PROJECT MUSE®

Just Memory: War and the Ethics of Remembrance

Viet Thanh Nguyen

American Literary History, Volume 25, Number 1, Spring 2013, pp. 144-163 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/alh/summary/v025/25.1.nguyen.html

Access provided by University of California , Santa Barbara (23 Sep 2014 13:26 GMT)

Just Memory: War and the Ethics of Remembrance

*Viet Thanh Nguyen**

"All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory." This sentence begins one of my articles and will likely begin my book, "Just Memory: War and the Ethics of Remembrance." Its major concern is the often irresolvable conflict over remembering particularly troubling events, with the war in question being what Americans call the Vietnam War, what Vietnamese call the American War, and what historians sometimes call the Second Indochina War (1960–1975).[1] Ranging across literary and visual cultures from the 1960s until the present, I examine how this war remains important by weaving American and Vietnamese memories together within multicultural and international contexts. While earlier works on the war have narrower cultural, national, or disciplinary concerns, I consider how both Vietnam and the US fashion war memories through art, literature, cinema, photography, memorials, and museums. What ultimately concerns me is the question of ethical memory, which I define as memory work that recalls both one's own as well as others. Considering memory (and forgetting) in this dual fashion, the book also challenges the borders and assumptions of American studies, Asian American studies, and Asian studies.

The war had always been an important concern for me, given how it had determined my life. Let me then begin with the affective and the autobiographical, as this is one case where the personal is unavoidable. Rather than myself seeking out the past, the past has sought me out, something I have felt ever since I came to the US as a refugee from Vietnam. Although I was too young to remember anything of the country or the war, it nevertheless imprinted itself on me with what W. G. Sebald calls "secondhand memories" (88) and what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory"

**Viet Thanh Nguyen* teaches at the University of Southern California. He is the author of *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (2002). His contribution is an excerpt from a book about war and the ethics of memory.

American Literary History, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 144–163
doi:10.1093/alh/ajs069
Advance Access publication January 5, 2013
© The Author 2013. Published by Oxford University Press. All rights reserved.
For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oup.com

(13). In Sebald's lyrical model, those who actually experience an event pass on secondhand memories to those too young to have seen them. For all that they are secondhand, these memories can be powerful enough to affect a life. This was evident in Sebald's career as an essayist and fiction writer, devoted almost entirely to World War II and the Holocaust, events that ended when Sebald was still in the crib. From a more theoretical point of view, Hirsch makes essentially the same claim of a generational inheritance of traumatic memory. Simply because events are unwitnessed directly does not mean that they are unknown most intimately.

Thus, long before encountering these writers, it already seemed to me that the traumatic experiences underwent by my father and mother were passed on to me in some measure through their repetitive retelling of certain terrible things. These had happened during the years of colonization and war stretching from the 1930s to the 1970s, and included famine, war, violent crime, the decades-long separation of siblings, children, and parents, the loss of social and economic status, being refugees (twice), and perhaps other things they did not tell me. While hearing these stories and witnessing their struggles as aliens in America, I was also subject to the cultural osmosis required for secondhand remembering, growing up in an ethnic enclave of Vietnamese refugees who were equally marked as my father and mother by numerous and even more severe scars. What I considered terrible was, in effect, normal for them. To *not* have experienced something terrible, to *not* have heard about terrible things—now that would have been unusual.

Two other types of experience marked my youth and leave their stamp on this book. First was my inarticulate awareness that my understanding of war and the American understanding of war were rather different. Americans generally think of war as something being fought by soldiers "over there," at least in the twentieth century, with the bloodily contradictory Revolutionary and Civil Wars being distant memories now rehearsed and sanitized by re-enactors. These soldiers were also men, and war in terms of combat, death, and killing was a masculine experience. War rarely touched the American homeland, except for Pearl Harbor (9/11 was yet to come, but even so, war remains a distant experience for many Americans). War also only touched a small minority of civilians and women, except in their more common roles as mourners or as workers in the war machine. But the Vietnamese experience of war was total. War took place in the homeland and was inescapable. Civilians endured famine, rape, massacres, bombing, illness, the destruction of their farms and homes, endemic forced relocation into so-called strategic hamlets that

were essentially concentration camps, poverty, the deaths of relatives, and becoming internal or external refugees, among other things. Hundreds of thousands of civilians died from these experiences, including many elderly, women, and children.

Not surprisingly, this war and others continue for survivors well after ceasefires and peace documents are signed. The Vietnamese ethnic enclaves in the US had not put the war behind them. Veterans still wore uniforms and marched at public events. The South Vietnamese national anthem was still sung and the flag was still waved. Everyone was on the lookout for Communist infiltrators, and signs of subversion were sometimes met with violence. Domestic abuse and home invasions where Vietnamese gangs attacked Vietnamese homes were commonplace. The violence that had supposedly ended erupted once more in the refugee community, caused by those traumatized by the war or by those who had no other opportunities because of the war. The conclusion was clear: to be a refugee was to be a survivor of war as much as a combat veteran.

