

# Review of Memory is Another Country

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Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora*

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Reviewed by Laura Chiro.

In his memoir *Perfume Dreams*, Vietnamese-American writer Andrew Lam recalls his initial impressions of the United States as an eleven year old refugee. The son of a general in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam who fled Saigon with his parents in 1975, Lam wondered at the insularity of his American classmates' lives. He remembers thinking, "There were times... when I was very envious of you. History happened to others on TV and you—you who grew up where everyone else wanted to live—could always change the channel. Other times I felt sorry for you. Your immunity from history robs you of the awe and appreciation of seeing how its powerful flow and surge can change everyone, near or far" (1). In twentieth-century Vietnam, as in wartime Europe and other societies rent by war, nobody was immune to the powerful flow and surge of history, which seared people's private lives.

In *Memory is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora*, Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen tells the stories of dozens of Vietnamese women in Australia whose lives were shaped by war, revolution and exodus. Nguyen's narrators discuss their childhoods, families, marriages, careers, losses and refugee experiences.

The book's haunting postwar images are familiar in the literature of the Vietnamese diaspora: "re-education" expected to last ten days but stretching into a nightmare of months and years; entire families drowning at sea; the corrosive effects of forced exile on family life; and the ever present yearning for an irrevocably lost homeland.

What makes this book remarkable is the number of stories that it collects—the author interviewed forty-two women over the course of a three year oral history project—and its focus on women. Despite the abundant documentation of the Vietnamese refugee experience, Nguyen points out, narratives from the women of South Vietnam are largely absent from the record. Cultural constraints, the pressure to provide for their families in countries of resettlement, the lack of public fora, and the impulse to bury past sorrows under silence are all factors that have kept women from telling their stories.

Nguyen sets out to remedy this absence, in detail and with compassion. She organizes her narrators' stories into thematic chapters on loss, sisterhood, female soldiers, war, marriage to foreigners and return to Vietnam. Each chapter highlights between two and four women. Nguyen lets her narrators—identified only by first name—speak for themselves, using long, uninterrupted blocks of quotation. Their narratives are bracketed by Nguyen's commentary on historical contexts and common themes, and overlaid with theories of trauma and memory. The theoretical aspect of the book focuses on the construction of memory after traumatic experiences, and the emotional, cultural and gendered aspects of making memory. Against this background, the book's title takes on two meanings: memory is another country, the lost homeland of South Vietnam, but memory is also a country in itself, where the

“memoryscape” is peopled with living and dead relatives and contoured with villages and city boulevards frozen in the past.

The most compelling aspect of *Memory Is Another Country* is the stories themselves, which form a collage of images of wartime and postwar Vietnam, viewed from the refugee-narrators’ perspective. A nanny remembers seeing children die by the side of a road in the North during the 1945 famine. A former diplomat in South Vietnam’s foreign service falls in love with an Englishman while posted in Europe. A singer performs in nightclubs in the South with the famous Khánh Ly. A southern provincial cinema is bombed by “the Viet Cong” during the screening of a Japanese action film in 1972. A Catholic girl and her family flee south from Thanh Hóa in 1954, paying off Viet Minh cadres along the way, and are greeted by representatives of the International Rescue Committee in Saigon. Another narrator is sheltered during her flight south by her uncle Phan Huy Quát, a State of Vietnam minister of defense who would later serve briefly as prime minister of the Republic of Vietnam. A daughter of Vietnamese colonial administrators leads a privileged, cosmopolitan life in the Phnom Penh of the 1950s and 1960s; her aunt, married to a cousin of Norodom Sihanouk, is later executed by the Khmer Rouge. Before escaping Vietnam by boat, another woman obsessively studies the English names for 200 types of diseases, in case she falls ill while abroad. An overseas Vietnamese returns to her birthplace in Nghệ An in the 1990s to learn that her mother, a benevolent landlord who provided meals for peasants during the 1945 famine, had been denounced during the land reform campaign by those very same peasants.

A set of particularly evocative stories emerges from Nguyen’s narrators’ memories of South Vietnamese society. The women remember a cosmopolitan Republic of Vietnam that accords with Hue-Tam Ho Tai’s observation: “In both the nostalgic recollections of disaffected southerners and the wishful projections of envious northerners, this pre-1975 South is not marked by war, chaos or corruption, but represents an era of abundant consumer goods and relative freedom” (2). These women came of age in the 1950s and 1960s, many as members of prosperous urban families, and they remember the South as a place where young women could pursue their intellectual and professional dreams—dreams which were, of course, quashed with the end of the war. One woman studies medicine and hopes to become a hospital director, inspired by her father who is a prominent acupuncturist and South Vietnamese official. In 1975 she is ejected from university because of her family’s political background. A second woman is in her final year of law school at the University of Saigon when the war ends and the new government shuts down the university. The sharp rupture of April 1975 accentuates the women’s nostalgia for pre-socialist years.

