

***Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* by Viet Thanh Nguyen, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016.**

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The notion that war ends when its participants sign an armistice agreement is a simplistic and outdated mode of thinking. The experiences of war have plagued the minds of those who have been exposed to it since man first used it as a tool of diplomacy. While the trauma of war has been documented throughout history, acknowledgment of its effects, and a concerted effort to heal those afflicted, has been slower to materialize. In recent history, psychologists and sociologists have exerted more effort to highlight the importance of the memories left behind after war has subsided.

In *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Viet Thanh Nguyen illuminates the remnants of the Vietnam War in the hearts and minds of those involved after the war was declared over. Dubbing this process, the “second war,” Nguyen asserts that the only path to reconciliation with former enemies, and indeed for the individual reliving the war, is the recognition of our shared and ever-present humanity as world citizens. To accomplish this, Nguyen undertakes an arduous journey through the experiences of combatants and civilians directly

affected by the war, to present an analysis of the psychological impact of the war in Vietnam.

Vietnam was not just an American fight against the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. Along with the Vietnamese people who endured the atrocities of the war, Laotians, Cambodians, Thai, South Koreans and Hmong were directly affected by their experiences. These cultures, and indeed in some cases their American-born offspring, remember the war in different ways. The Vietnamese who fled the battlefields have little choice but to be associated with the death and destruction that brought them to the U.S. They grapple with their own painful memories, which shadow them or get pushed aside, while their descendants try to cope with their elders refusing to share their recollections. Even within the context of those fleeing Vietnam, divisions arise in relative experiences. Many of the refugees fleeing Vietnam after the war were Hmong, an ethnically Chinese population living in the mountains of Vietnam who helped U.S. forces with their campaigns in Laos and Vietnam. Their experience largely differs from those described as South Vietnamese.

In the section of the prologue entitled “Just Memory,” Nguyen claims that “war has a distinct identity, a face with carefully drawn features, familiar at a glance to the nation’s people” (p. 5). Throughout the remainder of his study, he analyzes death, destruction, and other war experiences from multiple vantage points, discussing many significant events such as the My Lai Massacre, or the caves where Vietnamese civilians were annihilated by American bombers. He also portrays the significance of war memorials in the United States, as well as in the Southeast Asian nations which participated in or were affected by the Vietnam War. While the study of such monuments offers excellent insight into the issues of commemoration and remembrance, the bulk of Nguyen’s analysis centers on how these nations have come to terms with memory and identity through the arts. By focusing on the arts, Nguyen is able to capture a more realistic interpretation of the war from the point of

view of the commoner, and not their respective state.

Historically, the art of remembrance concerning the Vietnam War was dominated by the American point of view. Given the wealth and availability of organizations to fund literary and cinematic endeavors in the United States, this should come as no surprise when compared to relative lack of funds available in Vietnam since the war ended. Nguyen, however, presents a wonderful analysis of a vast array of Vietnamese artists, including directors Dang Nhat Minh and Bui Thac Chuyen, and writers Le Ly Hayslip and Monique Truong. In doing so, he presents a greater perspective of the native Vietnamese experience.

The brilliance of analysis in *Nothing Ever Dies* is due in large part to the applicability of the subject matter to the analysis of war trauma and memory in any period of history. Equally important, however, is the individual undertaking the analysis. Viet Thanh Nguyen was born in Vietnam, and raised in America. Coming to the United States as a refugee, he has a close connection to the memories of the war harbored by his Vietnamese family, and those presented by his adopted nation. Nguyen is an associate professor of English and American Studies at the University of Southern California, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Sympathizer*, as well as many other works in Trans-Pacific studies. His background, past literary accomplishments, and depth of research in multiple nations make Viet Thanh Nguyen more than qualified to contribute to the historical record on the memory of war.

Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War is a compelling addition to the large body of historical work on the subject. Its author Viet Thanh Nguyen bridges the gap between history and literature to portray the harrowing effects of the Vietnam War on the individuals who experienced it. He also very astutely highlights the memories of dispossessed individuals who left their ancestral homelands in the wake of a war long before American involvement. In recent years, many individual accounts of the Vietnam War have been published, and the

war continues to make an appearance in modern film and television. Nguyen's account adds the needed balance: the information related to all sides involved. *Nothing Ever Dies*, while specific to the Vietnam War, holds truths about the history of commemoration and remembrance that are applicable to any war. As such, it belongs on the shelf of any student of military history, dispossessed peoples, and Trans-Pacific studies. Art enthusiasts will also get great value from this study, with its numerous representations of Southeast Asian art.