While this first type of experience has become the stuff of ethnic memoirs and fiction, the second type of experience was very American. I grew up reading war books and watching war movies in much the same way that American boys of the 1950s did. John Wayne and Audie Murphy were the heroes of that generation, the one that would volunteer for the Vietnam War and be so disillusioned that "John Wayne" became a verb for doing something foolish on the battlefield, as Ron Kovic recalled in his memoir *Born on the Fourth of July* (1974). I was equally seduced in childhood by the *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) and *To Hell and Back* (1955), and the combination of my fascination with the military and my family's history led me to Vietnam War stories. Early in my adolescence and at much too young an age, I read Larry Heinemann's *Close Quarters* (1977) and watched *Apocalypse Now* (1979). I have never forgotten the scene in *Close Quarters* where American soldiers gang-rape a Vietnamese prostitute they call Claymore Face, holding a gun to her head and forcing her to perform fellatio. Nor would I ever forget the moment in *Apocalypse Now* when American sailors massacre a sampan full of civilians, the coup de grâce delivered by Martin Sheen's character of Captain Willard when he executes the sole survivor—also a woman.

These were only stories. But in our business of literary history, stories are another set of experiences as valid as historical ones. Whenever I thought back to *Close Quarters* or *Apocalypse Now*, I experienced my readerly and spectatorial emotions all over again, intense feelings of disgust, horror, shame, and rage that

Fig. 1. Diorama depicting the My Lai Massacre at the Son My Museum (Son My being the name of the village that Americans called My Lai), central Vietnam. The aesthetic is typical of many memorials in Vietnam. Courtesy of Sam Sweezy.

literally made me tremble. So, scarred by stories, I eventually became a critical reader of stories. My dissertation and first book, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (2002), bear the mark of my close encounters with literary and cinematic fiction, as well as the shadowy stain of the Vietnam War. The book started off as a dissertation about the importance of Asian American literature in resisting the oppression directed against Asian immigrants and Asian Americans. Asian American literature spoke out against imposed voicelessness. By the time I finished the book, I had completely reversed my argument. While Asian American literature was sometimes an act of resistance against oppression, it was also often an act of accommodation, sometimes in the same work or author's corpus. Speaking out against voicelessness and assuming a voice were powerful acts, but also oftentimes complicitous or complicated acts, a difficulty overlooked by many critics of Asian American literature (and perhaps of other ethnic literatures too).

The one Vietnamese American writer I examined, for example, Le Ly Hayslip, wrote a wonderful memoir of her war-scarred life in Vietnam and America. *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989) was unflinching about addressing the cruelties committed by both Americans and Vietnamese. But part of the popularity of the book came from her forgiving Americans for any guilty feelings they might have, which her readers may have mistaken as forgiveness from a representative of all the

Vietnamese people. In her case, an Asian American literary text fulfilled a double function: to tell the story of a devastated people, but also to reconcile the pains of the past between victims and victimizers. This reconciliation becomes problematic and premature when the historical conditions that produced such pain have not yet themselves been resolved, including American global domination and the inequitable place of minorities within the US.

This first book of mine itself had unresolved issues which eventually found their way into the second book. Let me trace the relationship, since it was really through writing a number of essays for the second book which grappled with these unresolved issues that finally led me to my thesis. One element of my first book was my argument that the tendency for Asian American literary critics to read for resistance and overlook accommodation was symptomatic of a tendency among Asian American intellectuals overall. As they considered the object they studied, organized, or led, Asian America, they too looked for signs of resistance and discounted other behaviors more accommodating to power and prejudice. These tendencies were indicative of a crisis in Asian America that arose from a disjunction between a leadership class of self-identified Asian Americans, relatively homogenous in terms of ideology, and a demographically classified population of Asian Americans that was ideologically more diverse. This argument was not popular with some in Asian American studies, and it left me uneasy as well. I had become involved in Asian American studies and written my dissertation because I believed in the power of resistance, and yet my book led me to the conclusion that Asian American culture was a conflicted site when it came to resistance. Reluctant to write a second book on a purely Asian American topic, given what I believed to be the topic's irresolvable political contradictions, I returned to the Vietnam War.

