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The Vietnam War, the American War: Literature, Film, and Popular Memory

The diplomacy of remembering is constructed by contradictory senses of interpretation and opinion—pliable factors that yield under the duress of politicization and capitalism. The Vietnam War, as it is remembered in the United States, is known in Vietnam as the American War. Akin to the monikers of other wars, the names "Vietnam War" and "American War" fail to fully encapsulate the experiences of the groups of people involved, the irreversible damage done, and the pain dealt to all sides. In the social, political, and cultural landscapes, battles have been waged about the meaning and remembrance of the Vietnam War. Conflicting attitudes, ethical quandaries, variegated historical analyses, and interpretive literature from both American and Vietnamese sides have been raised, and both sides are not lacking in personal or political motivation. Despite the complexity of the conflict, the American elucidation of the experience has become canonical and dominant, all around uncompromising in its purview, and neither inclusive nor discursive of minority experiences. The incorporation of diverse perspectives, opinions, and experiences should be considered so that the master narrative of the war may be widened, eventually becoming a more nuanced one.

In *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Viet Thanh Nguyen, an American writer who has emerged as an indispensable voice in ethnic studies and literature, reminds the public that "[a]ll wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory" (4). The bloodshed and physical elements of armed conflict eventually come to an end; however, the second struggle continues in the realm of memory, in which the narrative of the Vietnam War becomes transmuted each and every time it is discussed. On this notion, Hue-Tam Ho Tai, author of *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, states, “The past, like the future, is an eternally unfinished project, constantly under construction and constantly being revised” (3). Indeed, the past is similar to the future in that they are both in a perpetual state of modification, remade and redone to suit personal or political motives. Moreover, all societies situate memory according to what is most beneficial to the nation. In the case of the past and collective memory, narratives are constantly being produced and changed in order to align with certain ideologies and -isms. This might mean that some historical elements are to be omitted while others are emphasized, romanticized, glorified, or even exaggerated. Considering this notion, the American interpretation of the war, or the American memory of the war, insists on attaching value to the experience of the American, wringing out the knots of national trauma, while strengthening the American master narrative through different mediums of popular culture (such as literature and film).

The immortalization of the Vietnam War in American popular memory has long hinged on the trauma that stemmed from the conflict. In the light of this, the American cultural fixation on the memory of Vietnam is directly correlated to the profound trauma that the war precipitated. On the significance of cultural trauma, the scholar Ron Eyerman and his colleagues state that cultural trauma is a “discursive response to a tear in the social fabric, occurring when the foundations of an established collective identity are shaken by one or a series of seemingly interrelated occurrences” (13). In the American social fabric, there were many tears that the Vietnam War indirectly or directly caused: political infighting and intrigue, social unrest (such as protests), national debates, and the call for reevaluation of American values. Furthermore, Eyerman and his colleagues, referring to how collective memory is represented and reproduced in narrative forms (such as literature and film), state, “Through such media and related ritual practices, the stories and myths that congeal as collective memory serve as a foundation upon which collective identity rests” (12). The formation and maintenance of the American collective identity seems to be what drives media and related ritual practices, in the form of literature and film. Although the collective identity of any and every nation can be thoroughly argued, the American collective identity is one that has been stringently and dutifully preserved—that is, one that rests on the values of justice, tranquility, and liberty. Eyerman and his colleagues explicate the concept of collective memory and remark that it “refers to the selective and cumulative process through which collectives, from groups to nations, make use and meaningful sense of the past” (14). According to these scholars, collective memory is a process that is both selective and cumulative, essentially meaning that certain events, groups of people, experiences, and opinions are bound to be omitted. This does not change the fact that within the history of wars involving the United States, Vietnam stands the test of time and has proven to be an enduring contestable topic. The American fixation on the Vietnam War is an easily discernible one—even to those who are non-American. Trương Như Tang, the former minister of justice of Vietnam, sought to shed light on the inner workings and many difficulties in Vietcong politics with *A Vietcong Memoir*. In the foreword to his memoir, Tang asserts, “It is only through understanding the Vietnamese who fought on the other side that Americans will have anything like a complete portrait of a war upon which they have been reflecting so deeply . . .” (xiv). It was partially with this intention that Tang wrote and published his pathbreaking memoir. Works of literature like Tang’s, however, seem to have been relegated to the outskirts of Vietnam literature.

