



Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War by Viet Thanh Nguyen.

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Review by Gary Kulik, Wilmington, DE (gkulik@comcast.net).

Among the books by acclaimed author Viet Thanh Nguyen (Univ. of Southern California¹) is the 2015 Pulitzer-Prize winning *The Sympathizer: A Novel*.² That book featured as its narrator a half-French, half-Vietnamese communist spy, imprisoned in a reeducation camp. Distrusted by the camp's hard-bitten communist commandant, the narrator, who has spent years in America, has been writing a long confession. He is asked Ho Chi Minh's favorite question "what is more precious than independence and freedom" (364)? He is tortured until he can answer correctly "nothing." In words evocative of Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*,³ the narrator grimly observes that "our revolution had gone from the vanguard of political change to the rearguard of holding power... When it came to learning the worst habits of our French masters and their American replacements, we quickly proved ourselves the best. We, too, could abuse grand ideals" (360). Critics have hailed Nguyen as an important new Vietnamese-American voice that insists on seeing Vietnam as a *country* not only a *war*.

Nothing Ever Dies,⁴ a nonfiction sequel to *The Sympathizer*, was a finalist for the National Book Award. But readers expecting the same even-handed approach to the meaning of the war in Vietnam will be disappointed. Rather than the sustained cultural history promised in its subtitle, the book is a discursive and tendentious personal essay blending Cultural Studies and Late Marxism.⁵ Its strengths include the author's justifiable bitterness over the United States' devastation of his birth-country as well as Laos and Cambodia; Nguyen also has a deep knowledge of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Korean film and literature.

The book's three sections—"Ethics," "Industries," and "Aesthetics"—set out the preconditions for a "just memory" of the Vietnam War based on "equal access" to the "industries of memory"—film, publishing, public memorials—in "a world in which no one would be exiled." Nguyen repeatedly admits that such utopian hopes will go unfulfilled "without a radical transformation, even a revolution, in the distribution of wealth and power" (283), but never clarifies the nature of that revolution.

For Nguyen, a truly "just memory" of the war would recognize the evil inherent in each of us, "our simultaneous humanity and inhumanity," and our complicity in the deeds "our side, our kin, and even we ourselves commit" (283). He makes the case by marshalling anecdotes from novels, films, and war commemorations while stitching it all together by invoking theorists of memory such as Paul Ricoeur, Pierre Nora, and Emmanuel Levinas.

Nguyen was born in Vietnam, "but made in America ... a man of two countries, as well as the inheritor of two revolutions" (1). He compares the American Revolution with Ho Chi Minh's seizure of

1. Where he is chairman of the English department and professor of American Studies and Ethnicity.

2. NY: Grove Pr. It received several other prizes, including an Edgar Award for Best First Novel, awarded by the Mystery Writers of America.

3. NY: Macmillan, 1941.

4. The title comes from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (NY: Knopf, 1987) 36.

5. See Tony Judt, "Freedom and Fredonia," *When the Facts Change: Essays, 1995-2010*, ed. Jennifer Homans (NY: Penguin, 2015) 91.

power inspired by Marxist-Leninist doctrine cloaked in nationalist aspiration. Neither country, he writes, lived up to its revolution. The American vision of a “city upon a hill now exists mostly as a sentimental fantasy,” while the Vietnamese revolution failed not because it fell short of its purported goals for its people, but because it could not satisfy Che Guevara’s wish for “two, three, many Vietnams” (3), a vision of third-world transformation once espoused by some on the 1960s far left.

The author’s Catholic family moved from the north to escape Ho Chi Minh’s regime in 1954–55 as part of the largest internal migration in Vietnamese history. After the communist victory in 1975, the family fled the country and lived briefly in a refugee camp in Ft. Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, before settling in San Jose, California, where his parents opened a grocery store. Nguyen attended Catholic schools there and then earned his bachelor’s and doctoral degrees at the University of California–Berkeley.

Nguyen dedicates *Nothing Ever Dies* to his parents, who, “having lost almost everything, ... nearly killed themselves to earn it back” (302). Neither will speak to him of the past. His father grew up minutes from the birthplace of Ho Chi Minh, “a region famous for producing hardcore revolutionaries and hardcore Catholics”(301). This “makes [him] ... wonder what a different direction my life might have taken, what a different war I might have inherited” (301), had his family been communists rather than Catholics.

