

‘Nothing ever dies’: memory and marginal children’s voices in Rwandan and Vietnamese narratives

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Abstract: Memory is a highly contested notion insofar as it is claimed by the collective (Halbwachs, Young) and deployed within a variety of political and socio-cultural contexts. For Viet Thanh Nguyen, the ‘true war story’ can be told by those who lived through it, thereby wresting power from ‘men and soldiers’ and dominant structures (*Nothing Ever Dies*, Harvard UP, 2017: 243). Examining the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, this article examines narratives which reclaim memory as a personal and as a collective plea to understand the structural discrepancy at play from the child, who is victim of war. It examines the memoir of a Tutsi refugee child, *Moi, le dernier Tutsi* (C. Habonimana, Plon Récit, 2019) and an autobiographical narrative by a Vietnamese refugee in Canada, *Ru* (K. Thúy, Liana Lévi, 2010), to gauge the extent to which such narratives create their own memorial spaces and in so doing reclaim their marginal memories and centre them, while grappling with the imperative to forget. Ultimately it tests Nguyen’s theory that memory can be just and that in this ethical recoding of memory, the humanity and inhumanity of both sides is underlined.

Keywords: Tutsi genocide, Vietnamese refugees, childhood narratives, war, memory, affect.

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Introduction

All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory.¹

Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*

Memory is a highly contested notion insofar as it is claimed by the collective and deployed within a variety of political and socio-cultural contexts.² Discussing the notion of postmemory,³ Viet Thanh Nguyen underlines the potential inwardness of the pain of memory and the subsequent agony that this causes for those who cannot deal with their past (2017: 268), which he seeks to eschew. For the writer critic, ‘total memory’ is impossible and memory has been commodified by those who wield power (2017: 4), as is the case of the Vietnam war, where memory is processed through the lens of the GIs and North America’s retelling of the war. Nguyen promulgates a recuperation of memory, which he terms ‘just memory’ as an ethical apparatus which empowers the reader to understand the humanity and inhumanity of both sides during the war (12).

According to Nguyen, ‘the problem of war and memory, is [...] first and foremost about how to remember the dead, who cannot speak for themselves’ (4). However, remembering is fraught since memories involve a complex ethical framing, which leads him to advocate for a:

complex ethics of memory, a just memory that strives both to remember one’s own and others, while at the same time drawing attention to the lifecycle of memories and their industrial production, how they are fashioned and forgotten, how they evolve and change. (12)

In this way, Nguyen gestures towards the dichotomy of remembering and forgetting as inherent to any study of memory. Studying memories of war, in this context, represents a ‘negotiation between remembering one’s own and remembering others [which] does not mean that competing memories can be reconciled, only that submitting to only one ethical memory at the exclusion of the other, will never suffice’ (18). It also involves understanding that the absence of memories is at stake where certain powers are able to control what is remembered and what is forgotten. For the writer, the ‘true war story’ (243) can be told by those who lived through it, thereby wresting power from ‘men and soldiers’ and dominant structures. Nonetheless, in so doing,

¹ Conversely, in his foreword to *The American War in Vietnam*, G. Kurt Piehler asserts that ‘many wars are forgotten despite the best efforts to preserve their memory’ (2017: x).

² See Halbwachs (1992) and Young (1993).

³ See Hirsch (1997).

those who write their own experiences of war and strife '[leave] one fraught territory to enter one nearly as perilous' (243).

In his introduction to *Memory and Postcolonial Studies*, Dirk Göttsche asserts that 'literary studies across languages have benefitted particularly from the new alliance between Memory Studies and Postcolonial Studies', insofar as literature creates a new poetics of memory (2019: 14–15). Writing personal experiences of war and the ways in which memories might be presented through different literary forms become a crucial aspect of discussing the dialectics of remembering and forgetting. It is from this point of view that I examine autobiographical narratives of two war refugee children from Rwanda (former Belgian colony) and Vietnam (former French colony and American ally) who grew up in Rwanda and Quebec, respectively, and through educational infrastructure, acquire the means and ability to speak of their experiences. I study narratives which reclaim memory as a personal and as a collective plea to understand the structural discrepancy at play from the child who is a victim of war. In particular, I examine a testimonial memoir by a Tutsi refugee child, *Moi, le dernier Tutsi* [I, The Last Tutsi] (Habonimana 2019) and an autobiographical narrative by a Vietnamese refugee in Canada, *Ru* (Thúy 2010) to gauge the extent to which such narratives create their own memorial spaces and in so doing reclaim their marginal memories and centre them. Ultimately, I test Nguyen's theory that memory can be 'just' and that in this ethical recoding of memory, the humanity and inhumanity of both sides is underlined.