In American literature, the Vietnam War has inspired a gargantuan body of work—histories, memoirs, novels, and essays; however, much of the literary corpus lacks discussion of the Vietnamese perspective. According to Quan Manh Ha, of the University of Montana, "Western discourses on Vietnam, particularly in the American cultural memory, have been criticised for their exclusion of the Vietnamese experience and suffering" (464). Narratives illuminate the politics of knowledge about the past and present, contributing to the growing discourse on the war and its long-lasting impacts, and literature itself plays an influential role in how events are remembered or are to be remembered. One example of such an exclusionary approach can be found in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, a New Journalism book that expands on the author's personal experience in Vietnam. Herr's closing words are symptomatic of America's Vietnam syndrome: "Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we've all been there" (260). Vietnam, Herr insists, is a metaphorical space that has become the property of Americans, further insinuating that Vietnam is an allegory for personal struggle or a representation of tragedy that is menacingly ubiquitous. Vietnam, however, is indeed a place, a country and a people that have been shaped by the ebb and flow of foreign occupation, colonialism, centuries of violence, infighting, and eventual reunification and independence. The memory of Vietnam or, rather, the experience of Vietnam and its literal name have been appropriated time again as an allegory for struggle. The appropriation of the war is commonplace and invites the question of exactly how the war has been remembered and who is responsible for curating the memory of Vietnam in American society. In a physical sense, those who believe that they have been there are gravely mistaken as they do not understand what it means to be robbed of nation and personhood, to be afflicted by senseless violence and incessantly attacked on one's native land, to be displaced, maimed by ideology, or to be forced to assume double consciousness—that is, to be a refugee or immigrant in a new homeland. Ha, a scholar of American literature and ethnic studies, uses the terms "Americacentrism" and "ethnocentrism" as descriptors of literature that might be exclusionary in its scope (468). Although *Dispatches* offers an illuminating and humanistic portrait of the American soldier's experience on the ground in Vietnam during the war, Herr's closing words reflect both Americacentrism and ethnocentrism, wherein the experience is seen as an American experience and an American tragedy rather than a shared, transnational trauma that afflicted not just Americans but also their "South" Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong, Cambodian, and even South Korean allies.

The focus on the Vietnamese experience is far and few between in the seemingly nebulous genre of the American war novel, and even if Vietnamese people are brought to the forefront, the characters and stories do not seem to be fully realized. The experience of the Vietnamese, suffering and all, has largely been relegated to the periphery. Philip H. Melling expounds on the representation of the Vietnamese in American literature, or lack thereof, in his book *Vietnam in American Literature*. He believes that the Vietnamese have become "culturally undermined" and exist only as "figures of darkness and obscurity who live on the wrong side of history, the bearers of primitive and fallible wisdom who have fallen prey to an atheistic mission and communist myth" (32). Here, Melling offers a scathing criticism of the American lens through which the United States views the Vietnamese. Melling's observation sheds light on an American stubbornness—that is, the insistence that anything that strays from American values or anything that dissents from the American social fabric must be inherently malformed, imperfectly developed, backward, or simply wrong. By extension, the dominant American understanding of the war is one that perpetuates its own innocence and good intentions despite jarring inconsistencies and contradictory results.

Cultural production and the influence of industry are interwoven elements that greatly influence the memory of the Vietnam War. Nguyen, a novelist and academic, has worked and written extensively on how the Vietnam War has been recalled, the social ramifications of such remembrances, and the difficulties of ethical memory. On the nature of collective memory, he remarks, “Memories are not only collected or collective, they are also corporate and capitalist” (*Nothing* 15). Indeed, memories can be collected or collective and can serve the purpose of enlightening the masses; however, the memories of war are susceptible to the capitalistic framework that American society hinges on. Therefore, the intention of the collective memory is not to simply educate but to tell stories that will attract, engage, and persuade people, with profit as the dominant objective. Americans have single-handedly been able to construct a universal framework on “good” war stories that aim to facilitate philosophical explication or reflections on the American side rather than nuanced discussion on Vietnamese perspectives (16-17). Robert McMahon, a specialist in the history of United States’ foreign relations, seeks to explore how the process of remembering the Vietnam War fits into the grander scheme of American national identity making, particularly in the past twenty-five years. In this sense, the question of how the war has been rationalized, memorialized, represented, and understood comes into play. On the construction of a nation’s collective past, McMahon offers acute insight: “Memories, individual and collective, are typically constructed rather than emerging as the simple, unfiltered recollections of past events. Individuals and societies choose what they will remember about the past—and what they will forget” (163). In the case of Vietnam, the experiences of those who are not American—including the Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodians—are more often than not excluded from popular conversation. Even diasporic people do not seem to be present in such discussions. Erroneous behavior and unconscionable acts carried out by American hands become shrouded. The American power of cultural production, indisputably the strongest and most pervasive, has enabled the United States to reconcile with the past and to, time and again, reinterpret the war.

