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On Remembering One's Own

DRIVE ALONG THE HIGHWAYS of Vietnam for any extended distance and you may notice, if you are looking for them, the cemeteries abutting the roads. Marking each one is an obelisk, a monument, or a sculpture, usually of a trio of heroes, sometimes including a heroine, tall enough to be visible from a distance. Draw closer and you will see a stone stela, engraved with the names of the dead. Every town and village has its own necropolis, devoted to the martyrs who died in the twentieth-century wars to unify and liberate the country. These burial grounds exist in America, too, and perhaps if I drove its freeways and thoroughfares looking for them, I would see them and think that America was preoccupied with its sacrificed warriors. This seemed the case in Vietnam, but possibly only because I had tasked myself with looking for these cities of the dead, traveling to find them by motorbike, bus, train, and private car. These cemeteries impact the geography in a way that would not be possible in the United States, for while the country is smaller than California and larger than New Mexico, there were more than a million dead to account for, if you counted only those who fought for the winning side. These dead victors inhabited every neighborhood,

their resting places constituting the most visible and brooding reminders in this country of the ethics of remembering one's own.

Among these graveyards, the most spectacular is the Truong Son Martyrs Cemetery. I think of it as the capital of the dead, a place where over fifty thousand lay interred, nearly the same number as those American dead commemorated in Washington, DC, at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. This martyrs cemetery is found outside the provincial town of Dong Ha in the province of Quang Tri, its most prominent feature a gigantic white statue of Le Duan, the man who had taken the leadership of the Communist Party as Ho Chi Minh's health and influence declined. Some fifty meters tall, the statue towers over a parade ground in the city center, as does a similar statue of Ho Chi Minh in the northern city of Vinh, near his birthplace. Perhaps to the locals these statues inspire awe, as they seem designed to do. To me and perhaps to other outsiders, their grandiosity seems so inconsistent with communist principles that they are absurd. But in the land of democracy and equality for all

there broods a massive Lincoln on his throne, eyes fixed on the Washington monument's white, phallic spire. Regardless of ideology, something in humanity seems to require towering heroes and monuments, as well as the more horizontal affirmations of the masses. Quang Tri, the province where Le Duan was born and the scene of terrible bombardment and warfare, offers those more democratic commemorations. They assume the form of cemeteries for tens of thousands of the war dead, regimented in death as in life. Once they stood tall; now they lay supine.

Quang Tri was home to the demilitarized zone that had divided the country. Nearby is the fabled Truong Son Road, known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail to Americans and much of the world. This is a landscape that remembers war and holds it close. Embedded in the earth are war's explosive remnants, the bombs, shells, and mines that did not detonate as designed. Dormant and deadly, they at times activate and continue fulfilling their fate, ending the lives of over seven thousand provincial residents since the war officially concluded, and mutilating many more. No memorials commemorate these accidental dead, except for the prostheses attached to the citizens of Quang Tri who have lost limbs. In a clean and efficient lab, foreign agencies train local technicians to fabricate these artificial arms and legs. My traveling companion, a professional photographer, tries to take photos of these arms and legs. He cannot find an angle that pleases him. Every war has these human consequences that are not easy to frame in ways that would make them more acceptable, these amputees, these blind, these depressed, these suicidal, these insane, these jobless, these homeless, these side effects and delayed effects whose existence keeps memories of the war alive when most citizens would rather forget, or, at best, remember in circumscribed fashion.[1]

The cities of the dead fulfill this desire for a memory quarantined in both space and time, for the burial of the dead is a burial of contagious memory. As Marc Augé notes of the war cemetery at

Normandy, "nobody could say that this arranged beauty is not moving, but the emotion it arouses is born from the harmony of forms," which "does not evoke raging battles, nor the fear of the men, nothing of what would actually restore some of the past realistically lived by the soldiers buried" there.[2] Beautiful, quiet war cemeteries mask the certainty, recorded in many photographs, that these dead died in heaps, in fragments, in piles, in pieces, their limbs bent at impossible angles and their muddy clothes sometimes ripped from their bodies by the velocity of the manmade force that took their lives. Their gravestones become what Milan Kundera calls "melancholy flowers of forgetting."[3] On memorial days or private anniversaries, families will gather at the gravestones of their dead, who all too often met their fates in their teens or early twenties. But during the rest of the year, the dead are noticed only by their caretakers, who do their work as cows wander among the tombs.