Remembering Rwanda, reliving hell

While just memory might lead to an enlightened forgetting of the horrors and conflicts of the past, it can also lead to a tragic awareness of what is irreconcilable within ourselves and within those near and dear to us. When it comes to war, ethical memory illuminates how war neither emerges from alien territory nor is fought by monsters. War grows on intimate soil, nurtured by friends and neighbors, fought by sons, daughters, wives, and fathers. (Nguyen 2017: 18)

In his essay, Nguyen highlights the fact that wars are not always fought between strangers and governments. Indeed, Nguyen argues that war is deeply intimate insofar as it involves the people who are the closest to each other and this is fully instantiated in the Tutsi genocide of Rwanda in 1994.⁴ Termed a 'massive human

⁴See also Florence Prudhomme's *Cahiers de mémoire, Kigali, 2019* (Prudhomme & Muller 2019) wherein the philosopher discusses the need to hear from the victims first-hand as they recount the murderous intent of neighbours and sometimes even family members.

failure' (Berry & Berry 1995: 2), it is a series of events that, despite being 'so widely covered by the media', 'largely [remain] misunderstood by the international community' (Berry & Berry 1995: 4). Between April and July 1994, one of the most disastrous massacres of the 20th century took place as the Hutus purged the majority of the Tutsis in Rwanda. Charles Habonimana, a Tutsi, was twelve at the time, son to a cabaret owner and homemaker mother, and sibling to seven other children, of whom only one other survived the genocide. As the last remaining Tutsi child in his village, he was not only given the front seat to the assassination of Tutsis but also maintained alive so his body would be preserved for the Hutu children to know what a Tutsi looked like. He was to be the last to die (Habonimana 2019: 53). Taken hostage by Sebhuku, the regional Hutu chief whose edict it was that he be spared until no other Tutsi existed, he is enslaved, suffers from utmost violence, both verbal and physical, until he is eventually rescued by the Front Patriotique Rwandais (FPR) / Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). *Moi, le dernier Tutsi* is an account of his memories of those three months, as well as his reflections on the aftermath of the genocide and the role of his own memories in paying tribute to those who died during the war, including his parents and siblings. In this section, I discuss the ways in which Habonimana (aided by his co-writer Daniel Le Scornet) constructs his narration to recreate those events and allow the reader to live through his experiences with him as living memory in the present rather than as a series of events which remain in the past.

In an insightful essay on the language of killing and suffering as related to the atrocities perpetrated in Rwanda, Christopher Davis argues that the term 'genocide' '[conjoins] personal and collective suffering to a catch-all moniker that does justice to neither' (2019: 396). Habonimana's narration goes a long way in combining both a personal narrative of events and the historical narrative, as he provides a detailed overview of the timeline and events as they unfold. From the very title of the memoir, the use of the tonic pronoun 'moi' shifts the focus to the boy's experiences. The definite article 'le / the' reinforces the uniqueness of his position as he is paraded in front of the Hutus. Equally the text is carefully constructed so that the narration is urgent, and this is reflected in the syntax and through the opening and closing sentences of each chapter. Indeed, Habonimana's narration begins with a shocking juxtaposition of childhood and death: 'Je m'appelle Charles, j'ai 12 ans et je vais mourir / My name is Charles, I am 12 and I am about to die' (9). Childhood is deemed to be the antithesis to death here since the latter should, under normal circumstances, occur in old age. The violence of the first sentence and the despair it underlines are exacerbated by the fact that people with whom he and his family have lived and interacted are now demanding that their blood be shed: 'des centaines de visages connus, voisins et amis d'hier, accourus pour assister aux exécutions comme on va à une fête de famille. Ils veulent voir. Ils doivent voir / hundreds of known faces, neighbours and friends of

yesterday, running to witness the executions as one would a family party. They want to see. They must see' (9). As Nguyen has outlined, the intimacy of war is evoked here as friends become foes and sing for their entire clan's death. The speed at which such a reversal occurs belies the so-called friendship that was shared.

