

Transcultural Perspectives in Literature, Language, Art, and Politics

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Chapter 2

Viet Than Nguyen's "Just Memory" and the Future of Transculturalism

Theodora Tsimpouki

For the most part, critical discourse has embraced the transcultural turn, which places emphasis on the significance of transcultural experience, its dynamism and fluidity, interconnectedness, and awareness of the other. A similar interest has been expressed within memory studies, where transcultural memory is conceived not as “site-bound” or “nation-bound” but as “traveling,” “continually moving across and beyond such territorial and social borders” (Erl 2011, 15, 10), mixing and transforming memories. Rather than emphasizing transculturalism’s smooth narratives of conciliation and harmonious transcendence of cultural boundaries or assuming the potential positive effects of de-territorialized, mobile, multidimensional memory, this paper draws attention to the fundamental role “just memory” plays in the development of transcultural memory and the formation of transcultural identity.¹ Drawing on Viet Thanh Nguyen’s definition of “just memory” as “memory work that recalls both one’s own as well as others” (Nguyen 2013), this paper examines the nonfiction writings of the author in combination with his Pulitzer Prize for Fiction winner *The Sympathizer* (2015) as transcultural texts that seek to cultivate a model of transcultural remembrance that encourages a comparative framework that transcends national borders. The underlying premise of my argument rests on the meaning of the prefix “trans” in transcultural memory, which is understood as a dynamic process of sharing individual and collective experiences between, across, and beyond specific cultures and nations, opening up the potential for “just memory.” Imbued with the ethics of remembrance that recalls “the past in a way that does justice to the forgotten, the excluded, the oppressed, the dead, the ghosts” (Nguyen 2013, 150), collectively these texts make the case for the need to develop “just memory” as the foundation of a truly transcultural self.

This study, then, joins forces with the efforts of critical theorists in an attempt to better understand contemporary transcultural experience and the development of transcultural memory as just memory. My presentation follows a twofold development. It begins with a brief discussion of the main theoretical views on transculturalism and transcultural memory as these have been articulated by theorists and critics such as Wolfgang Welsh, Mikhail Epstein, Arianna Dagnino, Astrid Erll, Alison Landsberg, and (more recently) Marianne Hirsch, respectively. It proceeds with my reading of *The Sympathizer* together with the scholarly work of Viet Thanh Nguyen, whose claim to just memory not only complicates the homogeneity of cultural memory but plays a vital role in the creation of a transcultural remembering and the formation of transcultural identity. Focusing on the haunting memories of the Vietnam War, Nguyen proposes “a doubled model” of ethical memory, in which remembering is “always aware of itself as being open-ended and in flux, rather than being satisfied with fixity and conclusiveness” (2013, 151), echoing in many ways an ethics of transcultural remembrance that draws attention to what Michael Rothberg calls “the palimpsestic overlays, the hybrid assemblages, the non-linear interactions, and the fuzzy edges of group belonging” (2014, 32).

In an attempt to supersede used-up concepts developed within the paradigm of postcolonial studies² or outdated models of “single,” “self-enclosed” cultures, German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch first proposed transculturality as the appropriate concept to “articulate th[e] altered cultural constitution” (1999, 204) in a rapidly globalized world. Welsch contends that

The description of today’s cultures as islands or spheres is factually incorrect and normatively deceptive. Cultures de facto no longer have the insinuated form of homogeneity and separateness. They have instead assumed a new form, which is to be called *transcultural* in so far as *it passes through* classical cultural boundaries. Cultural conditions today are largely characterized by mixes and permeations. (2009, 4)

In the same vein, Mikhail Epstein sees transculture as “the next level of liberation,” a “third,” “broad way” of cultural development between the homogenization of (American) globalism and the separatism of multiculturalism (2009, 327, 329). Epstein even argues that transculture is the next stage of the ongoing human quest for freedom, “the freedom of every person to live on the border of one’s “inborn’ culture or beyond it” (334). From Epstein’s point of view, “[B]ecoming transcultural” is “moving into the open space of ‘no culture,’ the transcendental realm that relates to all existing cultures as they relate to nature” (335).