In daylight, the capital of the dead is a peaceful and reverent place, exempt from the crowds and the clamor of the cities of the living. The atmosphere is somber but not gloomy, the red-roofed temples with their ornate eaves serene and the tombs tended and tidy. Many of the capital's features are shared with the smaller cities of the dead, the most important being the Mai Dich Martyrs Cemetery in Hanoi, reserved for the heroes of the Communist Party. Behind gated walls, nineteen luminaries rest on an elite boulevard, prestigious real estate lined with black marble tombs for the likes of Le Duan; To Huu, the party's poet laureate; and Le Duc Tho, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize along with Henry Kissinger for their negotiation of the Paris Peace Accords (Kissinger accepted his award but Le Duc Tho declined, for there was no peace to speak of in 1973). The boulevard leads to the center of the groomed grounds where an obelisk stands, engraved with *To Quoc Ghi Cong*, the Fatherland Remembers Your Sacrifice. This slogan is inscribed in all the places where the honored dead dwell. The Communist Party draws its vitality from the marrow of those bones, most of which

are found in cemeteries far less grand than Mai Dich.[4] In these more proletarian burying grounds, *Vo Danh* marks many of the gravestones—nameless, anonymous, unknown. Most of the dead have died far from home, and while they are not disrespected, they often exist in shabby circumstances, too distant for relatives to visit, looked on askance by those locals who see themselves as having been conquered by these martyrs. Their provincial cemeteries are often dusty and neglected, the grass withered, the tombs arrayed on bare earth, the names on gravestones and shrines faded.

In these cemeteries, the masses of the dead lay as inert as facts, a million of them, not counting the contradictory facts of the losers and bystanders. These facts are not memory but are interpreted, revivified, and placed into stories by memory's mechanisms, stories that change from time to time to suit the interests of the living. "Memory fades," the writer Joan Didion says, "memory adjusts, memory conforms to what we think we remember."[5] Mutable and malleable memory calls for an ethical sense, a guide on how to remember in fitting ways. Perhaps this need for a guide is particularly urgent when it comes to remembering the dead, who may have died for us or the community to which we belong, whom we might have killed or whom someone killed in our name. This need to remember the dead properly extends to all those whom we consider kin, by blood, affiliation, identification, community, sympathy, and empathy. These are the near and the dear, as the philosopher Avishai Margalit calls them, people for whom we naturally feel a bond because they belong to us through what he calls the "thick" relations of family, friends, and countrymen.[6]

A sense of natural affinity is what gives the ethics of remembering one's own its tremendous power, its capacity to draw from our emotions and to stimulate feelings that range from heartwarming to blood-boiling. We are in the thick of things when it comes to this kind of ethics, our feelings deep and our reactions quick, whether we speak of love in the private world or patriotism in the public

world. Because these ethics emerge from relationships that we deem natural, they often lead to unquestioning loyalty to those we remember, at least in the heroic version of these ethics. When it comes to war, we usually remember our own as noble, virtuous, suffering, and sacrificial. Uncomfortable questions about these heroes are unthinkable or recede into the background, unless circumstances force us to confront them. If and when we can finally acknowledge that those of our own side committed acts that cannot be reconciled with law and morality, we sometimes excuse those acts and their agents by blaming extenuating circumstances, such as the stress of combat. At worst, we may consider these acts as reactive and justified simply because the enemy acted immorally first. Even so, we continue to think that those of our side are human, demanding understanding and empathy as people endowed with complexities of feeling, experience and perspective. Those of the other side, our enemies, or at least those unfriendly or alien to us, lack those complexities. To appropriate the language of the novelist E. M. Forster, they appear in our perception as "flat" characters.[7] Those of our own side are usually "round," three dimensional, observable from all angles, thick in flesh, bone, feeling, and history. When they feel, and what they feel, so do we.