The horror of the betrayal is reinforced by the Christian imagery of Jesus Christ's road to Calvary.⁵ Indeed, the chapter itself is called 'Calvary' and the hill on which all the Tutsis are assassinated is renamed road to Calvary, in an ironic reinterpretation of the New Testament. While Christ may have died to save humanity, here humans kill other humans to prove their superiority, thus invalidating the premise of the Biblical sacrifice, and delegitimising the Hutus' quest. The Catholic priest, a legacy from the missionary work in Rwanda, is crucified like Christ (10), and his last moments are likened to Christ's 'Passion' (11). In front of the young boy, his friends from football watch the massacre unfold in front of their voyeur eyes. Their eyes register their interest and their investment in the bloodshed even as their friends are rapidly butchered before them. The Hutu enemies acquire the characteristics of hunters as the semantic and lexical fields of hunting and butchery are deployed: 'la chasse / the hunt', 'les captures / the captures' (11), and his father is killed 'comme un animal à l'abattoir / like an animal at the slaughterhouse' (12). The Tutsis are dehumanised so that it becomes easier for their killers to think of them as prey. For Charles, this means that he is living through the last vestiges of his humanity as he is asked to witness before also being reduced to mere flesh. Witnessing is here a form of torture and not a way to remember. The Hutus will only remember their own victories over the Tutsis and choose to forget their own inhuman actions. The circularity of the first chapter as it ends on the emphatic and repeated 'J'ai 12 ans et je vais mourir / I am 12 and I am about to die' (12) brings to bear the immediacy as well as the imminence of death for the boy. Later he comes back to this scene, depicted through short emphatic sentences as they reveal the shock of the child as it is etched in his memory:

Fidel est mort.

Papa gît à mes pieds.

J'ai 12 ans et je viens d'assister à la mise à mort de mes deux héros.

(Fidel is dead.

Father lies at my feet.

I am twelve and I have just witnessed the assassination of my two heroes.) (52)

⁵According to the New Testament, Jesus is tasked with carrying his own cross on the way to Golgotha, where he will be crucified. Along the way, he falters and falls a number of times and meets several people, including his mother and his apostles.

For Nguyen, part of the ethics of memory is ‘reminding ourselves that being human also means being inhuman’ (Nguyen 2017: 72). The Hutus in this narrative are depicted both pre-genocide and post-genocide to highlight the drastic changes in their demeanour. Thus, setting his story through a time-stamped historical rendition, the narrator informs us that on 6 April 1994, at approximately eight in the evening, a ‘tsunami de violence / tsunami of violence’ erupts in the country (Habonimana 2019: 13), as overnight the Hutus became the enemies. He depicts the time pre-genocide in his village as peaceful: ‘au village Hutu, Tutsi, Twa vivent en harmonie. [...] Il n’y a ni apartheid ni ghetto. Les mariages entre Tutsi et Hutu sont nombreux / in the village, Hutu/Tutsi and Twa live in harmony. [...] There is neither apartheid nor a ghetto. There are many marriages between the Hutu and Tutsi’ (14). Nonetheless, he acquiesces that there were multiple instances in the past where the Tutsis had been in danger (1959, 1962, 1973), thereby testifying to the fragility of the peace which is taken for granted by the children since they have not lived through these trying times. In reality, the fact that the parents and heads of family have a contingency plan for such eventualities speaks to a recurrent event, which reached its apogee in 1994. Indeed, the Tutsi families retreat to a form of refugee camp where they believe they will be safe, since it is where they sought refuge in the previous skirmishes, while others are massacred across the country in a concerted effort by several Hutu factions. We are informed that refugees from the previous strife against Tutsis were already in neighbouring countries, even if, for the child, the different groups had lived in relative harmony in recent decades.

In an interview with Mehdi Ba of *Jeune Afrique*, Habonimana explains that: ‘Les événements que j’ai vécus pendant ces trois mois sont restés imprimés. Je n’ai oublié ni les bruits, ni les mots, ni les images du génocide des Tutsi. Mon récit porte surtout sur les événements du mois d’avril 1994, ceux que j’ai le mieux mémorisés / The events that I experienced during these three months are imprinted in my memory. I have not forgotten the sounds, the words, nor the images of the genocide of the Tutsis. My text focuses particularly on the events which took place in April 1994, those that I recollect the most’.⁶ Indeed, most of the narration focuses on that initial month as the child looks on in horror as Tutsi houses are burnt in their village. He also watches, as much a voyeur as his former football teammates, as his personal cow is savagely mutilated ‘malgré l’horreur, je suis incapable de détourner mon regard de cette scène dantesque / in spite of the horror, I am unable to avert my gaze from this Dantesque scene’ (35). The reference to Dante stresses the hellish scenes of torture and senseless killings, which is compounded with the disgust of unknowingly being fed the meat from his own butchered cow by someone whom they consider a family friend (42). However, he