Optimistic and bold, and, to a certain extent, utopian as these assumptions may sound, they have opened the way for a number of critics to investigate literature from a transcultural lens. Arianna Dagnino highlights in her research the significance of literary works that

engage with and express the confluent nature of cultures overcoming the different dichotomies between North and South, the West and the Rest, the colonizer and the colonized, the dominator and the dominated, the native and the (im)migrant, the national and the ethnic. (2013)

Taking heed from Welsch, whose main examples of transcultural identity-formation are writers "no longer shaped by a single homeland but by different reference-countries" (2009, 8), Dagnino posits that

there is no doubt that at the forefront of the change of paradigm under discussion are those artists, writers, and sometimes scholars who have already experienced in the flesh and in their creative minds the effects of global mobility, transnational patterns, neonomadic lifestyles, and that in their creative (or critical) works have already captured and expressed an emerging transcultural mood. (2013)

Following these footsteps, it is probably safe to assume that although in the past there were many literary authors who had written in the tradition of exilic, postcolonial, (im)migrant, and diasporic literature, the current transcultural turn may be considered an instance of a paradigm shift in literary studies brought about by unprecedented levels of global forced migration and rabid capitalism as a result of economic deregulation and environmental crisis. Despite the differences among critical approaches, what is perhaps shared across them all is, on the one hand, that transcultural literature's main difference lies in its resistance to appropriations by one single national canon or cultural tradition, and, on the other, its emphasis on individual empowerment. In her book *Transcultural Writers & Novels*, Dagnino is keen to point out that authors of transcultural literature "have—in one way or another, consciously or unconsciously, physically or virtually—made the voyage out of and from their national, linguistic, ethnic, or cultural boundaries" (2015, 152). She goes on to argue that "individual agency and the right to a personal cultural choice and allegiance appear to be among the central tenets" of transculture (126), emphasizing human agency "'with an affirmative position by the individual' [. . .] and the right to personal cultural choices, allegiances, plural affiliations, and multiple, multilayered identities" (2015, 140).

If transcultural vision moves away from ethnic affiliations and national forms of identification, it seems almost self-evidently appropriate to assume that individual remembering and collective memory, too, become

unmoored from territory, ethnicity, and the nation-state and are “further socialised and mobilised” (Crownshaw 2011, 1). In the introduction to the special issue of *Parallax* on transcultural memory, Richard Crownshaw associates the (non-linear) continuity of memory to its “inherently social nature [that] means that memories can be shared, no matter our proximity or distance to the events remembered” (2011, 1). Moreover, as Astrid Erll has argued, not only Pierre Nora’s admittedly groundbreaking sites-of-memory (*lieux de mémoire*) approach seems “old-fashioned,” grounded as it is “on national culture and its puristic memory” (2011, 7), but there is a “great internal heterogeneity of cultural remembering within the nation-state,” as well as cultural formations beyond the nation-state that “generate their own and in many ways intersecting, frameworks of memory” (8). Put differently, Erll and other critics have embraced a post-Halbwachsian view of “collective memory” which moves beyond the French sociologist’s concept of social frameworks of memory (*cadres sociaux de la mémoire*)³ toward a transcultural dimension of memory that pays more attention to the routes through which “memory travels” on, across, and beyond boundaries—be it the boundaries of one’s own national, ethnic, political, or religious group (Erll 2011). Admittedly, as Rothberg contends, thinking memory as transcultural is based on the postulation that remembrance cannot be uniquely or simply “understood in national and local frameworks” (Moses and Rothberg 2014, 31).