Filmmaking is another powerful form of cultural production, one that disallows minority participation. Films that explore the memory of war are what Nguyen dubs “rememories” (*Nothing* 65). *Apocalypse Now*, an American epic war film that was met with critical acclaim, exhibits Americacentrism: the Vietnamese are sideshow pieces amid the more important, more interesting American characters. About midway through the film, we see a sampan full of Vietnamese civilians massacred in a botched mission (Coppola). Although the film offers blatant criticism of military violence and the United States’ counterinsurgency, it is nonetheless a strategic and interpretive remembrance in which the presentation of past events becomes co-opted and deprived of the voice of the othered. Here, the Western obsession with philosophical reinterpretation and discursive spectacle is prioritized over the Vietnamese perspective. American egotism becomes abundantly clear. On this point, Nguyen remarks that those whose stories are not worth expounding on—not just Vietnamese but other Southeast Asians—are simply “an abstraction to be dismissed in favor of the more interesting topic, the power of the war machine and its cinematic squadrons” (*Nothing* 65). Here, Nguyen suggests that certain elements of war, particularly violence, are more accessible and more engaging material to those who are not directly affected by or involved with the war itself. In a society that is profoundly influenced by spectacle, stories of people of color (that seem dissenting) are overlooked in favor of what the public considers more relatable or more interesting. Adding to this sentiment, Nguyen remarks, “Vietnamese Americans have the unnerving experience of seeing themselves in those crosshairs of American solipsism and American memory” (“Speak” 25). Although there seems to be a desire for inclusiveness, a heartening and comforting aspect of American culture, there is a seemingly nebulous expectation that people of color (in this case, Vietnamese people) fail to meet. Paul Williams has studied representations of white American masculinity and the Vietnamese in the Vietnam War film genre from the years 1977 to 1987. Williams observes that in the media in the United States, "Southeast Asian humanity was ignored or inferior to our own . . . perceived as either pathetically racially inferior (as prostitutes, passive natives, targets or effete homosexuals) or as threatening Other (the omnipresent VC, the cruel sadist, the treacherous 'ally')" (216). Again, the titles and roles the Vietnamese assume in films engender the American national identity—freedom fighters who fought valiantly against the threat of toxic collectivism (which seems to be the antithesis of the American spirit). Williams's observation illuminates the lack of options that the Vietnamese seem to have in the film industry, a powerful tool of popular memory. In the Vietnam War film genre, the Vietnamese do not hold a valued place. Having both the American film industry and literature in mind, American filmmakers and novelists alike are able to reconcile with the past, with memory, by sharing their own interpretation or analysis, creating a cultural space for acknowledgment, sympathy, and empathy. Considering the analysis of the American master narrative of the Vietnam War that exists in both literature and film, Ha suggests:

> Because much of the information about the Vietnam War is filtered through the ideological and discriminatory lenses of the U.S. media and the society's *idées reçues*, reading of the traumatic experiences of the Vietnamese people becomes an ethical responsibility for anyone interested in the Vietnam War. (486)

Ha believes that the inclusion of both perspectives, Vietnamese and American, should be implemented in college courses.

The combination of how the war has been presented to the American public and to the entire world through literature and film has been a largely exclusionary effort driven by a narrow ideological agenda—that is, to keep the United States and Americans at the center of the story. In the afterword to her book, *The Country of Memory*, Ho Tai remarks, “If a community creates and sustains memory, the reverse is also true: memory creates and sustains the community.” She adds that the creation of such a shared history, or shared memory, is a method of “defining what and who belongs, and what and who deserve to be consigned to oblivion” (227). Thus, the battles waged over memory directly dictate the form or structure of a community, who should be included, and whose voices might be undermined. At a time when historical memories—vital to our understanding of self in the nation and around the globe—appear to be simultaneously dangerous and imperiled, the question then becomes how society can practice remembrance, for the cause of knowledge, education, and discourse, without remembrance being co-opted and stripped of its integrity and analytic qualities. Regarding minority groups, particularly on the task of remembering, producing, and manufacturing memory, Nguyen remarks, “To be forgotten altogether or to be disremembered—these are the choices left to the Southeast Asians of the former Indochina in the discourse of the Gook, as well as any other Asians unfortunate enough to be mistaken for such a creature” (*Nothing* 66). Nguyen criticizes the options that greater America foists on diasporic Vietnamese Americans and Southeast Asians: consigned to oblivion, eradicated from the dominant history, and, overall, bypassed.

The practice of remembering national trauma, particularly war, is a contentious one that involves inherently polarizing elements: interpretation and opinion, two forms of discourse that are easily politicized and co-opted. Despite the Vietnam War’s complexity, the narrative, as it is presented in popular memory, sees to it that the American is posited at the center of the story at all times. Recently, there has been a resuscitation of this ethnocentric hubris—that is, a return to racist and xenophobic cultural narratives that attempt to push back against social progress. To this end, the phrase “Make America Great Again” has become less of a slogan and more of a looming reminder that toxic hubris, racist malice, and patriotic pride have not yet been expunged from the American social fabric. The phrase or, rather, the rhetorical power behind those words should act as a caveat: within language exists a quality that is equal parts terrifying and magical. On the one hand, our words and our stories can stir hate; on the other hand, they also allow us to challenge others to rethink consensual historical narratives. Memory, much like the future, need not remain static or impervious to change. With words comes narrative power, and with narrative power comes a crucial responsibility: to shed an eternal light on the experiences of those who have been for too long ignored.

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