In writing the second book, it became clear to me that the Vietnam War and the influx of Southeast Asian refugees had much to do with both the desire for resistance on the part of Asian Americans and the conflicts around the possibility of resistance. The Vietnam War was absolutely central to the self-conscious formation of a group of activists and artists calling themselves "Asian Americans" for the very first time in the late 1960s. These activists and artists were part of anti-imperialist, antiracist, antiwar, and antipatriarchal movements, and drew much of their inspiration not just from civil rights and Black Power but from third world revolutions, especially the one in Vietnam. The Communist and nationalist movements in Vietnam inspired the Asian American revolutionary imagination, particularly because Vietnam was an Asian country. At the time, Asian American and revolutionary

were equivalent terms. The arrival of Vietnamese (as well as Laotian and Cambodian) refugees in the 1970s ended the possibility of this equivalence. These new populations were not only Asian Americans, demographically speaking, they were also in some ways ideal Asian Americans. Tending to be traumatized, poor, and oppressed, they needed the voice and representation that Asian American activism prioritized. But they were also unideal Asian Americans, as they also tended to be anticommunist, conservative, and prowar. Asian American studies and Asian American intellectuals have only recently begun theorizing what this contradiction between ideal and unideal Asian Americans means, beginning with how this contradiction stemming from the Vietnam War is not a marginal one relegated to the experiences of one, or even three, ethnic subgroups in Asian America. The Vietnam War is, in fact, a central contradiction of Asian American experience, as important as the legendary railroads and internment camps that have historically defined Asian American paradigms of voice and resistance.[2]

This did not mean that what I wanted was to privilege the experiences of Southeast Asians. To do so could have been a way of repeating the logic of voice and resistance, that is, one in which every group has its day and its due. In this logic, every new ethnic subgroup in Asian America will eventually become the object of its own substudies, premised on the need for inclusion and respect for that subgroup's voice and acts of resistance. But what if that subgroup itself works to suppress dissident voices and exercise power and domination in its own terrain? Asian American studies has not, until recently, been inclined to ask such a question, though the evidence was widespread in regard to the Vietnamese American community, which has a record of enforcing mass anticommunism through violence, intimidation, and protest. It is not surprising to discover this record except if one believes that minorities only exercise power to resist, rather than also to suppress. It is also not surprising when one considers how many Vietnamese Americans descend from a political, economic, and military class in South Vietnam that engaged in similarly ambivalent and contradictory uses of power as it resisted Communist invasion and subversion by suppressing dissension of any kind, communist or not.

After working through these various issues around Southeast Asians and Asian American studies, I arrived, eventually, at the topic and thesis of my second book. I wanted to write about the Vietnam War and how it was remembered, including Southeast Asians, but not privileging them as victims. But I had not given up on the idea of resistance, to which I was almost sentimentally attached and which I was now attaching to memory and forgetting.

I was interested in the possibilities of resistance against forgetting or being forgotten, with the assumption that being forgotten, or forgetting others, was unjust, particularly if we are talking about a historical conflict in which it is in the interests of one side to suppress the memories of and about others. Thus, the question I began with was one of ethical memory: how can we recall the past in a way that does justice to the forgotten, the excluded, the oppressed, the dead, the ghosts?

At the beginning of thinking through this question, I was in agreement with Paul Ricoeur. In his monumental *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2006), he argues that ethical memory is oriented toward justice and the other, rather than the self (89). For anyone invested in resistance, or minority discourse, or any practice involving subordinated others, Ricoeur's approach to memory is powerful and persuasive. But what happens when competing claims to justice exist? This is always the case regarding any contested event, and Ricoeur is not explicit about adjudicating justice. He is also silent on another, related question: if we deem some memories to be ethical, then must conflicting ones be unethical? To say yes seemed unacceptable to me, since many on opposing sides of memory, presumably most, would consider themselves to be ethical in regard to their remembrance of the past.

To deal with these two questions, the idea of resistance against forgetting in the service of subordinated others ultimately proved inadequate for dealing with ethical memory. Instead, my

Fig. 2. Defaced tombstone of South Vietnamese soldier, National Cemetery of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, Bien Hoa (outside Saigon). Courtesy of Sam Sweezy.

model of ethical memory identifies two ends of a spectrum along which the argument over defining just memories slides: the ethics of recalling one's own and the ethics of recalling others, with each end looking suspicious and even unethical to its competitor. While acknowledging the validity of these singular ethical positions, I propose a doubled model where both are necessary. In a doubled ethical memory, remembering is always aware of itself as being open-ended and in flux, rather than being satisfied with fixity and conclusiveness. In a similar fashion, Ricoeur's ethical memory is always aware of its own forgetting. His approach is partially a deconstructive one, influenced explicitly by Derrida, where the orientation toward the other constantly unravels the certainty of the self. I agree with the deconstructivist idea that the self's memory is always constituted by the forgetting of some other. But Derrida often seems less interested in specific others and more interested in abstract others, leading to utopian arguments about the (im)possible that would be more convincing if they also acknowledged the dreary demands of the possible (as in his arguments on cosmopolitanism and forgiveness). Thus, this book is not about a one-sided, (im)possible ethical memory that only calls on us to remember the other. Focusing on a particular war with deeply committed actors on all sides inevitably requires that I also pay attention to the ethical demands of the self-centered rather than only the self-less. To recall one's own and to recall others is (im)possible enough.

