part laid the theoretical ground of Nguyen’s examination of the *lieux de memoire*. Each chapter in the section stresses each way we structure our memory: First, we “remember our own” — the ethic revolves around focusing on our own humanity in the pursuit of a shared identity. A more complex remembering, secondly, is in the form of “remembering the others”; to include them as part of the self. This, in consequence, entails that we also recognize the other’s humanity; a blurring of the friend/enemy line. The last, and the most revolutionary way of remembering is recognizing both the humanity and inhumanity within ourselves and the others. This plea to recognize both the human and inhuman within self is radical because the core working of the industries of memories — and industries of war, by extension — is through claiming one’s innocence and granting the role of villain to the others, thus justifying the violence for the enemy as something that they warrant.

IN SEARCH FOR AN IDENTITY

One particularly engaging part in Nguyen’s contemplation of identity in the book is his way of looking at the process of inclusion and exclusion. I believe this is particularly

helpful when we think of ‘identity’ in terms of the process of ‘othering.’ In racial America, this process of othering that is concealed under the guise of naturalness is often encountered.

Those who feel such affinity believe it to be natural, even though it is actually learned. The naturalness arises from our having forgotten how we came by this affinity whereby some Americans think that they share more culturally with the English than the Mexicans. In contrast to psychic intimacy, physical proximity is not a guarantee of creating feelings of nearness and dearness. Americans did not enslave those who lived far from them, but instead enslaved those who lived with them or next door to them, including their lovers and illegitimate offspring (59-60).

There is so much to unpack in this paragraph. First, Nguyen fundamentally proposes that inclusivity is never about physical proximity. Not all those who are near get included into the dear ‘family’; and that is evidently the case for America and its reconciliation with racial issues. America brutally killed their predecessors, the Native Americans who had tended the land before their arrival. America brutally oppressed their black siblings, those who they forcefully brought to this land. America camped the Japanese, threatened to remove the Vietnamese, and Trump insistence on building a wall to separate the country from neighboring Mexico is also a telling example. Those communities and many others had been for decades excluded despite their proximity to the body that is the United States of America.

Proximity, Nguyen further argues, is located in the psychic realm, and there is nothing natural about the process of inclusion. Everything is acquired and conditioned, with remembering and forgetting at the center of its operative. Americans *think* that they are closer to the English, forgetting that those are the people they took flight from centuries ago. “Think,” “feel,” this screwed sense of proximity comes from adopting the paradigm that color defines one’s allegation, that color is the deciding factor that separates whites as “one’s own” and non-whites as the “others”. The real tragedy, however, is assuming that this inclusion is natural. That ‘race’ is natural. That dividing human from other human based on their physical features in any way is natural. This is why, the act of recalling the perceived “others” into the circle is seen as unnatural, therefore, always political. This is why Black Lives Matter protest is seen as a political statement, despite its essence being all too human. Nguyen’s exploration of the artificiality of the inclusion and separation process gestures to a radical outlook in perceiving America’s racial relation.

THE INDUSTRY OF MEMORY

The second idea at the heart of Nguyen's examination is "industry of memory." He coined the term to refer to the complete mechanism of how memory is produced and distributed, including the material condition that allows it (the means of production: the money behind a film or a book, for example) and the ideological forces that influence its shaping (to what political and sociological means is the memory used: as propaganda? As an erasure?). He further argues that this industry of memory eventually creates "structure of feelings" — Raymond Williams's term — which influences how we perceive the world (107). The predicament around this industry of memory is that, right now, it is only accessible to the prosperous. There is an imbalance of power, and Nguyen insists that today "the memories of the wealthy and the powerful exert more influence because they own the means of production" (107). In extension, this monopoly of the industry of memory facilitates an unjust remembering and forgetting.

I find Nguyen's examination of the industry of memory significant. While strict control of information is usually associated with authoritarian governments, the book highlights how the manipulation of the industry of memory is everywhere, and how it is used more stealthily through the distribution of cultural productions. Restriction and violation in the dictatorship regime is easier to spot; it is visible, but more elusive constraint through popular culture is harder to pick out. It seeps through our defense stealthily, altering our understanding of the world without us noticing. The asymmetry of memory is happening in the case of the Vietnam war, for example, where the US could easily deploy its memory machine. Hollywood as the center of its operative could easily export its blockbuster hit like *Apocalypse Now* — a film that Nguyen appears to be obsessed with in some ways, being discussed not only in this monograph but also his novel *The Sympathizer* — while Vietnam and Vietnamese have to struggle to get their voice heard through its minuscule cinema industry. Nguyen even goes as far as equating this mnemonic production with the landmines deployed in foreign lands (172), drawing vivid connection between the war on memory and the physical war that precedes it.