⁶Mehdi Ba (2019).

is blissfully unaware of this fact as he feasts on the flesh of his beloved cow and is only told the truth much later. The inhumanity of the Hutus is emphasised here as they become both butchers and cattle themselves in the narration: 'une dizaine de bouchers qui chassent en meute / ten or so butchers who hunt as a herd' (49). Moreover, the narrator refers to himself as 'gibier / prey' (66) and the appalling reality of children being murderers is associated with the same imagery 'des enfants ont participé à la chasse à l'homme, ont tué, ont torturé / children participated in the man hunt, they killed, they tortured' (134). Indeed, when the Hutus are bloodthirsty and Sebhuku threatens to kill him, it is a child, like him, who displays the most urgency to end his life: 'un gamin excité s'approche de moi [...] décidé à me tuer illico / a young boy approaches [...] deciding to kill me right then' (98). Thus, in this narrative, inhumanity is not only exhibited by the adults who are bent on ethnic cleansing but also children who mirror their elders' gestures and feelings. Children, far from symbolising innocence, are on a par with the adults, thereby explaining the fact that they, too, are judged by the village councils later.

The notion of inhumanity is also deployed with regard to those who animalise others to deny the humanity of those they kill: 'toujours lorsque les humains veulent exterminer, ils bestialisent leur proie / when humans want to kill, they always animalise their prey' (74). According to Frantz Fanon in *Les damnés de la terre / The Wretched of the Earth* (1961, rep. 2002), colonial powers employed the same principle when they enslaved colonial others.⁷ Through the use of what Fanon terms the 'langage zoologique / zoological language' (2002: 45), they reduced those they colonised to the status of animals so that they did not feel they are mistreating human beings. The Tutsi genocide was not effected on people of different 'races'. Here, Habonimana highlights the fact that it was a 'racisme sans race / racism without race' which they faced (2019: 130), wherein Sebhuku is regaled with stories of 'une journée de chasse aux Tutsi bien remplie / a full day of Tutsi hunting' (69). The child witnesses these gory tales as he has by now become the leader's slave (88) and is privy to this 'litanie des morts / litany of the dead' on a daily basis (89). From this point of view, Habonimana underlines the fact that the Hutus were as culpable of enslaving and degrading other humans as the former colonisers of Rwanda. In fact, the narrator reinforces the fact that hierarchies existed before colonisation, but they were principally along territorial lines. Colonial powers fragmented the society further by encouraging the opposition between Hutus and Tutsis as both ethnic communities vied for power under colonialism (90). Habonimana decries the fact that Europeans did not heed the warning signs of an

⁷On another note, in his introduction to his edited volume *Memory and Postcolonial Studies* (2019), Dirk Göttsche underlines the fact that 'Postcolonial discourse uses memory—both individual and collective—to promote critical knowledge of the history of colonialism' (1).

impending massacre and left it too late before they intervened, so that the FPR soldiers were the only means of salvation as the Tutsis were decimated.⁸ The genocide of 1994 was also not the final battle as skirmishes and attacks occurred again in 1997 and 1998 as the narrator points out (123), testifying to the tenuousness of peace.

Throughout the memoir, the narrator alternates between a historical analysis and a personal portrayal of events as he has experienced them. Writing about telling such a story, Habonimana reveals that it is impossible to relate these events: ‘Comment raconter [...]? Je ne peux pas raconter / How to tell [...]? I can’t tell’ (64–5). Yet, tell he must, for history will remember the general events, forgetting the particular events, while he will remember the individuals who were brutally assassinated in front of his young eyes. Thus, it is with pathos that he depicts the Catholic convert, Vincent, who prays for the perpetrators and the victims alike even as he is dying (83). Equally the horror of putrefaction as the bodies decompose on the hill and have to be buried in mass graves is related in detail (92). Later, the entombment of women and children, including his own mother and siblings as they sing passages from the Bible to ask for forgiveness for their killers is portrayed with anguish and gravitas (94–5). This poignant episode, as he loses his mother and siblings, is also contrasted to the singing of the killers as they ask for the narrator’s death (97). Nonetheless, the Hutus are not all assassins, as Sebhuku’s wife, Francine, and Sebhuku’s parents give him refuge and protect him when others hunt him. In fact, Sebhuku himself, in spite of his role as head of the Hutu killers, in many ways protects Habonimana and allows him to live on several occasions, even as the horde clamours for his immediate assassination. In this way, the narrator does see the humanity of the Hutus who spare him and enable him to escape.