[M]y model of ethical memory identifies two ends of a spectrum along which the argument over defining just memories slides: the ethics of recalling one's own and the ethics of recalling others. . .

The Vietnam War remains a timely example of dealing with memory and its ethical challenges, beginning with how the war's enduring half-life in memory continues. For Americans, the war remains controversial, with our current wars leading both opponents and advocates to look back to Vietnam for lessons. In Vietnam, the state remembers dead soldiers as heroic martyrs and justifies the war's terrible toll by repeating Hồ Chí Minh's ever-present slogan, "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom." But since Vietnam does not seem free to many, memorializing the struggle for independence as a necessary war is crucial for the Communist Party. In both nations, citizens still flock to war memorials; artists and scholars still produce a constant stream of work about the war; and most of the memory work is about each nation's own suffering.

As I began to think about this book, I was inclined to dismiss this type of memorial work as nationalist, patriotic ethnocentrism, premised on the forgetting of strategic others—the enemy outside, the minority within, the ideologically disagreeable, as well as civilians, women, children, the disabled, animals, and the environment. But the practitioners of such nationalist memory may very well regard themselves as ethical. The Vietnam Veterans

Memorial, designed by Maya Lin, exemplifies this type of nationalist memory, powerfully exclusionary and powerfully inclusionary. The memorial remembers over 58,000 dead American soldiers and has become a triumph of memorial design. And yet, as the photographer Philip Jones Griffiths notes, "Everyone should know one simple statistic: the Washington, D.C., memorial to the American war dead is 150 yards long; if a similar monument were built with the same density of names of the Vietnamese who died in it, [it] would be nine miles long" (qtd. in Lesser). I am on Griffiths's side in this caustic comparison. Still, for both countries, I acknowledge that it is ethical and necessary to recall one's own, even with the dangers of possibly serving jingoistic or imperialist purposes. If we do not recall our own, then who will? This question justifies the other side's memorial work as well. When it is the other side recalling her or his own, we do not have an ethics of recalling the other, just an ethics of recalling one's own as seen from another side.

The ethics of recalling one's own, no matter which side exercises it, is the dominant kind of ethical memory. This type of ethics is deeply political, but in self-denial about its politics, preferring to see its mode of recalling one's own as natural, or what Ricoeur might characterize as a habit (25). Avishai Margalit classifies this type of ethical memory as dealing with the "thick" relations of family, friends, and countrymen, the "near and dear" (8). The dominance of recalling one's own is evident in the rarity of work that recalls others, which involves remembering not only one's enemies or strangers but the diversity within any given side, as well as those people caught between opposing sides. What I call the ethics of recalling others here is what Margalit denies as being ethical but classifies instead as moral, occurring in the realm of "thin" relations dealing with strangers and distant others, the abstract world of shared humanity.

My hope is that this realm can indeed be ethical, that the remote can be brought closer. Remoteness is not only a function of geographical distance, as Margalit implies, but of psychic and cultural distance. Thus, ethnic, racial, gender, religious, linguistic, or class difference within the same nation has led to countrymen or fellow citizens not seeing each other as related. Yet we have cases where those differences have been overcome, or are in the process of being negotiated, in which the morality of treating our fellow human beings as we would like to be treated becomes the ethics of seeing them as part of our natural community. We learn to develop habits of recognition and to see strangers as being kin. In contrast, proximity is not a guarantee of creating feelings of nearness and dearness. Sometimes we detest our neighbors and

feel more affinity for those far away, as is the case with some Americans' attitudes toward Mexico and, say, the UK. The process by which the distant other, far away because of geography or perceived difference, becomes recognized as near and dear is a political one. It involves breaking habits that seem natural, and it is because of this that the ethics of recalling others is explicitly political. As such, this type of ethics runs the risk of being called treacherous at worst and pejoratively cosmopolitan at best, where one may be a citizen of the world but not of one's own nation (Appiah xviii). My model of a doubled ethical memory negotiates and makes explicit these tensions between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, rootedness and rootlessness, distance and proximity, ethics and morality, and the apolitical and political.

By working from both ends of the ethical spectrum, my book also offers a more nuanced, collective portrait of the war's dramatis personae than previously available except in oral history form. The book builds on a substantial body of war scholarship, some of it multicultural (Renny Christopher, *The Viet Nam War/The American War* [1995]), international (Julia Bleakney, *Revisiting Vietnam* [2006]), or interdisciplinary (Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam* [2009]). Unlike previous efforts, however, this book brings together all three approaches as it threads together the memories of Americans and Vietnamese, men and women, soldiers and civilians, majorities and minorities, and winners and losers. The impetus behind this inclusiveness stems from my belief that war is not an event involving only soldiers and combat. War involves civilians, in many cases, and even more than this, war is inseparable from domestic life. Maxine Hong Kingston renders this uncomfortable reality of war as being total war, even for Americans, vividly. She writes that whenever "we ate a candy bar, when we drank grape juice, bought bread (ITT makes Wonder bread), wrapped food in plastic, made a phone call, put money in the bank, cleaned the oven, washed with soap, turned on the electricity, refrigerated food, cooked it, ran a computer, drove a car, rode an airplane, sprayed with insecticide, we were supporting the corporations that made tanks and bombers, napalm, defoliants, and bombs. For the carpet bombing" (284).