Given the dynamics of transcultural memory, it might then be possible to envision the impact of forms and technologies of memory that would facilitate alliances and solidarities across racial, class, and other chasms of difference. Writing on the capacity of mass culture to create empathy, Alison Landsberg maintains that memories generated from the interface between personal and mediated representations (such as literary works, film, television, museums, the internet, and other technologies) can bridge the temporal and geographical differences that separate individuals and communities.⁴ This type of memory, which is not derived from a person’s lived experience and yet becomes part of “one’s personal archive of experience, informing one’s subjectivity” (2004, 26), she calls “prosthetic memory.” What is important to note is that Landsberg stresses, on the one hand, the transportability, interchangeability, and exchangeability of prosthetic memory, which stems from experiencing different pasts that are not one’s own, and on the other, its potential to “produce empathy and social responsibility as well as political alliances that transcend race, class and gender” (2004, 21).⁵ While she makes clear that there is nothing “*inherently* positive or progressive” about this new form of memory (2003, 157), she does underline the ethical ramifications of prosthetic memory to bring about more “radical democratic engagements and movements in the future” (2009, 228).

More recently, and in line with work on transcultural memory, Marianne Hirsch, whose concept of "postmemory" sought to deal with the transgenerational and intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories, has also proposed the notion of "stateless memory,"⁶ as "a space of openness and potentiality" (2019, 431), that contains "multiple temporalities, spaces, and conceptions of identity and community, as well as multiple possibilities of encounter and transformation."⁷ She goes on to add that stateless memory is not "static but dynamic, not passive but active, not linear but repetitive, recursive, circular, rhizomatic. Its activity is not uni- but multidirectional" (419–420). Without downplaying the condition of victimhood and abjection that statelessness and refugeehood conjure, Hirsch's emphasis on the opportunities that stateless memory can offer shares a common perspective with transcultural memory, which is conceptualized as a fluid process, not delimited by one culture or nation-state but open-ended, that may facilitate the emergence of unexpected forms of solidarity.

It is precisely this affirmative and forward-looking aspect of memory, capable of contributing to fresh interpretations and new understandings of the past, that Viet Thanh Nguyen aspires to. He argues not simply in favor of the remembrance of universal humanity but of a just memory, which is a "model of a doubled ethical memory" (2013, 153) that recalls our own but also "strangers as being kin" (2013, 152). In *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Nguyen explores the various ways in which the American War in Vietnam has been remembered, challenging the dominant views of American collective memory that foreground "American self-interest and American self-serving mythologies" at the exclusion of other perspectives (Nguyen 2022a, 84). He engages directly with Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological analysis of memory and historical knowledge, which tackles questions about the use and abuse of memory as well as the prospect of forgetting that entails the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation.⁸ But Nguyen moves one step further in arguing for memory's duty to do justice to others and, also, to recognize one's own and the other's inhumanity. As he writes,

[a] just memory demands [. . .] a final step in the dialectics of ethical memory—not just the movement between an ethics of remembering one's own and remembering others, but also a shift toward an ethics of recognition, of seeing and remembering how the inhuman inhabits the human. (2016, 19)

To a large extent, Viet Thanh Nguyen's interest in Asian American and, particularly, overseas Vietnamese literature and culture, is personal since it relies on autobiographical material and traumatic memories transmitted to his generation as postmemories. Born in Vietnam, he is the son of refugees from North Vietnam who moved south following the 1954 partition of Vietnam.

After the fall of Saigon (1975), his family fled to the United States. The family went through the experience of refugee camps before being able to settle in California (1978), where Nguyen grew up and eventually became a professor of English, American studies, and ethnicity. After all, he was “born in Vietnam but made in America,” as he writes in the prologue to *Nothing Ever Dies* (2016, 1). While it is important not to conflate the biography of a writer with his work, Viet Thanh Nguyen seems to belong to the group of intellectuals whose “cultural formation” is, according to Welsch, “transcultural” (1999, 198). In light of his having experienced all that involuntary movement across continents, nations, and communities during his upbringing, Nguyen’s cultural shaping is that of a transcultural postcolonial writer, who practices “at the intersection of several historical, political, and cultural terrains” (Stein 2009, 254).