Through his survival, Charles inadvertently becomes the repository of memories inasmuch as he is the only one who has heard the list of all those who were killed since he was serving Sebhuku when the killers reported their day’s work: ‘moi seul connais le registre complet des assassinats dans mon village / only I know the complete register of all the assassinations in my village’ (119). Habonimana informs us that ‘la mémoire d’un gamin de 12 ans est redoutable / a 12-year old boy’s memory is formidable’ (132). For the survivor, in time the massacre and its history will be properly written and for now, only those like him, who lived through these events and the bare life of survival,

⁸ In March 2021, the Commission Duclert, which investigated the role of France in the genocide against Tutsis in Rwanda twenty-seven years after the event, confirmed that France gave its support to the génocidaires (the people conducting the genocide) rather than the victims, both before and during the massacre. The report concludes that France had a ‘responsabilité accablante / overwhelming responsibility’ based on a ‘faillite d’analyse / failure of analysis’ and the decision makers as being blinded to the facts. The report has been accused of being edulcorated given that it concludes that France was not expressly complicit in the genocide itself. (See Survie 2021.)

can attest to the events they witnessed.⁹ It is due to this formidable memory that his services are called upon in assisting the village justice system in imprisoning the man who killed his father and raped his mother (135). Redress and punishment for those who acted against the Tutsis is of fundamental importance so that justice is obtained for those who perished.

Towards the end of the text, Habonimana pivots the narrative to address his deceased family and acquaintances and reveals that his writing is commemorative as it speaks for the dead: 'ce n'est pas mon parcours, mon odyssee, ce sont les vôtres, c'est pourquoi il faut ma parole / it is not my journey, my odyssey, it is yours, that is why my words are necessary' (144). And, indeed, he goes as far as describing his children as representing those who passed away during the genocide, in a form of genealogical continuity (144). In an unpublished exchange, Habonimana tells me that 'd'abord le but était de rendre hommage aux disparus puis raconter ce qui est arrivé, sauvegarder leur mémoire / in the first place, the aim was to pay tribute to those who died, then tell the story of the events, treasure their memory' (personal communication (pc) 2020). As Marie-Odile Godard states, texts such as Habonimana's are 'marqueurs de mémoires / markers of memory', insofar as they enable the authors to write about their past and also 's'adresser aux disparus, pour leur dire la douleur du manque / to speak to the dead, to tell them of the pain of missing them' (in Prudhomme & Muller 2014: 261). Nevertheless, more than a tribute, the book is also Habonimana's way of writing the 'inoubliable / unforgettable' (2019: 162), in a manuscript he tells me it took him fifteen years to write. Writing in his case becomes a way of coming to terms with a past which is always present: 'c'est toujours ma vie / it's still my life' (pc 2020). For Habonimana, writing this memoir was intended as a means of 'dégager tout ce qui m'empêchait [*sic*] de poursuivre ma vie au futur / getting rid of whatever was stopping me from living for the future' (pc 2020). It is also an acknowledgement that history might repeat itself and if so, 's'il m'arrive quelque chose, le monde sera au courant de mon enfance perdue [*sic*] / if something happens to me, the world will know of my lost childhood' (pc 2020).

Thus, writing childhood memories of war is both cathartic and horrific as the writer is forced to face his fears and trauma, as delineated by Nguyen. The path to piecing together memories of war is fraught and while those who must be remembered live again through the narrative, it also conjures up memories of those who committed atrocious acts. While Habonimana sought refuge within Rwanda and with those he knew, others, such as the Vietnamese refugees, were not always able to do so, and their memories of their country and the war, are tempered by language and identity issues.

⁹Olivier Nyirubugara (2013) warns of the dangers of remembering and forgetting in Rwanda as it is also the memory of the violence perpetrated against Hutus by Tutsis which fuelled their wrath during the genocide.