In this book, Nguyen advocates refusing the given name of war, which imply its contained nature and does not acknowledge the 'leaks' that spills over. For Nguyen, contrary to how wars are portrayed as having a clear start and ending, no war has a definite border; many of them overlap, merely the prelude and continuation of the other. He is drawing connections between how we remember

Vietnam — stressing the heroic death of its soldier and not the civilians killed in the war; remembering it as America's goodwill to save it from the evil Communist — and how the United States approaches its contemporary wars; in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, and many others. "Vietnam syndrome," he argues, is not America's fear of failure.

By stating that war does not have a start and an end, Nguyen also opens up the possibility to see colonization, globalization, and everything in between the two points as a thread of a never-ending battle. Even if he does not mention it quite explicitly, his view goes in line with the idea that the Cold War — which is the driving force behind the Vietnam war — is the bridge that allows a new mode of subjugation to flourish in the world after the 'official' end of colonization. Many had failed to see how the Cold War, and its insistence toward alignment and choosing sides, had acted as a giant disruption in the process of decolonization. Instead of a break from colonization, the Cold War grew as a brand-new model of domination. Odd Arne Westad, a Cold War historian, fundamentally argues in his book *The Global Cold War* (2010) that the conflict was principally driven by both superpower's inclination to see themselves as the sole model of modernism leading the world, who saw their intervention in the newly liberated nation's politics as necessary and justifiable to contain each other's influence. I believe that *Nothing Ever Dies* has the potential to prompt readers to engage in such thought, to push them to join the discourse of global capitalism critically, seeing it as a consequence of the US's uncrowned victory in the Cold War.

In exploring how the industries of memory works, Nguyen takes us to a journey across all kinds of memorialization; from the cemeteries in Vietnam which glorifies the Northern soldier; to Little Saigon and the Vietnam Veterans parade in California struggling to be heard. Remembering and disremembering — the systematic, deliberate forgetting, in Nguyen's formulation, come in various shapes; monuments, graves, museum, books, films, and little communities built by refugees in their new country. What each of these exhibits, however, is not merely what we designed to remember, but explain *how* we remember and *why* we remember in certain ways.

It is noteworthy that Nguyen's reading of the *lieux de memoire* of the Vietnam war — the site of memory, the term he borrowed from historian Pierre Nora — is helpful as a model for examining mnemonic spaces generated for other wars. Nguyen's detailed analysis of the way memory is structured and narrated through a different medium could serve as a prototype. What happens to

Vietnam is certainly unique, but it is also a part of a bigger structure: the Cold War becoming the smallest unit; and centuries long Western imperialism a larger ones. There are many nations who both fell victims to and are the perpetrator of an unjust remembering. In my case as an Indonesian, Nguyen's model of reading is fruitful to be used in approaching my nation's struggle to redo the three decades historical malpractice of Soeharto's authoritarian regime, such as the erasure of millions brutally killed during the 1965 Communist Massacre.

The amount of memory sites that Nguyen visited and investigated in the book is astonishing, the list ranging from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC to a forgotten mountain cave in Vietnam called Tham Piu. He scrutinized not only Hollywood extravaganzas such as *Apocalypse Now*, but also the largely ignored Vietnam cinemas like *When The Tenth Month Comes*. A huge range of writers from both 'sides' are included, sometimes spilling into Cambodian and Laotian sites as well, and it

is as if Nguyen himself is refusing to forget the abandoned memory site forgotten by many, crushed under the weight and intensity of both America and Vietnam's industries of memory. He is refusing the misremembering of many by presenting a different interpretation and explication of it, and in some cases like the obscured monuments in far Vietnam, by simply including them to the picture. The monuments, novels, and films that he mentioned are extensive that it becomes a little overwhelming at times; but the dizzying effect might, after all, be deliberate. To me, in the end, the book reads like Nguyen's own attempt to remember it all, as much as he could do, about his war. *Nothing Ever Dies* at its core is an endeavor to strive for a Just Memory — and by extension, a Just Forgetting.

REFERENCES

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