Although Nguyen does not use the term transcultural memory,⁹ his fiction and nonfiction resonate strongly with the recent transcultural turn in memory studies. In *Nothing Ever Dies*, he focuses on the conflict over remembering particularly troubling events of “the American War in Vietnam” (and not the Vietnam War, as the Americans call it) to advocate for a just memory. In his view, the war is an example of a “contact zone,” to borrow Mary Louise Pratt’s concept (1992),¹⁰ where, on the one hand, different cultures meet “in tragic but also productive ways” (2005, 20–21) and, on the other, where “collective struggles over memory, over what to remember, whom to recognize, and how to represent the past” occur (2013, 157). By contrasting the disadvantaged position of the Vietnamese mnemonic viewpoints against the powerful industries of memory in the United States, Nguyen underscores the “asymmetry” between war memories—that is, the inequalities of memory as a result of the unequal configurations of economic power between the two countries. As he succinctly puts it, “all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory” (2016, 4). Accordingly, a large part of his work on the Vietnam War narratives is related to problems of representation in American literature and popular culture in an attempt to expose significant omissions in wartime memories as well as operations of forgetting that deny justice to the unacknowledged and unrecognized.

Situated as they are in a twilight zone between history, autobiography, and fiction, the modes of cultural recall of historic conflicts have provided the inspiration for Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer*.¹¹ While *Nothing Ever Dies* develops an analytic approach that cuts across literature, art, cinematic representations, sites of commemoration, and popular culture in order to address the discourses and practices of memory politics concerning the Vietnam War, the fictional work dramatizes the subversive potential of just memory by introducing a fictional character who is a diasporic spy, torn apart by his doubleness, and therefore able to hold a perspective that is neither binary nor dualistic but

double, "pregnant with the potential for new world visions" (Bond and Rapson 2014, 8).¹² In the novel, the reader comes across an unnamed narrator, a divided man, who is trapped in a cycle of competing and often contradictory ideologies, discourses, and memories of the past, and enhanced capacity to shift between and negotiate diverse positions and ways of being and knowing. The son of a North Vietnamese girl and a French priest, he is caught between the East and the West, both self and other, fixed and fluid, both a victim and victimizer, an idealist and a revolutionary, devoted to communist revolution and able to appreciate the American way of life. As if to represent his own divided self, his two closest friends and blood brothers, Bon and Man, are "situated at opposite ends of the ideological-political spectrum" (Britto 2019, 373): Bon is a South Vietnamese loyalist and, unbeknownst to Bon, Man is a fierce communist officer, to whom the protagonist addresses his reports.

Cultural hybridity, however, is, according to Epstein, "a rather elementary form of transcultural existence" (343) but seems to be a necessary one for the potential emergence of the transcultural self. As a matter of fact, Viet Thang Nguyen takes pains to emphasize his character's irreconcilable doubleness in order to lay bare the interchangeability of the roles of victims and aggressors and the need for mutual recognition as a precondition of transcultural memory. We could read *The Sympathizer* as a novelization of this admonition to move away from rivalry in victimhood, resentment, and retribution toward cultural agency based on a dual ethics, "an ethics of remembering" one's own and the other and "an ethics of recognition" of one's as well as the other's flawed subjectivity (2016, 19). Remembering, thus, becomes an ethical act that goes beyond postcolonial cultural difference and resistance to colonial authority or naïve narratives of integration and assimilation. A "doubled model" of ethical memory, as proposed by Viet Thang Nguyen, could potentially contribute to a transcultural identity construction that goes beyond "the dominance of group identity," encouraging a perpetual questioning and reevaluation of national and cultural affiliations (Fischer 2016, 1).¹³

Hence, the narrator's self-reflective reasoning and ever-hybrid subjectivity cause him to experience a sense of physical dislocation and psychological instability which challenge his effort to establish a coherent individual and cultural identity.