The Vietnam within

Though most people know the Vietnam war through the lens of American theatre, novels, and film performances, such as *Miss Saigon* (initially performed onstage in 1989), *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *The Quiet American* (novel by Graham Greene 1955, film 2002), the region had suffered from different power struggles, from the French colonisation, to the Japanese invasion, to the French again in the aftermath of the Second World War. The Communist takeover of North Vietnam plunged the country into further chaos in the 1950s and culminated in the fall of Saigon in April 1975, with the repatriation of Americans and some of the Vietnamese allies. The American defeat in Vietnam is deemed to be a ‘thorn in the side’ of political powers (Pelaud 2010: 20). Popular retellings of the war have tended to favour the American perspective, eliding the role played by the South Vietnamese as American allies and creating a sense of malaise in the Vietnamese themselves. For those who have been displaced due to the war and have elected to live in North America, ‘acknowledging that they [the Vietnamese who died in South Vietnam] are worthy of remembrance’ (Espiritu 2016: 19), is as important as the American’s commemoration of their own soldiers.¹⁰ While the USA seems to only want to remember the Vietnam War as the US soldiers fighting against the Viet Cong (Communists), creating their version of good against evil, they should not forget the role played by the ARVN (South Vietnam) soldiers who fought alongside them, some of whom were later granted asylum in the USA. Thus, there is an ‘urgent need for the Vietnamese refugee story to be told from multiple vantage points in the face of traumatic silencing, both for North American and international audiences’ (James 2016: 46). From this perspective, Hao Pham argues that writing about the war and the singular experiences from the vantage points of the Vietnamese ‘becomes a political act, in representing an alternative voice to the mainstream’ (Pham 2013: 18). For Pham, this process, which he calls ‘counter-memory’, ‘goes against the mainstream dominant memories of an event’ (19). For others, like Nathalie Huyh Chau Nguyen, ‘the reappropriation of the past may reveal traumatic experience and devastating loss ... but also be regenerative’ (N. Nguyen 2010: 7). It is from this perspective that I focus on Thúy’s first novel, *Ru*, which not only won the Governor’s Prize in Quebec (2010), the RTL Prize (2010), and the Canada Reads prize (2010), but also the hearts of many people in Canada and around the world through her depiction of life in Saigon, the refugee experiences in Malaysia, and integration in Quebec. I examine the ways in which the protagonist reconstructs

¹⁰ See also Karin Agilar-San Juan’s argument that ‘that view is a partial, distorted, and exclusive rendition of history that does much more to shape a U.S. national identity than it does to illuminate the complexity of the Vietnamese American experience’ (Aguilar-San Juan 2009: 62).

her childhood memories and reinscribes the fallen Vietnamese into the folds of collective history.

According to Donna Bailey Nurse, the text is 'Thúy's lightly fictionalized account of her own experience'.¹¹ Indeed, Thúy left Vietnam with her family in the 1980s, at the age of ten. As part of the boat people,¹² they travelled to Malaysian refugee camps and later were welcomed into Quebec. Like the writer, An Tinh Nguyen, the protagonist of *Ru*, hails from a well-to-do family in Saigon and falls into precarity in refugee camps. She becomes a child 'whom war transforms into a dispossessed and displaced individual' (Sing 2016: 181). From the inception, the narrator places her birth within history: 'Je suis venue au monde pendant l'offensive du Têt / I was born during the Têt offensive' (Thúy 2010: 11), thereby underlining the links between personal and the collective history as the event heralded the fall of Saigon. Thus, the narrative itself is carefully constructed in such a way as her present, as the mother of two sons Pascal and Henri, is imbricated in her past life in Saigon, during the occupation and in the refugee camps. This is effected through the way in which the narrative adopts a see-saw movement as memories are recollected with each anecdotal account.¹³ In a form of what Jenny James terms 'bricolage', that is, a 'textual process where stories graft onto one another' (James 2016: 44–5), Thúy foregrounds 'adaptation and repair' (42), as Vietnamese families scramble to piece together a new life in Quebec, while maintaining links with the past.

The commingling of History and personal histories evokes Espiritu and Pham's notion of counter-memory, while here allowing the known History to carry the narrative as the multiple stories of the Vietnamese who lost their lives are foregrounded, saving them from the abyss of forgetting. In an early part of the text, the Vietnam war is recounted through the stories of the people who died on the way to relative safety in the Malaysian refugee camps. One of the bare lives on which she focuses her initial forays into the recesses of her memory is that of the mother who is rocking her scabies-infested child in the boat in which they are travelling, a memory which is conjured up by her own admission to not having experienced maternal feelings at first when her children were born. The present and memories of past events become interconnected in this narrative as she fashions a complex retelling of the refugee experience. Another memory, this time related to the boat and the other innocent people trying to survive, is that of the little girl who was 'engloutie par la mer / was devoured by the sea' (2010: 16), and whose memento was her footwear left behind as she slips and falls without anyone knowing. The fear of the Communists is compounded

¹¹ Donna Bailey Nurse (2018).