One exception in the prominence of round characters for this kind of heroic ethics is that those of our own side can also be flat characters, so long as they are positive. After all, there is nothing flatter than the dead in a cemetery, marshaled as characters into a narrative not of their own making. They remain obedient to the generals and statesmen who continue speaking on their behalf, telling the story that the Fatherland remembers their sacrifice. This mournful but triumphant Vietnamese story exemplifies the ethics of remembering one's own, unifying the cemeteries with the monuments, memorials, and museums that commemorate the war, where dead and living appear as both round and flat.[8] The greatest and flattest character in contemporary Vietnamese storytelling and memory is Uncle Ho. While the historical Ho Chi Minh is round and complex,

in life and in his biographies, the fictional Uncle Ho whose image is found everywhere is flat, featured most prominently on the country's paper currency.[9] This Uncle Ho is pure, sincere, and sacrificial, embodying all the ideals of the painful and glorious days of the revolution. So utterly attractive a character is he that even some of those from the losing side acquiesce to calling him Uncle. The persuasive, titanic, and heroic Uncle Ho proves Forster's claim that flat characters are not necessarily worse, aesthetically, than round characters. Flat and round characters simply serve different purposes. This flattened Uncle Ho is the one whom the revolution must remember, his image and icon continuing to urge on the people the heroic version of the ethics of remembering one's own, where their identity is one with that of party, state, and country.

Flat, heroic characters are commonplace, even fashionable, in Vietnam. They star on those billboards all over the country that exhort citizens to behave nobly and work for the nation. These billboards have their stylistic origins in wartime propaganda posters featuring revolutionary heroes and heroines, virtuous and smiling, chiseled and fierce, urging the people to unite and fight. Flat characters also dominate in the museums, from the Fine Arts Museum of Hanoi to the War Remnants Museum of Saigon, where the stories share a numbing sameness. In the common narrative of the country's museums, a foreign invader, French and later American, occupies the land and terrorizes the people. Communist revolutionaries, at great cost to themselves, mobilize and organize the people. Following the guidance of Uncle Ho, the Communist Party leads the people to victory. In the aftermath, with Uncle Ho gone but under his benevolent gaze, the Communist Party moves from total war to collective industry, shaping the country's increasingly prosperous economy. The shabby Museum of the Revolution in Hanoi presents this story for the entire country, beginning with black-and-white documentary photographs of colonial atrocities and legendary revolutionaries, ending with unintentionally pitiful displays of

economic triumph: textiles and sewing machines and rice cookers behind glass.

On a smaller scale and in the middle of the country, the Son My museum that commemorates the My Lai massacre focuses on the singular tragedy of the five hundred people murdered—some raped—by American troops. The aftermath of their story is the same as the common narrative, the triumphant revolution eventually transforming the war-blasted landscape of village and province with verdant fields, new bridges, lively schools, and lovely people. While the photographs that decorate these museums feature real people, the captions underlining them have stamped them flat, as in the Son My museum's display of Ronald Haeberle's most famous photograph, underwritten with this: "The last moment of life for villager women and children under a silk cotton tree before being murdered by the U.S. soldiers." Whoever these civilians and soldiers were in their complex lives and complicated histories, they exist in the caption as victims and villains in a drama that justifies the revolution and the party. The caption as genre echoes the slogan as genre, from Follow Uncle Ho's Shining Example to Nothing Is More Precious than Independence and Freedom. Slogans like these exemplify the Communist Party's story of itself, which has become, for now, the official story of the country and the nation.

Past these captions, slogans, and official commemorations, round characters do exist and are also a part of the ethics of remembering one's own. They walk and breathe in a few works of art that deviated from the dominant story and yet found their way to readers and viewers. Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* was one, a landmark novel that expressed, for the first time, how the noble war to liberate the Fatherland was oftentimes horrific for the soldiers who fought in it. The novel begins in the months following the end of the war, with a team searching for the missing and the dead in the Jungle of Screaming Souls. Kien, the soldier at the novel's center, hears the dead too well. Once an idealistic volunteer and now a col-

lector of corpses, he has been "crushed by the war."[10] The sole survivor of his platoon, he vividly remembers the men and women he killed as well as his dead comrades. Still, he might have been able to bear these horrors but for the gangrenous disillusionment of the postwar years. "This kind of peace?" says the driver of the truck bearing the dead, among whom Kien sleeps. "People have unmasked themselves and revealed their true, horrible selves. So much blood, so many lives were sacrificed—for what?"[11] This is the universal question of the disillusioned soldier.