This desire for inclusiveness is not unique to this project. It is also the outcome of the struggle to build a collective memory (or what James Young [*The Texture of Memory* (1993)] reworks by coining the term collected memories [xi]). Collective memory, or collected memories, are credible only if they are inclusive of whichever group by which they are defined, however large or small. This ethical desire to include more of one's own or even

Fig. 3. Scrap collectors, Quang Tri Province, the most heavily bombed area in South Vietnam. A portion of their revenue comes from collecting some of the 800,000 tons of unexploded American ordnance in the country. Courtesy of Sam Sweezy.

others runs into the political problem that neither individual nor collective memory can be utterly inclusive. Total memory is neither possible nor practical, with something always forgotten despite our best efforts. My model of a doubled ethical memory points to how this is true not just for the powerful but for the weak, who, having been forgotten themselves, often create their own selective memories when given the chance to tell their tales. Among other things, the stories of the many losers in this war show that in the conflict over remembrance, no one is innocent of forgetting. Of course, forgetting is key to individual memory, as many have argued, while selective memory is fundamental to nationalism. But it is not just the existence of forgetting for individuals or collectives that is at stake here. What is necessary for a doubled ethical memory is the awareness of forgetting, which reminds us that all classes and groups are invested in strategic forgetting for the sake of their own interests. This includes the ironic exploitation of the sometimes pious injunctions about "always remembering" and "never forgetting" the terrible events that define particular populations. The "always remembering" and "never forgetting" of supposedly unspeakable historical traumas in fact always require something else that is uncomfortable to be forgotten and rendered literally unspeakable. Haunted by the inevitability of forgetting something, ethical remembering constantly tries to recall what might be overlooked.

I structure my book to reflect and explore the tripartite relationship among opposing countries and the diverse peoples caught between competing, nationalist ways of memory. Thus, the book is divided into three parts of three chapters each. Part 1's theme is *memories of a bad war*, which is how many Americans and some Vietnamese recalled the war until recently. Chapters deal with the defeated, the dissident, and the forgotten. Part 2 continues with *memories of a just war*, which is how the Vietnamese commemorate the war in public and how more and more Americans view the war. Chapters are concerned with memorials, museums, and historical revisionism. Part 3 is about *memories against war*, the terrain of individual writers, artists, and filmmakers rather than nations and states. Chapters focus on refugees, the aesthetics of recalling others, and compassion as a key element in both versions of ethical memory. My method is comparative in each chapter, leading me to discuss memories as constructed by different populations. So, in the chapter on compassion, I look at how that emotion motivates people from Kingston and Martin Luther King, Jr., to Dang Thuy Tram, a North Vietnamese doctor killed in 1972 whose diary is an enormous bestseller.

The comparative method shows how struggles over recall and challenges of ethical memory exist for both countries and their multicultural populations. In all three parts, the tensions between recalling one's own and others exist. Thus, American writers and American filmmakers generally cast the war as a bad one, but the differences between the two are telling. From *Apocalypse Now* to *Rambo*, filmmakers mostly told ethnocentrically American stories. This is no surprise, given the correlation between economics and ethics. That is, the more expensive a medium, the less likely it is to be concerned with the ethics of recalling others. Fiction, and particularly poetry, which costs nothing but the poet's time, is more likely to recall others. Even so, it is only a small minority of American writers who have undertaken this task of including Vietnamese characters or writing from their point of view, from Denis Johnson in *Tree of Smoke* (2007) and Robert Olen Butler in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (1993) to, ironically, Larry Heinemann. In his memoir *Black Virgin Mountain* (2005), he returns to his old battlefields and not only makes peace with the North Vietnamese soldiers he fought against, but lionizes the North Vietnamese cause as a heroic one that he only retrospectively appreciates.