Particularly poignant is the reminiscence of the daughter of booksellers in Biên Hòa who recalls that before 1975, “I read Tolstoy, Romain Rolland, Balzac, Thomas Hardy, I read all the Western writers before I read any Vietnamese books” (p. 16). Her parents’ bookstore and books are destroyed in the postwar campaign against decadent literature:

After 1975, all the books were confiscated and taken away by the government, including all the textbooks of biology, mathematics, physics, chemistry, all the dictionaries and you know things that are not ideological . . . [I]n order to create a fair society, a socialist society, individuals had to make sacrifices so my father’s bookshops happened to be in the pathway of history, and history had just crushed my father’s business in order to make everyone enlightened. (p. 21)

The narrators who do try to accommodate themselves to life in a communist society find themselves unable to do so. The daughter of an ethnic Chinese woman in Buôn Ma Thuột joins a youth singing troupe after the end of the war. She is shunned and called *bộ đội* (the term for communist soldiers) by her old friends, but as tensions flare along the northern border she is compelled to sing anti-Chinese songs and must also endure ethnic slurs from fellow members of the troupe. Another narrator remembers having constant headaches from the incessant blaring of the ubiquitous public loudspeakers that became hallmarks of life after April 1975.

The book's most interesting historical contribution comes in its third chapter, which chronicles women's participation in the armed services of South Vietnam. The Women's Armed Forces Corps (WAFC) originated in the 1950s as an auxiliary corps. By 1975 it consisted of 6,000 women serving in non-combat positions (mostly as nurses). Nguyen argues that, while women's contribution to the war in the North has been amply recorded, the contribution of women to the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces and the southern war effort has gone largely unrecognized. (One reason is the imbalance in numbers: 60,000 women may have served in the war-time People's Army of Vietnam.) She interviews four former servicewomen, women who saw service as a route to adventure, independence, and better social status for their families. One woman, Thuy, was a 1954 migrant to the South who joined the WAFC parachute unit, "to hasten the possibility of returning to North Vietnam" (p. 63). Another, Quy, was a student at Saigon's prestigious Gia Long High School who joined after a Viet Minh cadre threatened to denounce her family in revenge for her refusal to marry him. (Quy's family later received news that the cadre died in battle.) The women's patriotism is on full display: one narrator says, "I was in the armed forces and I know that our army fought bravely and tenaciously. They were not lukewarm in their fighting" (p. 84).

At the war's end, all four of Nguyen's female veterans were sent to re-education camps. Women who had served in the armed forces and civil service of the Republic of Vietnam, as well as those caught attempting to flee the newly reunified country, could be arrested. Yet there is no re-education memoir published in English or French and written by a woman to accompany the numerous male accounts. One of the narrators was pregnant during her three months of internment. Another describes writing interminable self-criticisms, terrified each time that she would slip and write an inconsistent detail. Lest we think, though, that things were simple, a third narrator describes the humane treatment that prisoners at her camp received from the camp's sympathetic (and southern) female director. Chapter 3 ends with a moving description of contemporary women's veterans' associations, the most invisible and forgotten branch of an already forgotten and much maligned armed force, organizing marches and charity drives in California to aid ailing female veterans in Vietnam.

Decisions about the organization of narrative material are crucial to a collection like this one. Nguyen does not make clear why she chose the particular chapter themes that she did, which overlap somewhat (for example, "war" and "loss" run throughout every story). Nor does she explain why only half of the 42 women interviewed are featured in the book.

A question never addressed in *Memory Is Another Country* is the ways in which the memories of women who came of age in the Republic of Vietnam and *stayed* in Vietnam differ from those who left. Would women who did not endure the bitter refugee experience have the same nostalgia for South Vietnam, and for the same reasons? Quite possibly—wistfulness for the intellectual and social freedoms of pre-1975 Saigon is evident even today in conversations with older people in Ho Chi Minh City. But the Vietnamese diaspora is not the sole repository

of memories of South Vietnam, and there is a growing (though still restricted) space in contemporary Vietnam for discussion of pre-1975 South Vietnamese society. Some comparison of memory in the diaspora and in contemporary Vietnam might augment the book's narrative.

As it is, however, Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen's recording of the stories of this aging generation is extremely valuable. She tells us that the act of remembering, and of documenting memory, is redemptive. The ultimate purpose of her book is not to substantiate or dispute historical facts, but to honor the memories, and thereby the lives and losses, of women of the Vietnamese diaspora.

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1. Andrew Lam, *Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2005), p. 43.

2. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), p. 182.

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