¹² For a detailed account of the boat people see Barbara Vaillant (2013).

¹³ See Buss (2018).

with the fear of the pirates who are attacking the boats and raping girls and women. Rather than the deaths of soldiers, here the atrocities experienced by individuals who are outside the power struggles between the Americans, the South Vietnamese soldiers, and the Communist soldiers are retold to highlight the countless other lives which were lost during this period, lest we forget that they, too, died in the name of the war.

But memories of Vietnam itself and the experience of occupation come later, with the family ceding half of their house to the Communist army. Thúy's narrator's evocations of this period is sensitive and cognisant of the naiveté of some of the Communists themselves, especially the young ones who are following orders. The 'jeune inspecteur encore enfant / young inspector, still a child', who is tasked with occupying her family's house and ensuring their possessions are at par with the other households', is portrayed with humanity as he thought he was saving South Vietnam from the Americans (2010: 58). As with Nguyen, Thúy acknowledges the humanity of the other by depicting the other side of the coin. In emphasising the brainwashing of the Communist Northerners, she brings to bear the humanity that links both the Communist soldiers and the narrator's family as they bond, even though this is quickly ruptured by orders from above to destroy the very cultural material such as music and books, which had united them (60). The subsequent realisation that the family should leave Saigon and travel towards freedom from the Communist regime further disrupts the incipient cordial relationship. Nonetheless, Thúy carefully navigates this by homing in on the fact that this inspector, along with many others, were also victims of the war, and their fate remains unknown. Remembering the war, involves not only remembering the negative, but also not forgetting the positive aspects of the enemy, even if it is a difficult prospect, as Nguyen reminds us.

Moreover, the narrator's memories of arrival in and adaptation to Quebec, their new society, are also lived in a range of ways. Invoking maternal imagery, the narrator depicts her first teacher as a 'maman cane / mother goose' keeping her offspring in line and looking after their well-being (2010: 24). Granby, the town in which they first settle, is portrayed as a roosting chicken which keeps its hatchlings warm (43), and later, as the biblical 'paradis terrestre / earthly paradise' (49). The host country is contrasted to the hell of the boats inside which they travelled when they left Vietnam, and the red earth on which they slept in the Malaysian refugee camps (32). These personal recollections allude to a happy integration process, so much that Thúy herself has been hailed as the poster child of refugee integration and success.¹⁴ Nonetheless, within the narrative, Thúy does not gloss over the difficulties presented by a society whose language the child does not speak. According to Sing, 'at the time, Vietnam had two native languages, and the speakers of one were unfamiliar with the idiom of

¹⁴See V.T. Nguyen (2013).

the other' (2016: 184). Since the narrator was born after the departure of the French, her native language is Vietnamese. Conversely, her parents have a good grasp of French, which allows them to find work easily. For An Tinh, navigating her way during her initial days in Quebec is problematic both because she is a quiet child and due to her lack of linguistic skills. Viet Thanh Nguyen reminds us that 'The immigrant, the refugee, the exile, and the stranger who comes to these new shores may already have a voice, but usually it speaks in a different language than the American lingua franca, English' (V.T. Nguyen 2017: 198). Of course, he refers to his own particular circumstances in the USA, but the narrator of *Ru*, also underlines this particular hurdle: 'j'étais étourdie par tous ces sons étrangers qui nous accueillait / all those strange sounds that welcomed us made me dizzy' (2010: 22). Moreover, since Quebec is part of Canada, where English is also spoken, the narrator must also grapple with English. The narrative stresses the problems of being a Vietnamese refugee through the recollection that when her mother forces her hand by sending her to an Anglophone cadet camp, she experiences bullying (39). Thus, even Quebec's welcome is mitigated by the circumstances of the person who arrives. The memories of good and bad experiences are woven together to allow for a balanced depiction here.