I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds. I am not some misunderstood mutant from a comic book or a horror movie, although some have treated me as such. I am simply able to see any issue from both sides. (Nguyen 2015b, 1)

So begins Nguyen's novel, *The Sympathizer*, clearly echoing Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.¹⁴ Its unnamed narrator-protagonist signals a conflicting voice

from the novel's very first sentence. Interestingly, from its very beginning, the novel is structured in the mediated form of a confession, in which the narrator is forced to recall and recount his life as a double agent, working for South Vietnamese officials and the CIA, who also leaks information to North Vietnamese forces. From his written confession, the reader finds out that the unnamed spy is educated in America before the fall of Saigon and returns to Vietnam to serve in the Army of South Vietnam. After the fall of Saigon, like other Vietnamese refugees, he flees to California on an espionage mission, secretly reporting to his communist superiors about the Vietnamese exile community in Los Angeles. As a man of multiple allegiances and divided loyalties, however, he feels sympathy for his ideological enemies (the Southern refugees) and is lured by the fantasy and folklore of the American Dream. He feels lucky to live in "the land of supermarkets and superhighways, of supersonic jets and Superman, of supercarriers and the Super Bowl" (38).

At the same time, his commitment to his refugee-cum-spy role leads the Vietnamese diasporic spy to take a position in the Philippines as "a technical consultant in charge of authenticity" (234) in a film on the Vietnam War that bears resemblance to Francis Ford Coppola's "Apocalypse Now." Convinced that he will serve as "an infiltrator into a work of propaganda" (225) to disrupt manipulated representations of the Vietnam War, he joins the film's production only to realize how naïve and idealistic his hope was:

I naively believed that I could divert the Hollywood organism from its goal . . . [the Auteur's] arrogance marked something new in the world, for this was the first war where the losers would write history instead of the victors, courtesy of the most efficient propagand machine ever created. (175)

Underlying Nguyen's scathing critique of strategies of representation is the understanding that memory can play a crucial role in perpetuating hostility, war, and violence.

As industrial and postindustrial products once they enter the public sphere, memories are as anemically or as aggressively manufactured, branded, sold, and exported as the rest of a nation's goods under globalization, which means that the industry of memory is structured through relations of exploitation and inequality. (Nguyen 2015a, 313)

In *Nothing Ever Dies*, Nguyen argues that it is he who owns "the material and ideological forces that determine how and why memories are produced and circulated, and who has access to, and control of, the memory industries" (2016, 107). Similarly, in *The Sympathizer*, the unnamed spy broods over the same issue on his way back to the United States: "Not to own the means of production can lead to premature death, but not to own the means

of representation is also a kind of death. For if we are represented by others, might they not one day, hose our deaths off memory's laminated floor?" (Nguyen 2015b, 253). Even though Nguyen seems to share his protagonist's disillusionment about his capacity to achieve change in the way the Vietnamese people might be represented by the technologies of reproduction, his fiction and nonfiction suggest that he has not lost faith in the potential of memory articulated through writing, film, and other technologies to generate empathy and, hopefully, to eventually prevent the cycles of violence from reproducing themselves. If, as he argues, "equal access to the industries of memory" is, at least in part, a precondition of just memory, it might be possible that memory's dissemination through linguistic and artistic representations of war and trauma facilitates the emergence of a transcultural ethics of a more inclusive conception of belonging (2016, 283).

As Judy Tzu-Chun Wu points out, Nguyen has admitted that it was through the process of writing *The Sympathizer*, and actively "empathizing with unsympathetic others, that he was able to develop a new theoretical understanding of war and ethics, the need to recognize not just one another's humanity but our collective inhumanity" (2018, 238). Such a realization bears resemblance to Alison Landsberg's belief in prosthetic memory's capacity to enable ethical thinking (2003, 156), made transcultural through artistic mobilization. Landsberg is careful not to adopt an entirely positive attitude toward mass cultural technologies' impact on the production and dissemination of memory. At the same time, she seems to be on the same par with Nguyen in their mutual recognition of the power and political potential of the technologies of reproduction to create conditions under which ethical memories can be developed and new alliances constructed, "based not on blood, or family or kinship, but on collective social responsibility" (Landsberg 2003, 158).