In an effort to make sense of death and disillusionment, of being surrounded by the dead, Kien becomes a writer. He is intent on imposing a plot on the past, "but relentlessly, his pen disobeyed him. Each page revived one story of death after another and gradually the stories swirled back deep into the primitive jungles of war, quietly restoking his horrible furnace of war memories."[12] Gusts of images swirl from this furnace until they settle near the novel's end, leaving him with two traumatic memories.[13] The first is the fate of Hoa, a female guide who led his men toward the safety of Cambodia. When American troops hunt them, she stays behind as a decoy, killing their tracker dog. After they capture her, the Americans, black and white, take turns raping her. Kien watches from a distance, too afraid to save her. Remembering this horrible scene provokes Kien into recalling another scene that came before it. In the earlier event, a teenage Kien sets off to war, accompanied on the train by his beautiful girlfriend Phuong. He is so devoted to her that he cannot bring himself to make love to her, despite her repeated invitations. This purity is a symptom of weakness rather than strength, at least in terms of how he perceives his masculinity. His weakness is revealed to him on the train, when he cannot protect her from fellow soldiers intent on gang-raping her. Years later, "he suddenly remembered what he thought he had seen in the freight car and what could still be happening there. He was to remember that as his first war wound. . . . It was from that moment, when Phuong was violently

taken from him, that the bloodshed truly began and his life entered into bloody suffering and failure."[14]

Too late and too fearful to save Phuong from the rapes she has already endured, the teenage Kien murders his first man, a sailor who tries to be next in line. Eventually he becomes an able killer, but despite his lethal ability, he will not save Hoa and cannot save Phuong from "what could still be happening there," raped by men driven by the same murderous urges found in Kien. If he gave in to murder, these other men gave in to rape, the erotic indistinguishable, at one extreme, from the homicidal. Rape is the hidden trauma, its climactic revelation destroying the masculine fiction that war is a soldier's adventure and a man's experience, or that war—over there—can be separated from the domestic world of the family, over here. "Can't you see?" Phuong cries after the rape. "It's not a wound! It can't be bandaged!"[15] The disturbing images of sexual violation at the novel's end incinerate the gentler language earlier in the novel, when Kien thinks how "the sorrow of war inside a soldier's heart was in a strange way similar to the sorrow of love. It was a kind of nostalgia, like the immense sadness of a world at dusk. It was a sadness, a missing, a pain which could send one soaring back into the past."[16] The novel traces this journey into the past, where war and love's paper-thin abstractions are fed into memory's hot furnace, the ashes revealing how the heady ideals of romance, purity, and patriotism devolve into rape, slaughter, and trauma.

But what is the relationship of these rounded characters of memorable fiction to the flat characters of the country's cemeteries, museums, and propaganda? While round characters are sometimes antiheroic, and the flat characters of one's own side are usually heroic, both enact the ethics of remembering one's own. Regardless of whether those we remember are saintly or all too human, the ethical force of remembering one's own reinforces the shared identities of family, nation, religion, or race. In the ethics of remembering one's own, remembering those of one's side, even when they

do terrible things, is better than ignoring them altogether. Nothing is worse than being ignored, erased, or effaced, as the losers of any war or conflict can affirm. In memory wars, a victory is had in simply being remembered and being able to remember, even if one's self and one's own appear troubled, tortured, even demonic. The antiheroic version of this kind of ethics dwells in the nebulous world of the chiaroscuro, half-lit, half-obscured. No surprise, then, that by the end, Kien the writer vanishes from his apartment and into the shadows, leaving only his manuscript. The last words of the novel, spoken by the unnamed person who discovers Kien's manuscript, commemorates why the warrior and writer must disappear: "I envied his inspiration, his optimism in focusing back on the painful but glorious days. They were caring days, when we knew what we were living and fighting for and why we needed to suffer and sacrifice. Those were the days when all of us were young, very pure, and very sincere."[17] The war and the Communist Party may be condemned in the pages of the novel, but not the young people and the true patriots who sacrificed themselves. Both an idealist in looking back and a cynic in looking at the present, Kien is not fit to live in a postwar society that only speaks about the glorious brightness of war. He, like many of the war's survivors, men and women both, dwell in the crepuscular margins of melancholy, loss, and sorrow.