The author distinguishes himself not only from the anti-communists of his parents’ generation of exiles, but also from others in the first cohort of Vietnamese-American writers. He criticizes writers like Le Ly Hayslip, Lan Cao, Andrew Lam, Andrew Pham, Aimee Phan, and Monique Troung as exponents of an “anti-communist liberalism” whose polite and reasonable voices differ sharply from the “rabid, demagogic kind found on the streets of Little Saigon” (206). Nguyen cautions that such writers, though not silenced altogether, as they would be in communist countries (a fact he rarely mentions), are subject to a censorship he imputes to American culture, “which allows them to speak, so long as they pass over other things in silence,” specifically in regard to revolution. But a literature “that has given up on revolution [loses] one of the most important ways to transcend victimization” (205). An authentic Vietnamese–American literature must embrace Nguyen’s ill-defined utopian hope of revolution.

The United States’ “official memory,” the author claims, has failed because it reflects no lessons learned “except ... to fight the Forever War more efficiently” (285). Given the ongoing, indecisive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, this is an understandable assertion. But it is too simplistic. The generals who directed the liberation of Kuwait (Operation Desert Storm) in 1990–91 were bent on avoiding the mistakes of the Vietnam war. They went to war with overwhelming force, the support of most Americans, and a clear sense of how the war would end. Within months of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the George W. Bush administration forgot the lessons of Desert Storm.

Nguyen writes that Vietnamese “official memory” is “unable to confront the failure of the revolution in bringing freedom and independence to all of the people” (285). This ambiguous assertion contradicts the author’s opening argument that the revolution failed because it could not fulfill Che Guevara’s promise of multiple revolutions. Nguyen is notably silent on the core of the Communist Party’s official memory—that the revolution was an American war on the Vietnamese people, a position that obscures the reality of a blood-soaked civil war.

Nguyen often indulges in lazy moral equivalencies. He writes, for example, that Thu Hoang’s 1995 *Novel without a Name*, a strident denunciation of communist party leadership, led to censorship and her house arrest. “Western publishers and readers considered her to be a dissident who spoke for justice Banned at home, her novels were published abroad, for the West likes to translate the enemies of its enemies” (62). In the end, he observes, “neither denunciation nor praise is innocent” (62). It is all

driven by ideology. This is not just moral equivalency, but moral blindness. Hoang's assault on her communist rulers has an integrity quite apart from the views of Western publishers and readers. In his travels in Vietnam, Nguyen seems never to have sought out the country's current dissidents, who write at risk of censorship and incarceration.

The United States lost the Vietnam war on the ground, but "won the war in memory, dominating as it does moviemaking, book publishing, fine art and the production of historical archives" (15). Hollywood is a "component of the military-industrial complex." In a sentence that would embarrass even neo-Leninists, Nguyen claims that "the ultimate goal of this industry is to reproduce power and inequality as well as to fulfill the needs of the war machine" (14).

To say that the United States "won the war in memory" ignores the deep and enduring divisions it produced in both America and Europe. In fact, there is no American consensus on the war, no single memory to justify such a crude conclusion. The antiwar movement resonated deeply in Hollywood films,⁶ popular documentaries,⁷ and bestsellers.⁸ Such cultural artifacts eloquently attest to the complexity of the American memory of the war.

Near the end of his book, the author offers this criticism of Korean writer Chang-Rae Lee's work: "as beautifully written as his novels are, there is something of the anxious student in them, the longing for belonging, the evident desire to never write a bad sentence ... which sometimes leads to overwritten sentences and lyrical conclusions that may not be earned" (249). The same can be said of *Nothing Ever Dies*.

6. E.g., *Coming Home*, dir. Hal Ashby (1978), *Platoon*, dir. Oliver Stone (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July*, dir. Oliver Stone (1989), and *Casualties of War*, dir. Brian De Palma (1989).

7. E.g., *In the Year of the Pig*, dir. Emile de Antonio (1968), *Interviews with My Lai Veterans*, dir. Joseph Strick (1970), and *Hearts and Minds*, dir. Peter Davis (1974).

8. E.g., Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1977), Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (NY: Knopf, 1977), Lynda Van Devanter, *Home before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam* (NY: Beaufort Books, 1983), and Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).