In *The Sympathizer*, though, this kind of prosthetic memory is not made too easily transcultural with a convergence of ethics and politics. Nguyen's novel dramatizes the historical densities and material conditions (political, social, economic) that impede adequate remembering, which would hold everyone accountable for their actions and their inhumanity. In order for this lesson to be learned, the narrator-protagonist has to return to Vietnam via Thailand on an impossible mission to regain control of the country and restore the past. Arrested and imprisoned in a communist reeducation camp, he is sentenced to write a confession, which turns out to be the novel we read. As a matter of fact, *The Sympathizer* continually alternates between the present of the narrator's imprisonment and punishment and the vexed memories of the past, culminating in his confession, a process that starts as a forced effort to adopt the "monologic vision" (Stanley 2020, 288) of his communist superiors and ends in an unanticipated moment of revelation that causes a dramatic change in the narrator's worldview and brings him closer to a just memory of his past.

In his reading of *The Sympathizer*, Hai-Dang Phan argues persuasively that “the narrator’s growth, and his education and reeducation are the true subject of the novel” and that the reeducation narrative functions primarily “as a vehicle for the narrator’s personal reflections on his development” (2018, 123). However, while he reads *The Sympathizer* as a *Künstlerroman*, recounting the narrator’s growth into an “accidental novelist” (123), my reading of the novel underscores his development of a just memory, which involves his cognitive and intellectual growth, his coming to terms with the other’s suffering as well as his own inhumanity. Contrary to the narrator’s (and the reader’s) expectations, he has to constantly revise his confession, even though the camp’s authorities know that he has been a communist himself. Ostensibly, his confession aims at his being “purged” because he “bears the contamination” that can “destroy the revolution’s purity” (437). But its outcome reaffirms his doubleness, his incapacity to be reduced to “the rigid binaries of identity politics” (Liu 2019, 546). Thus, in the process of writing and rewriting his confession detailing his undercover life, the narrator is forced to revise his life story and to admit having committed two assassinations that he had to execute in order to maintain his cover and survive. However, these two murders are inconsequential for the camp’s commandant, in whose opinion the “pitiful lives” (Nguyen 2015b, 464) of the victims do not deserve to be remembered. Even acknowledging he has been “contaminated by the West” (406) is not enough. He is forced to “remember what [he has] forgotten” (451), to recuperate his repressed—never before consciously articulated—memory of witnessing the torture and interrogation of two communist agents, one of them gang-raped by South Vietnamese men, and his failure to act on their behalf. The narrator finally becomes aware that he perpetuates violence through inaction, and that accusing the Americans of bad faith and hypocrisy applies to himself, as well:

[Americans] pretend they are eternally innocent no matter how many times they lose their innocence. The problem is that those who insist on their innocence believe anything they do is just. At least we who believe in our own guilt know what dark things we can do. (248)

At the end, and despite being reminded that “the only cure for being a bastard is to take a side” (408), he comes to the insight that “the true optical illusion [is] in seeing others as undivided and whole, as if being in focus is more important than being out of focus” (484). This translates into acknowledging the gift of his seeing “any issue from both sides” (1), “ever mindful,” as Pat C. Hoy II maintains, “of the dangers of a single vision” (2015, 689).

After a year’s reeducation, the narrator is not “transformed into a Vietnamese once more” (Nguyen 2015b, 415), as the camp’s authorities would have it.

Instead, being subjected to torture, he undergoes a transformation with unexpected results: his mind splits. Put otherwise, he can now embrace his plural self, or to borrow Shameem Black's term, his "crowded self" whose contours "become porous and flexible" and pull "in the direction of the expanding and unknown multitude" (2010, 47). In the narrator's own words: "My cell divided, and divided, and divided again, until I was a million cells and more, until I was multitudes and multitudes, my own country, my own nation, the emperor and dictator of the masses of myself" (Nguyen 2015b, 476). Being finally "enlightened" (477), the narrator embraces a transcultural perspective that "opens his uniquely porous 'I' to a diverse collectivity" (Rody 2018, 400). To paraphrase Welsch, having recognized his "internal foreignness," the narrator can now accept "the external foreign" (1999, 201).¹⁵ In fact, as if to signal this development, at the end of the novel the character's narrative voice changes from the first-person singular "I" to the first-person plural "we."