At least these veterans of the revolution are remembered by their country in some way, even if inadequately. In contrast, those who fought for the losing side are disremembered. They can be discovered by driving on from the Truong Son Martyrs Cemetery and heading further south on Highway 1A. This is the nation's main artery, a crowded, noisy, and slow two-lane road running the length of the coast and lowland interior. This trans-Vietnamese route eventually reaches the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City, or what many still prefer to call, for reactionary, sentimental, or simply lyrical reasons, Saigon (itself a name of memory and forgetting, given to a city conquered by the Vietnamese people on their great march south, a

history remembered by the Vietnamese as a feat of nation-building rather than bloody imperialism). Past the industrial zone on Saigon's edge where the sky is always a sheet of smog, one will see, on the border of the highway, a grand martyrs cemetery. A towering statue of a mother grieving for these martyrs gazes across the highway. The crowded landscape of factories, billboards, and roadside homes she sees is unremarkable, unless one knows what was once there. Many years ago, during the war years and before the victors built the martyrs cemetery, there sat on the other side of the highway another statue, a soldier of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, pensive on a rock as he gazed on the road from his modest six-meter height.[18] Behind him was the vast national cemetery for this southern army.

In the days when the mourning soldier still surveyed the land, it was barren and sparsely populated, and the cemetery and pagoda behind him could be seen from the road. Of this time and this place, journalist Michael Herr noted that

> there is a monument to the Vietnamese war dead, and it is one of the few graceful things left in the country. It is a modest pagoda set above the road and approached by long flights of gently rising steps. One Sunday, I saw a bunch of these engineers gunning their Harleys up those steps, laughing and shouting in the afternoon sun. The Vietnamese had a special name for them to distinguish them from all other Americans; it translated out to something like 'The Terrible Ones,' although I'm told that this doesn't even approximate the odium carried in the original.[19]

More than thirty years later, the landscape has changed, but the abuse aimed at the cemetery has not. The mourning soldier, as he was known, has disappeared, as statues tend to do after wars end or regimes collapse. The cemetery itself is not marked by any signs and is invisible from the highway. Drive a hundred meters down a spur from the highway and one will see, at last, the cemetery's entrance, a memorial gate overgrown by green foliage, the lettering on its faded pillars proclaiming the need for sacrifice and struggle. Workers on their noon break sit on the littered steps, smoking cigarettes. At the top of the stairs, another laborer dozes on a hammock strung between a pillar and the faded blue doorframe of the pagoda, its white walls serving as pages for lines of graffiti. Inside, the pagoda is empty except for a makeshift shrine on a wooden table, decorated with flowers in vases and an urn for incense. On my first visit, a corner of the room is charred from a fire where someone has burned something, a fire on a cold night or perhaps paper offerings to the dead. There is nothing else to see.

The actual cemetery lays a few hundred meters further west. No signs mark the route to the cemetery, which turns out to be closed for lunch. Its barred gate is rolled shut, the office is empty, and there is no indication of when anyone will return. I have traveled a long distance on a hot day, I am impatient, and over a lifetime I have

learned lessons from the Vietnamese people about letting nothing get in our way. I crawl under the gate. The cemetery that I discover is the ugly, beaten, closeted cousin of the one celebrating the victors across the highway. There are the same rows of tombs nearly level with the earth, but they lay unloved, unpainted, and untended amid green meadows of uncut grass and groves of shade trees. In the center of the cemetery squats an unfinished gray hulk of a memorial obelisk, resembling an industrial smokestack. Most of the tombs are little more than neglected slabs and headstones, but a handful have been rebuilt recently. Composed of granite and marble, they appear cleanly swept and feature fresh photographs of their inhabitants. The desecrated tombs far outnumber these rehabilitated ones. Someone has vandalized the photographs of the dead on these desecrated tombs, scratching out the eyes and faces. I do not have time to count the numbers of defaced dead. Worried about my illicit entry, I return to the gate, where I find the staff has returned. My presence bemuses this handful of functionaries in sandals and short-sleeved shirts, who record my passport's information in a ledger. When I return to visit the following year, a blue, solid metal gate on rollers has replaced the barred gate with the gap underneath. I cannot slip beneath this time. A brand new sign installed next to the gate proclaims this the People's Cemetery of Binh An, which was not the name it bore during the war, the National Cemetery of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. Once again I present my passport, and this time one of the staff follows me as I walk from grave to grave, put-putting on his motorbike.

