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Book Review: Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War

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***Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War.* Viet Thanh Nguyen. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press. 2016. 304 pages plus notes. ISBN:978-0-674-66034-2. Illustrated.**

Nothing ever dies. Not the memories of war, not its trauma, not its controversies--and not the hope that we can one day extricate our present from our traumatic pasts in order to create a more peaceful future. This hope threads through Viet Thanh Nguyen's Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War. The book is about war, identity, and memory, Nguyen tells us. His goal is to "beat....hearts back to life." Our hearts, the hearts of the generations wounded, in different ways and to different extents, by war.

While Nguyen's primary focus is his own war, the war in Vietnam that was enmeshed in the last century's wars in Southeast Asia, the book's broader topic is war itself. Radcliffe Magazine has called the book a "bible for a new pacifism, more nuanced and wiser than 'make love not war'." But that does scant justice to its great value as a compendium of writers, filmmakers, and artists in Asia and America—and of creative spirits who claim "no country but the imagination." Nor does such a characterization do justice to the book's engagement with theories of memory and identity, or to the complexity of its meditations both on iconic representations of war and on historical sites in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Korea.¹

Part history, part memoir, part philosophical treatise, part cultural critique, and part introduction to creative work engendered by war, *Nothing Ever Dies* is also part disruption and part exhortation. Disrupting simplistic narratives that divide us into victim and perpetrator, friend and enemy, us and them, Nguyen calls us to make possible a greater humanity by recognizing that we all, ourselves as well as our enemies, are capable of both inhumanity and humanity. As he puts it, "...the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being." (72)

Nguyen argues that war haunts us not only because of what has been done to us and those we love, but also because of "the horrors we have done, seen, and condoned... the unspeakable things from which we have profited. Haunted and haunting, human and inhuman, war remains with us and within us, impossible to forget but difficult to remember."(19)

In order to move toward peace, Nguyen asserts, we need "just memory"--memory that includes what we have forgotten or excluded through self interest, trauma, and the excessive remembering of something else, like the heroism of our own side, or the atrocities of the other, or even through an empathy with the suffering of the "other side" that fails to recognize that these sufferers too are capable of inhumanity.

The core of the book is a sustained exploration of three requisite transformations—in ethics, industries of memory, and aesthetics--that Nguyen proposes as a foundation for just memory.

The first transformation required, according to Nguyen, is a move beyond the division of the world into “the near and the dear” and “the far and the feared,” through an ethics that acknowledges our shared, simultaneous humanity and inhumanity.

The second requisite is to counterbalance the asymmetrical production of public memory, in which the voices of those with international power, position, and resources are amplified in widely circulated images and texts, while the voices necessary to create a more complete and consequently more accurate telling of history are not heard. *Nothing Ever Dies* itself embodies this rebalancing.

The third requisite is for powerful new stories that will enable us to “fight war and find peace”—not a nostalgic, utopian vision of peace, but one born of a “sober vision” of the self-destructiveness of war. Nguyen asks artists to venture “into the no man’s land between trenches, borders, and camps,” liberating themselves as they speak of the past in order to lay it to rest. He calls for stories of refugees who are not simply victims, or revealers of ethnic secrets, or anti-communist witnesses, or caught—whether painfully or wondrously—between two worlds. He calls for war stories that are more comprehensive—soldiers and battles, yes, but also civilians, orphans, widows, refugees, factory workers, tax-payers, future generations. Most important, he says, is to tell stories that illuminate the workings of the machinery of war, power, and profit. By expanding our vision, such stories have the potential to lift us out of places where our memories and identities are stuck.

Yet to live, Nguyen writes, we must forget as well as remember. And for this forgetting to make possible a degree of reconciliation that can help disengage the present from the death grip of the past, it too must be just. That is, we cannot ignore the past, we cannot pretend it did not happen, and we should not write its history in a way that serves a predetermined agenda.

There is irony in Nguyen’s hope for a world where just memory can lead to just forgetting and the possibility of reconciliation. “Where’s the hope?” asked many of the 13 publishers who, looking for a happy ending, rejected the manuscript of his Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Sympathizer*. Should we read *Nothing Ever Dies*, then, as a capitulation to the publishing industry? I don’t think so. It seems to me rather the thoughtful and impassioned cry of a person who knows from painful first-hand experience the long-term, cross-generational, and ultimately suicidal costs of war, and refuses to shut his eyes or yield to its inevitability.

It is perhaps a sign of both Nguyen’s courage and the passage of time that he can so directly acknowledge that there was inhumanity on all sides of the war and yet speak of reconciliation. Readers old enough to remember past threats, fire-bombings, and assassinations of Vietnamese Americans who spoke for reconciliation, or who have seen the PBS Frontline report “Terror in Little Saigon,” may well be a little worried for Nguyen, while at the same time hoping that his ability to speak out is a sign that we have indeed moved some distance from his war.

In *Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie asks how we can move beyond our murderous pasts. “How does newness come into the world?” he asks. “How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, and conjoinings is it made? How does it survive, extreme and dangerous as it is?...Is birth always a fall?”

Desmond Tutu’s *No Future without Forgiveness* can be read as one part of an answer to Rushdie’s question. Nguyen Thanh Viet, who describes himself as “born in Vietnam but made in America”—a fusion, a conjoining—has written a book that could be read as another part, a first step toward that future, that newness born of forgiveness: contrition, or perhaps simply humility, a recognition of both the inhumanity and the humanity we share with those we once thought were unlike ourselves. The goal is to move beyond denial, paralyzing shame, resignation, and a desire for revenge. In the words of a Vietnamese proverb: “Close the past to open the future.”

ⁱ The book is an extended, grounded conversation with an impressive number of theoreticians and writers. The following samples selected from but a few pages of its 22 page bibliography gives only a hint of its richness: Arendt and Appiah, Barthes and Bhabha, Dang Nhat Minh, Derrida, Diaz, Linh Dinh and DuBois, Kant, Kundera, and Kwon, Ricoeur, Martin Luther King, and Thich Nhat Hanh.

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