The collective "we" he adopts includes all those people whose suffering and victimhood are not recognizable, represented, or rendered "grievable" (Butler 2009).¹⁶ Through his fractured identity, the narrator can identify with those alive or dead who are denied our affective response: "Our life and our death have taught us always to sympathize with the undesirables among the undesirables. Thus magnetized by experience, our compass continually points toward those who suffer" (Nguyen 2015b, 494). His plural "we" includes refugees who, like himself after his release from the camp, drift between borders, impacted by the traumatic memories of their painful pasts and, at the same time, threatened with erasure and death. From such an experience of statelessness and precarity, the possibility of making different kinds of ties emerges, and new forms of living together may follow. Indeed, Nguyen's character seems to envision a better future where new communal solidarities and political allegiances might be created among the stateless refugees: "we still consider ourselves revolutionary. We remain the most hopeful of creatures, [. . .] a revolutionary in search of a revolution" (494). Involved in this kind of revolution that the "crowded" narrator has in mind are stateless people like him, "refugees, exiles, migrants, immigrants, and emigrés, all carrying trauma and memory with them on their sometimes endless journeys through spaces of unbelonging," as Marianne Hirsch has put it, arguing in favor of a stateless memory (2019, 419).¹⁷

The sympathizer-refugee finally finds the power "to envision a stateless form of community in a suspended space of encounter" (Hirsch 2019, 431) with a work of art, which in this case is none other than the written confession he carries with him—in the form of the novel:

We have nothing to leave to anyone except these words, our best attempt to represent ourselves against all those who sought to represent us. [. . .] No, we

are not alone! Thousands more must be staring into darkness like us, gripped by scandalous thoughts, extravagant hopes, and forbidden plots. We lie in wait for the right moment and the just cause, which at this moment is simply wanting to live. And even as we write this final sentence, the sentence will not be revised, we confess to being certain of one and only one thing—we swear to keep, on penalty of death, this one promise: *We will live!* (Nguyen 2015b, 492–495)¹⁸

In *Nothing Ever Dies*, Nguyen has stressed the crucial role of literature and art in effecting the ethical work of just memory that would promote empathy and compassion. Even though art cannot enact significant change, it can “breed a sense of shared suffering, and this fellow feeling may urge us toward action” (2016, 267–268). In the same vein as Nguyen, Hirsch suggests that an encounter with works of art that acknowledge “the vulnerabilities of unbelonging, the violence of forced migration and the difficulties of statelessness” may “mobilize the urgency that something needs to be done” and allow us to imagine “the potentiality of different futures” (2019, 427). Put simply, the two scholars call for a transcultural orientation that might open up “spaces of encounter beyond nationalist and ethnocentric imaginaries” (Hirsch 2019, 422).

Nevertheless, in order to break from “ethnified” notions of memory (Dirk and Rothberg 2014, 32) and attempt the actualization/realization of transcultural ethics and politics, it is important, as Nguyen repeatedly reminds us, to embrace a just memory that attends to the material conditions of conflict¹⁹ and strives to recall one’s own and others (2016, 18), as well as how the inhuman inhabits the human (19). “Memory is haunted, not just by ghostly others but by the horrors we have done,” Nguyen contends. Thinking of memory as transcultural might draw attention to “our latent inhumanity [. . .] telling us that the past can repeat if, paradoxically, we do not remember” (269). Because, as he succinctly puts it, quoting Toni Morrison, “nothing ever dies” (1988, 36).

NOTES

1. The present paper draws on related arguments I have already discussed in my article “Transcultural with a Twist: Reading *Americanah* Contrapuntally.”

2. Some critics, Bond and Rapson among them, have acknowledged the groundwork laid by postcolonial theory for the critical movement described as the transcultural turn.

3. According to Halbwachs, it is in society “that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (1992, 38). Later, he adds: “the framework of collective memory confines and binds our most intimate remembrances to each other” (53).