These decaying tombstones and this neglected cemetery evoke in me the same emotion I sometimes felt in libraries of years past, encountering books whose checkout cards recorded last encounters with readers from decades ago. Forgotten people and forgotten books exude the same melancholy, for books, too, live and die. Bao Ninh writes of how Kien's novel has its own autonomy, how it "seemed to have its own logic, its own flow. It seemed from then on

to structure itself, to take its own time, to make its own detours."[20] What alleviates melancholy in both *The Sorrow of War* and this Bien Hoa cemetery is the sense that both books and the dead live in their own ways. "As for Kien, he was just the writer; the novel seemed to be in charge and he meekly accepted that."[21] After the novelist disappears, his book remains. In the cemetery's case, the dead are too dangerous to be unguarded, but also too dangerous to be bulldozed, or at least completely. They remain a precious resource, for the state might one day use them to reconcile with the country's defeated exiles.

They, too, demand their share of memory. They have created plans for renovating this cemetery and display them in the only museum that commemorates their experiences, the Museum of the Boat People and the Republic of Vietnam. It stands in the History Park of San Jose, California, the city where I was raised and home to a Vietnamese community that is the second-largest outside Vietnam. A small, two-story Victorian house, the Viet Museum, as it is also known, is an apt metaphor for exilic memory, overstuffed with amateurish exhibits and historical relics kept in someone else's home. Its hours are so irregular that the first two times I visit, the doors are locked. I peer through the windows to see mannequins outfitted in Republican uniforms and a bronze sculpture of a slightly larger than life southern soldier, all inhabiting what was once a parlor. On my third try, the museum is open, run by husband and wife custodians. The mood in the handful of rooms, denoted in the captions and narratives, is one of sorrowful memory and mourning for dead soldiers, forgotten heroes, and what I think of as oceanic refugees, a term that lends more nobility to the sufferings and heroism of those whom the Western press called the "boat people." The soldier is not in a fighting posture. Instead, he kneels before a comrade's grave, while nearby a small diorama shows a model of the national cemetery, as groomed and as green as it could be if the victorious state would allow it. Until that moment of reconciliation, the state

and party will exclude the exiles and their dead from memory, for part of the ethics of remembering one's own is the exclusion and forgetting of others.

But this forgetting also begets remembering (sometimes thought of as haunting). This is especially the case when forgetting is not accidental but deliberate, strategic, even malicious—in other words, disremembering. Thus, in the aftermath of any war or conflict, the defeated and disremembered will inevitably seek to remember themselves, although not as others. So it is that the refugees from this country and this war have also engaged in an ethics of remembering their own, knowing their country of origin has erased or suppressed their presence. The greatest work of collective memory these defeated people have created is not a museum or a memorial or a work of fiction but is instead their archipelago of overseas communities, the largest and most famous of which is Little Saigon in Orange County, California. Little Saigon and similar communities worldwide are "strategic memory projects," as scholar Karin Aguilar-San Juan calls them.[22] Little Saigon's residents see it as the embodiment of the "American Dream in Vietnamese," where capitalism and free choice reign.[23] Bolsa Avenue in Little Saigon is the most famous thoroughfare in the refugee diaspora, its eight lanes more commodious than Highway 1A, its sidewalks more usable than any in the country of origin, its restaurants cleaner and oftentimes offering better native food than that found at home. For more than a decade after war's end, perhaps two, as the homeland suffered from failed collectivist economic policies, explosive inflation, the rationing of necessities, and an American embargo that was part of a continuing "American war on Vietnam," Little Saigon's malls were more spectacular and its entertainment industry more vibrant than the homeland's.[24] Little Saigon was a triumph of capitalism and a rebuke against communism, and in this way it fulfilled its role as the ultimate, much belated strategic hamlet so desired by the southern government and its American advisors.