In discussing these writers and their representations, I also take on the issue of whether ethical works are somehow aesthetically better works. The answer is a mixed one. In some cases, I argue that ethically recalling others lends itself to creating more

complex, rounded characters, or more complete casts of characters. Whether or not these accomplishments or these works are aesthetically interesting or compelling is subjective and an issue that needs to be assessed in relationship to other criteria. Butler's book, for example, is a collection of short stories told entirely from the perspectives of Vietnamese refugees in Louisiana. It won a Pulitzer and impressed me when I was a college senior. Now I see it as a work of ventriloquism that ethically recalls others but is marred by sentimentalism and mired in a literary marketplace eager to exploit ethnic or even imagined ethnic voices. In contrast, Heinemann's *Close Quarters*, which horrified me so long ago, now strikes me as one of the most powerful and memorable American literary works of the war precisely because of its horrific qualities. It unflinchingly inhabits one point of view without editorial comment, the young American soldier dehumanized by war and his treatment of the Vietnamese. This is an example of the ethics of recalling one's own that draws its immense aesthetic power from deliberately disregarding the other, in the same and not uncontroversial way that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* does.

A parallel case can be found in Vietnam. There, the foremost director of the revolutionary generation, Dang Nhat Minh, made a movie called *Don't Burn* (2009), based on Dang Thuy Tram's diary. The film tells not only Tram's story but the story of the American soldier who found her diary and returned it over 30 years later to her family. The film is remarkable for being a high-budget, state-approved work that engages in doubled ethical memory. But it is also hobbled by a narrative sentimentalism about Tram and her American enemies that is an outcome of the same desire for a more evenhanded memory which the Vietnamese state discourages. In contrast, Bao Ninh's absolutely one-sided novel *The Sorrow of War* (1994) justly remains as one of the best literary accounts of the war we have, whether from Americans or Vietnamese. It tells the story of one haunted North Vietnamese soldier and disregards all other points of view, including that of the woman whom he loves and abandons because she is raped. After reading it, one can only agree with her when she says that her suffering, and by extension those of traumatized others, is a wound that cannot be bandaged.[3]

To address this diverse array of voices found in art, literature, cinema, photography, memorials, and museums, I use disciplinary approaches taken from literary criticism, film criticism, art history, ethnic studies, and cultural studies. My method is to frame the close analysis of select texts and images with a concern not just for individual memories but their migration into the public sphere, where collective struggles over memory are power struggles over

Fig. 4. Remnants of downed American warplanes and captured French and American weaponry, Military History Museum, Hanoi. This is the grandest example of a genre seen throughout the country: war wreckage as trophies. Courtesy of Sam Sweezy.

what to remember, whom to recognize, and how to represent the past. These struggles have consequences for rebuilding nations torn by war both physically and psychically, and they shape the passing on of secondhand memories. Literary and visual cultures are my evidence because they serve as the most public repository of collective memory and secondhand memories, visible for most people in both nations. Thus, in the chapter on museums, I look at differences within Vietnamese institutions. They have portrayed the war as a heroic struggle of a unified people against foreign occupation, but in tones ranging from the elegiac (the Fine Arts Museum of Hanoi) to the brutal (the War Remnants Museum of Saigon). Even within a society many Americans see as ideologically monolithic, memory is textured and tensions exist.

Without forgetting American perspectives, I stress Vietnamese points of view like the one found in these museums, for while American stories are available internationally, stories from Vietnam and its diaspora are rarely heard. So, while acknowledging and reading the spectacular seductions offered by American film and photography, I also draw attention in my chapter on refugees to writers and artists like lê thi diem thúy and Dinh Q. Lê, Americans of Vietnamese descent. thúy and Lê speak quietly but fiercely against such seductions, propagated not just by Americans but also by Vietnamese Americans. They fled communist persecution as refugees, but in telling their own anticommunist stories, they construct deeply exclusionary and pronationalist

memories in places like Garden Grove, California, with its heroic Vietnam War Memorial. In contrast, thúy and Lê perform the doubled ethics of recalling both one's own and others by reminding us that overlooked minority memories deserve not only praise but scrutiny, since they are also acts of power, constituted by amnesia and excluding those who do not fit into refugee nationalism.

The doubled ethical memory of artists like thúy and Lê constantly draws our attention to the inequalities of memory and memory's own elusiveness. The signature aesthetic device of Lê, for example, is the weaving together of images drawn from American memory and Vietnamese memory. The American images are from American movies like *Apocalypse Now*, while the Vietnamese images are anonymous black-and-white portrait and family photographs that he bought in secondhand stores in Saigon. What is remembered and what is forgotten are woven together in works that compel visual and personal identification, eliciting sorrow, haunting, and loss. Lê also applied this technique to the Cambodian genocide, weaving images of the victims of Khmer Rouge murder with bas-reliefs from Angkor Wat. Part of the point of his oeuvre is to suggest that recalling one's own—the Vietnamese—is not sufficient.

Something or someone is always forgotten, especially in dualistic, binaristic conflicts where the suppressed, the excluded, the minoritized, or the forgotten simply want to be remembered in a mirror image of dominant memory. One peril my book skirts is the reinforcement of this duality, the idea that the war was fought between two sides, American and Vietnamese. In reality, the war had many national participants, and nations were themselves fractured. Thus, the book also gestures at the experiences and memories of Cambodians, Laotians, Japanese, and Koreans, who occupy minor positions in the book but not necessarily in the history of the war. Their inclusion in the book is less of an attempt at total inclusion, since there were even more populations I do not address, and more of an attempt to gesture at the impossibility of total memory and the necessity of addressing forgetfulness.