4. In her 2004 book, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, Landsberg focuses on mass media representations of historical trauma and their impact, particularly on the United States. To this end, her critical analysis includes Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Toni Morrison's fiction, Alex Haley's *Roots*, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, along with many American films.

5. Inspired by Emmanuel Levinas, Landsberg emphasizes the power of empathy to transform a person by enabling the ethical connection with the Other, which is predicated on difference, not sameness.

6. In *Past (Im)Perfect Continuous*, Alice Balestrino makes the connection, noting that stateless memory could be an opportunity to remember the past and imagine the future, like postmemory (13).

7. Not much critical work has been done on the concept of "stateless memory," partly because it was proposed by Hirsch quite recently. So far, her thoughts on the subject appeared in an article focusing on feminist diasporic artists from different parts of the world, which was published twice as "Stateless Memory" (in *Critical Times*) and "Stateless Figures" (in *Past (Im)Perfect Continuous*).

8. While Ricoeur underlines memory's duty "to do justice, through memories, to an other than the self" (89), he also notes the "right of forgetting," which does not translate into the citizen's obligation to remember to forget evil, but into a duty to "state [evil] in a pacified mode, without anger." This sort of forgetting will not be enunciated as "a commandment, an order," but as a "wish in the optative mood" (456).

9. Nguyen frequently uses the terms "cosmopolitanism" and "cosmopolitan" (as for example, cosmopolitan artist, cosmopolitan education, cosmopolitan call, cosmopolitan citizen in *Nothing Ever Dies*) to qualify a certain kind of vision that would encompass all human beings on a worldwide scale. Although cosmopolitanism is intimately intertwined with transculturalism, I have avoided cosmopolitanism as it is often criticized for its contradictory relationship with power and elitist social representation.

10. Pratt's exact definition of the "contact zone" is "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (4).

11. The novel's sequel, *The Committed* explores issues of colonization, and in particular, France's history of colonialism in relation to the large immigrant communities (Vietnamese and others) of today's France. Nguyen has announced the publication of a third and final novel to the trilogy (2022a, 85).

12. The phrase belongs to Bakhtin and is quoted by Bhabha and again by Bond and Rapson.

13. As Nguyen argued in a recent interview, "a kind of political project that I wanted to be engaged in would have to be built on the principles of solidarity and alliances" (2022b).

14. Nguyen has repeatedly acknowledged his debt to Ellison, and many scholars have commented on the importance of this influence on the author's entire oeuvre. Among them, Sandra Kumamoto Stanley has pointed out the social implications of

intertextual connections, which operate as literary sites of memory. But, building upon Nguyen's own remarks, she argues that Nguyen departs from *Invisible Man's* conclusion of liberal individualism, embracing a collective "we" instead (2020, 296). See also note 3 in the same article.

15. In Welsch's words, recognizing "a degree of internal foreignness forms a prerequisite for the acceptance of the external foreign. It is precisely when we no longer deny, but rather perceive, our inner transculturality, that we will become capable of dealing with outer transculturality" (Welsch 1999, 201).

16. In *Nothing Ever Dies*, Nguyen addresses Butler's ethics of alterity, according to which the humanity of the other ought to be recognized, but he points out that sufficient attention is not given to the fact that the other is also capable of acts of inhumanity.

17. I am indebted to Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, who first, to my knowledge, pointed out the resonance between the narrator's radical imagination and Hirsch's stateless memory (2020).

18. As these lines are written, a new chapter has just begun in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Given that "all wars have murky beginnings and inconclusive endings" (Nguyen 2016, 5), it is fair to ask what transcultural, just memory would have to offer in situations of unresolvable conflict, like the one in the Middle East.

19. "Given the scale of so many historical traumas, it can only be the case that for many survivors, witnesses, and inheritors, the past can only be worked through together, in collectivity and community, in struggle and solidarity. This effort of a mass approach to memory should involve a confrontation with the present as much as the past, for it is today's material inequalities that help to shape mnemonic inequities" (Nguyen 2016, 16).

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