This dichotomous portrayal of the positive and negative impacts of displacement is taken further as the narrator returns to Vietnam on assignment for work. The allegorical deployment of stories to underline the rupture between siblings and North and South Vietnam (2010: 64–6) is correlated to the stories of her sons Pascal and Henri and the ways in which they have learnt to live together in peace, despite Henri's autism. Vietnam is also where An Tinh realises that she has become Canadian, through the eyes of the Vietnamese waiter who does not believe she is Vietnamese as she is too self-assured and has become too 'American'. She had lost the Vietnamese people's 'fragilité, leur incertitude, leurs peurs / fragility, their uncertainty and their fears' (2010: 127). Though she still considers herself to be Vietnamese at the time, such reflections augur a form of hybrid identity, which she claims as she recognises her ability to be both Canadian and Vietnamese. In spite of the nationalist rhetoric which only considers white Caucasians as Canadian, she chooses both countries even if they each reject her in her alterity. These episodes also lead to memories of another hybrid entity, emblematised by the children of Vietnamese prostitutes and American GIs, whom she calls 'la face cachée de la guerre / the hidden face of war' (132). While some have been able to take advantage of the US's repatriation programme, others have not been able to do so and live in limbo between two worlds and two identities. In inscribing such stories, Thúy reminds us that there are many facets to a war and to survival. While History may choose to forget individuals who belong nowhere, or perhaps in both countries simultaneously through their birth right, personal history involves permanent re-negotiations of such complex identification processes.

The narrator herself returns to Canada and through her partner and her children, re-anchors herself in Quebec, ending her narrative on a message of hope for the future.

Conclusion: the poetics of ‘just memory’?

As she draws her narration to a close, An Tinh reiterates the need to understand that her children’s future is connected to the ‘personnages de son passé / characters from her past’, who have ‘secoué la crasse accumulée sur leur dos / shaken the dirt accumulated on their backs’ to reveal beautiful feathers which adorn her sons’ sky (2010: 213). For Thúy’s narrator, ‘un horizon en cache toujours un autre et [...] il en est ainsi jusqu’à l’infini / a horizon hides another one [...] and it will always be so infinitely’ (213). Through her poetic words, she reinforces the notion that there are many layers to every story and history. For Thúy, through telling stories and evoking such memories, both the personal and the collective are braided together so that the next generations can understand and mourn. But it is important to remember that memories are also fallible and forgetting can be part of the process of survival. Throughout her narrative, Thúy has underlined the dualities at play. In many ways, she lends credence to Nguyen’s premise that ‘only through forgiveness of the pure kind, extended to others and ourselves, can we actually have a just forgetting and a hope for a new kind of story where we do not turn to the unjust past’ (V.T. Nguyen 2017: 292).

Similarly, Habonimana’s text ends on the notion of forgiveness. For a nation to repair its rifts, the national discourse is, as his eloquent chapter title asserts, ‘Pardon et réconciliation / Forgiveness and Reconciliation’ (2019: 138). Inscripting the aftermath of the Tutsi genocide of Rwanda through historical events mapped out with dates, Habonimana identifies the 2014 Commemoration of the genocide as instrumental in thinking about a common future for the people (139). Nonetheless, as Nicki Hitchcott suggests, ‘the Rwandan government’s campaign for reconciliation has generated a national discourse of forgiveness and forgetting, which leaves genocide survivors in a difficult place, torn between the (often involuntary) impulse to remember and the duty to forget’ (2013: 76). Though Hitchcott conceives of forgetting as a duty, there is also a measure where forgiveness itself can only occur if contrition is true and amends are made. Yet how can survivors like Habonimana forget such traumatic experiences? Although moving on might aid with forgiveness and reparation, it is difficult for those who were witnesses not to remain afraid that such events might recur. When asked whether he still fears another genocide, Habonimana admits, he is always afraid, and that is why he wrote this memoir, so that people will know what has

happened to him (pc 2020). The duty here is also to remember so that others may be aware of how quickly life can change.

Thus, both texts speak to the importance of considering the individuals' memories alongside collective History. Marginal voices provide insight into the everyday of war and strife. Through their remembrances of their past, readers find a cautionary tale of what could be if nations are rent apart from the inside, and when people who look like them reject them due to ethnic or political ideologies. In inscribing their experiences, the poetics of memory allows them to correlate justice, the beauty of writing, and constructing a narrative which belongs to them and to those who passed away.

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Films and play

- Apocalypse Now* (1979), Dir. Francis Ford Coppola (American Zoetrope).
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To cite the article: Ashwiny O. Kistnareddy (2021), "'Nothing ever dies': memory and marginal children's voices in Rwandan and Vietnamese narratives", *Journal of the British Academy*, 9(s3): 157–172.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/009s3.157>