The original strategic hamlet program was designed to persuade the peasantry that their best interests lay with the southern government and the Americans, who coerced them into fortified encampments meant to isolate the guerillas from peasant support. In practice, the guerillas infiltrated the hamlets, while the residents often resented the government for forcibly evacuating them from their farms and ancestral homes. While these strategic hamlets were crude, blunt instruments, Little Saigon is an example of American capitalism and democracy operating at a refined level of soft power. If Ho Chi Minh City is now a better place to live than Little Saigon for many of those with privilege, it is because the Communist Party adopted the capitalist practices and consumer ideology of Little Saigon. As strategic hamlet, Little Saigon beckoned for years to the people of the homeland to come to America, as oceanic refugees, as Amerasians, as reeducation camp survivors, as family members reunited through immigration policy, as spouses of citizens. All were marginalized or punished in their homeland under communist rule and chose to flee or migrate to a land that promised wealth and inclusion. But Little Saigon as strategic hamlet is not just physical real estate. It is also mnemonic real estate, for according to the informal terms of the American compact, the more wealth minorities amass, the more property they buy, the more clout they accumulate, and the more visible they become, the more other Americans will positively recognize and remember them. Belonging would substitute for longing; membership would make up for disremembering. This membership in the American body politic would be made possible not only by economic success, but also through winning those political and cultural rights of self-representation denied to the exiles and refugees when they lived under communism. Memory and self-representation are thus inseparable, for those who represent themselves are also saying this: remember us.

The Vietnamese in America understood that strength and profit came in the concentration of their numbers. Thus, like other new

arrivals, they gathered themselves defensively into ethnic enclave, subaltern suburb, and strategic hamlet, those emergent landscapes of the American dream distinct from the sidelined ghetto, barrio, and reservation of the American nightmare. Enclave, suburb, hamlet, ghetto, barrio, and reservation are examples of *lieux de memoire*, the sites of memory that have, in the modern age, substituted for history, or so says scholar Pierre Nora.[25] American society created these particular *lieux de memoire* through centuries of warfare, exploitation, appropriation, and discrimination, practices that tell the inhabitants of these sites to remember their place. These inhabitants also tell themselves to remember their place. They understand that if they have any hope of being remembered by Americans, they must remember themselves first. For Vietnamese refugees, the most important anniversary is April 30, the date of Saigon's fall, which they call Black April (although white is the color of mourning in Vietnamese society, calling this day White April would likely offend, or at least confuse, white Americans, around whom the Vietnamese in America are usually on their best behavior, polite at the least and often solicitous at the most). On Black April, hundreds of veterans of the Republic of Vietnam's military forces gather at the Vietnam War Monument located in Freedom Park on All American Way in Garden Grove, Orange County. A portable memorial showcases photographs of communist atrocities and ragged boat people. Commemorative wreaths decorate a shrine honoring dead soldiers. Speeches are given by local politicians and former generals and admirals, one of whom, during the memorial's dedication in 2003, proclaimed the invasion of Iraq to be an extension of the Vietnam War. Once again, America was defending freedom, a claim with which no one disagreed. The national anthems of both the United States and the Republic of Vietnam play as honor guards march forth with the flags of both countries, parading before veterans displaying themselves in recreations of their old uniforms. The veterans are se-

nior citizens, their supporters numbering in the several thousands at the dedication and in the several hundreds in subsequent years. Theirs is a ferocious display of patriotism, at once spectacular and yet small, inadvertently showing what Vladimir Nabokov calls the "gloom and glory of exile."[26]