Finally, as is now obvious, this book might have some classificatory problems in relation to discipline, field, and area. It is not a conventional work of US American studies, nor is it a work of Asian studies. It is also explicitly critical of Asian American studies and implicitly critical of ethnic studies. All this is done even as I acknowledge my debts to all these formations and their valuable work that make this book possible. Even so, the book proceeds from the premise of disregarding the usual boundaries of American studies and Vietnamese studies, whose problems I take to be indicative of Asian studies as a whole. Focused on Vietnam,

Vietnamese studies is reluctant to address the vast diasporic Vietnamese population created by the war, or to consider how the war, as a Vietnamese phenomenon, shapes American culture. Vietnamese studies is mostly about what happens within Vietnam to Vietnamese people, although an emerging generation of Vietnamese American scholars is challenging this self-imposed geographical and national limitation by foregrounding transnational approaches. These emerge from ethnic, cultural, and American studies, allowing Vietnamese studies to take into account the diaspora and Vietnamese influence overseas.

Conversely, while US American studies is interested in Vietnamese refugees in the US and in the Vietnam War, it mostly treats the war as an American event, rarely considering Vietnamese viewpoints or language sources. In doing so, US American studies only reiterates an endemic structural problem wherein US American studies rarely considers non-US viewpoints and theories, rarely considers the influence of non-American cultures on US American culture, and rarely hears non-English voices within US borders.[4] In both US American and Vietnamese studies, as well as Asian studies in general, national borders still define objects of study. But the Vietnam War concerns populations, cultural productions, and memories that cross borders. War itself crosses borders. To do justice to the war's memories, then, I draw on both American studies, the home field in which I am trained and work, and Vietnamese studies, the field from which I forage. Studying the war is also a way for me to reveal the limitations of the fields themselves, and to encourage these fields to use knowledge from outside their borders.

So far as Asian American and ethnic studies goes, I indicated some of the problems around the privileging of voice and resistance. But studying the Vietnam War only made it more evident to me how this privileging is reinforced by the invisible nationalism that shapes much of Asian American and ethnic studies. While minorities within the US may experience oppression, discrimination, marginalization, and exploitation, these same American minorities may also participate in or benefit from American militarism, imperialism, and global domination. Asian American and ethnic studies tends to focus on the former and forget its connection to the latter, which produces regular moments of blindness and illegibility that are not accidental but rather systemic. The systematic nature of minority participation in American domination is called out by Martin Luther King, Jr., when he identified the "brutal solidarity" between white and black American soldiers in the Vietnam War, unified by their fear and hatred of the Vietnamese (143). Jorge Mariscal also observes this problem when

he points out how "the Chicano GI's recognition of his own situation in the Vietnamese, rather than leading to a heightened critical awareness, in fact produced exaggerated forms of violence" (311). The works of Maxine Hong Kingston and other feminists point out that brutal solidarity involves women and civilians as well, who are complicit in the war machinery.

The uneasy gender and racial politics of the Vietnam era in American history, which involved not only feminist unrest and racial dissension but also brutal solidarity, extends today to the incorporation of versions of feminism and multiculturalism into American domination. From global corporations deploying Asian American shock troops (in Aihwa Ong's memorable image) to the US military being actively dependent on women and soldiers of color, inclusiveness and equity continue to be signature features of US global power. From a more academic perspective, it remains to be seen whether the transnational "turn" in Asian American studies[5] and other ethnic studies fields is actually global or is simply the neoimperialist reassertion of an implicitly nationalist US American studies model. This model, which is not the only one possible, theorizes the international from a US vantage point versus engaging in dialogue with foreign others and taking seriously their ideas, theories, stories, arguments, and locations. An American studies practice that contests US domination absorbs some of the practices of area studies: reading works in languages besides English, including those works published in the US by its multilingual minorities; doing field work in foreign locations; and exchanging ideas with foreign scholars.

Possibly the most bothersome charge that can be leveled against this book has less to do with discipline, field, or area and more to do with the basic question of whether we should remember at all. Haven't we remembered enough? Isn't there a surfeit of memory? Hasn't memory been commodified? What's the point of remembering all this? Won't we just be caught in the past in an endless loop of resentment?

