

**Oliver, Kendrick. *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006. 300pp.**

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The images are now familiar. The group of Vietnamese gathered by US troops moments before they were killed in Xom Lang/My Lai, the inhabitants of the village that lie dead on the trail; the babies and toddlers remains, amongst those of their parents and community; their names identifying the people below the photograph, not a normal feature when presented with this image (a method used so effectively by Robert Fisk). They deserve reflection and contextualisation. Too often in reproduction the familiar becomes banal. One glosses over the images with swift psychological categorisation to the context of the war in Vietnam. One has assimilated these particular images over time, one has become used to them, one has displaced their meaning. Kendrick Oliver's powerful study of the killing of over 400 "unarmed, unresisting inhabitants" of the village on 16 March 1968 is extraordinarily the first book to examine the place of this massacre in US history and memory. His findings force us to reflect further on these events, though their relevance to wider issues, contexts and wars are obvious and ongoing.

Oliver argues that contrary to the treatment of the massacre in much school and academic text, the revelation of the massacre left many Americans untroubled, dissimilar to the standard line that many Americans turned against the war as a result of these images. It was swiftly contextualised within the Tet Offensive and the brutality of the wider war. It was only when those directly responsible were brought to trial that the opposition mounted; when it became clear that the national will to win in the minds of the US leadership no longer held. Most studies on the US collective memory of the Vietnam War follow the fairly standard argument that whilst the war and in particular such atrocities and more particularly the images of such atrocities produced profound division at the time, with the passing of that time the social context and the national framework begin to exert their influences, pushing for greater consensus, agreement and the dissolution of anger, angst and social enmity. The community re-imagines itself, or in the words of Steven Rose, it 're-members' itself, through the necessary process of reconstruction, if not faithful recollection. Without forgetting, life itself might be impossible Roland Barthes suggested. But Oliver's meticulous research and sophisticated analysis and sustained argument is devastating all the more for its conclusion that the war and its attendant violence was assimilated not just after the fact as the nation moved towards the processes of healing, but also at the time. The principal US social concerns, which Oliver does share with others working on the memory(ies), is with the US soldiers as the principle victims, as refashioned in countless Vietnam movies.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Susan Sontag observed "what is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the stories in our

mind.” And ideologies working through archives of images encapsulate common ideas and “trigger predictable thoughts, feelings.” Oliver’s work does much to substantiate such an observation. Through four chapters of six, he centres his analysis on the issue of culpability. In reporting the culpability he advances a convincing argument, supported by exhaustive referencing across a formidable range of sources that the media largely worked within acceptable frameworks, rather than with the fidelity to investigative journalism. Of course there were the exceptions. Seymour Hersh’s reporting differed largely because, not just his style, but also because of his independence. He worked outside the loop in which other journalists were largely compromised or dependent. Oliver clearly, and in intricate detail, traces the “ideological discomfort of correspondents with stories that were critical of the national military effort, their dependence upon less than candid government sources, the need to preserve workable relationships with officers out in the field, the empathic continence and ethical agnosticism required by the ‘objective’ register of journalistic address, and the commercial constraints upon the broadcast and publication of graphic accounts of injury and death...” but these alone do not entirely explain the US silence on civilian casualties. There was also the difficulty in separating the acceptable from the unacceptable behaviour in wartime. And much atrocity was perhaps filtered through explanatory and justificatory frameworks associated with the brutality of war. In chapters on containing and dispersing the culpability, the blame was shifted to broader contexts, to the culture of American war making in Vietnam, suggesting that the killings at My Lai were consonant with attitudes and actions in that war. Others widened the circle still further to encompass human behaviour under such circumstances. Still, others limited the story to the personal guilt of those directly involved, a narrative obviously buttressed by the legal process, that rested with the “supposition that the causes of the massacre were essentially local, rooted in the aberrant criminality of a small group of men”. Finally, in the process of “abstracting culpability” the tendency to shift the blame from the particular to broader contexts without pinning the blame in any specific locale in effect “allow[ed] responsibility to drift.”

The research for this study is commendable. Oliver’s use of such a variety of sources and the depth of investigation, reflection and analysis is evident throughout. The victims at My Lai have been effectively displaced from the American narratives that continuously looked inward. In echo Sontag proposed that arguments that called for the withholding of such disturbing images, especially in the interests of ‘good taste’ was always “a repressive standard when invoked by institutions.” Oliver’s study insists on further reflection.