This gloom and glory arises from how loss has stung exiles and the related breeds of refugees, immigrants, and minorities. They have lost their countries of origin, either by choice or circumstance, and their hosts often see them as others. This sense of loss and otherness inflects their memories differently from the memories of majorities. For majorities, the ethics of remembering one's own can range from heroic to antiheroic. The power and privilege of being the majority usually provides enough security to allow the antiheroic, although this is not always the case, as in authoritarian societies where the state's near-total grasp of power paradoxically breeds a great insecurity about power. In a related fashion, for those who see themselves as marginalized, dominated, excluded, exploited, or oppressed, the antiheroic takes time to develop. This is because weaker populations can ill afford to seem less than powerful to the powerful. Thus, the ethics of remembering one's own as practiced by the less powerful is usually done first in the heroic mode. Their longing for their past is what scholar Svetlana Boym calls "restorative nostalgia," the desire to reproduce, wholesale, what once was.[27] Only later, when the less powerful feel more secure in their host country, or after they give up on the host country's promises, does the antiheroic mode flourish in stories of the morally flawed or culturally inassimilable. The antiheroic mode has not yet, for the most part, developed among the Vietnamese in America, with one of the most visible exceptions being the writer Linh Dinh, of whose grotesqueries I will say more later. Otherwise, Vietnamese American art, literature, and film, while often depicting the troubles of refugee life and the haunting past, nevertheless prefer the beautiful to the grotesque

and the heroic to the antiheroic. Collectively, Vietnamese American culture, for better and for worse, foregrounds the adaptability of the Vietnamese and the promise of the American dream, albeit with some degree of ambivalence.

For these Vietnamese exiles in America and many of their descendants, remembering one's own takes place in relationship to, and often antagonism with, the national projects of remembering one's own in Vietnam and America. These projects often ignore them and when they do notice them, usually cast them in less than heroic terms. So it is that Vietnamese Americans, for now, insist on the heroic mode in remembering themselves. Since the most heroic are the dead, perhaps the most symbolic way these ethical practices of remembering can be reconciled is over the bodies of the dead. But even in pluralist America, the weak and the defeated find themselves rejected. American veterans have rebuffed the request of Vietnamese veterans to be included in their war memorials in places such as Kansas City, and no mention of Vietnamese veterans exists in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial of Washington, DC.[28] Arlington National Cemetery would also presumably turn these veterans away if they asked to be buried there. This was what happened, after all, to another American ally, General Vang Pao, leader of the Hmong soldiers who fought for the CIA in Laos during the so-called Secret War (which was, of course, not a secret to the Hmong who fought it, just as the Cold War was not cold to the Asians who killed and died for it). Good enough to die for American interests in vast numbers, good enough to lose their home to America's enemies, these Hmong soldiers are not good enough to be buried alongside American soldiers. Their deaths, too, will remain secret to American citizens.

Come home, then. That should be the message that the countries of origin send to their exiles in the future, through the way these countries deal with the dead. At the Bien Hoa cemetery, the dead lay ready to be called on once more to serve a national cause, this

time of reconciliation. Meanwhile, in Quang Tri province, arduous efforts to excavate dormant bombs, mines, and shells have also uncovered the bones of the dead from both sides. In a sunbaked field, a demining squad that has searched meter by meter for this ordnance has also uncovered the remains of six or seven southern soldiers. They were buried in a local cemetery. Not far away, in Dong Ha, the remains of two northern soldiers were also recently found. My guide from the demining organization tells me that national reconciliation means we should not distinguish between northern dead and southern dead. He speaks without bitterness or melancholy, even though the French killed his paternal grandfather and the Americans killed his maternal grandfather. Bespectacled and in jeans and a t-shirt, my guide looks no different than any of the Vietnamese who return from overseas. But my embittered Vietnamese American compatriots, remembering their losses and their own dead, may not so readily bring themselves to share his sentiment. It is difficult for them when stories like this, remembered by refugee Hien Trong Nguyen, interfere:

> When [my brother] died in 1974, he was only 22 years old. Five years after my brother's death, the Communists plowed the cemetery for Southern soldiers, where my brother was buried, in order to build a military training center. My mother decided to exhume his body and move him. During the next few days, my parents, uncle, cousins, and I went to remove his body. When I first looked at his body, I was amazed and frightened to see that he looked as if he were only sleeping. His body was wrapped inside a plastic bag, and the coffin had been specially made so that water would not seep in. My family took his body and removed all the skin and flesh so that only bones remained. The skin came off just like a glove. The bones were washed and put in a smaller box.[29]

Generosity comes easier when one has won, and the victorious find it in their best interests to be magnanimous to the defeated. I do not mention this to my guide as we watch the men in khaki probe the earth, their work slow and hot. I think we are both aware that survivors do not so easily forget history. What once happened here could still be happening for many, the past as explosive as any of the remnants buried in this land.