In responding to these questions, the first distinction is one between the so-called memory industry and what this book is concerned with, industries of memory. The memory industry commodifies memory, deploying memory professionals in archives and memory amateurs in the cottage economy of producing souvenirs, memorabilia, re-enactments, and the like. Sentimentality and ethnocentrism are key to the memory industry. In contrast, this book is concerned with recognizing that memories are not equal. If differing memories of a shared event between two people can lead to a contest, then the nature of conflict over memories is even more magnified in a public sphere. Here, memories are industrially

Fig. 5. War memorial under construction at Khe Sanh, site of one of the most legendary battles of the American War in Vietnam. Building new memorials and museums, and renovating old ones, is an ongoing process in the country. Courtesy of Sam Sweezy.

produced and distributed, and just as countries and ethnic groups are not economically equal, neither are their memories. Hence, the US lost the war in fact, but it has won the war in memory on most of the world's fronts outside of Vietnam. American memories globally circulate via the most expensive circuits, whereas Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian memories are local or at most diasporic, invisible, inaudible, and illegible to the majorities in any given country.

A doubled ethical memory draws attention not only to overlooked memories but also to the structures and histories that produce dominant and subordinated memories. In so doing, doubled ethical memory does not simply add even more memories to the surfeit of memories. The surfeit of memories for any given troubling event exists not because the past has been worked through too much but because the past has not been worked through enough. Doubled ethical memory suggests, following Freud, that we must work through the past or else be condemned to act out because of it. Ethically recalling our own is not enough to work through the past, and neither is the less common phenomenon of ethically recalling others. Both modes are haunted by what they have forgotten, an ever-lingering absence that compels ever more furious efforts to paper over that absence with further, repetitive memories.

In the end, excessive memories do not point to a just approach to the past, but to an unjust one, defined by what Ricoeur calls "memory abusively summoned, when commemoration rhymes with rememoration" (57). The response is not to cease remembering an event that has been chewed over relentlessly, but to reconsider how we remember that event. "Just Memory" indicates two ways of dealing with the problem of excessive memories. One is through the struggle to ethically remember conflicted events, to create a just memory. The other is to recognize that memories of even the most conflicted events may one day become just memories, names, dates, or places that stir no emotions in those who hear about them. Time and mortality offer passive solutions to the problem of obdurate memories as witnesses pass on. Both possibilities of achieving just memories, the active and the passive, address Nietzsche's claim that to live, we must forget (62).

Insofar as we try to actively forget through an ethical memory, to struggle for reconciliation and forgiveness, for what Ricoeur calls an "enlightened forgetting" (68), we must work through the past by negotiating the competing challenges of recalling one's own and recalling others. Negotiation does not mean that those competing memories can be reconciled, but it does mean that submitting to only one, at the exclusion of the other, will never be enough. This is true of the many deeply conflicted events which, like this war, remain impossible to forget, yet difficult to remember.[6]

Notes

1. The First Indochina War was fought against the French from 1946 to 1954, ending their colonization of Indochina (1887–1954). Indochina comprised Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, and the Indochina Wars indicate how the American term of the Vietnam War is inadequate in its exclusion of Cambodia and Laos. Both of them were deeply affected by the so-called Vietnam War. The Second Indochina War's beginning might be dated to the late 1950s or early 1960s, depending on the event one chooses. The Third Indochina War was fought between Vietnam and Cambodia in 1979.

2. For the symbolic importance of railroads and internment camps to the Asian American imagination, see Elaine Kim, "Beyond Railroads and Internment: Comments on the Past, Present, and Future of Asian American Studies," *Privileging Positions: The Sites of Asian American Studies* (1995), eds. Gary Y. Okihiro, Marilyn Alquizola, Dorothy Fujita Rony, and K. Scott Wong, 1–9.

3. "'Can't you see?' she cries. 'It's not a wound! It can't be bandaged!'" (204).

4. See John Carlos Rowe, *The New American Studies* (2002) and Werner Sollors, *Multilingual America* (1998).

5. See Eric Hayot, "The Asian Turns," *PMLA* 124.3 (2009): 906–917.

6. The photos throughout this essay were taken by Sam Sweezy, with whom I traveled through Vietnam in the summer of 2010. I thank him for the use of the photographs, and the Asian Cultural Council, which funded our travel as Luce Foundation Fellows.

Works Cited

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: Norton, 2006.

Derrida, Jacques. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Beyond Vietnam." *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr*. Ed. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard. New York: Warner, 2001. 133–64.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *China Men*. New York: Vintage, 1989.

Lê, Dinh Q. and Stefano Catalani. *A Tapestry of Memories: The Art of Dinh Q. Lê*. Bellevue: Bellevue Arts Museum, 2007.

Lesser, William. "Presence of Mind: The Photographs of Philip Jones Griffiths." *Aperture* 2008. 20 Apr. 2012.

Margalit, Avishai. *The Ethics of Memory*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002.

Mariscal, Jorge, ed. *Aztlan and Viet Nam: Chicano and Chicana Experiences of the War*. Berkeley: U California P, 1999.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 2004.

Sebald, W. G. *On the Natural History of Destruction*. New York: Modern Library, 2004.

thúy, lê thi diem. *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. New York: Anchor, 2004.