

Book Notes

RE-MEMBERING CULTURE: ERASURE AND RENEWAL IN HMONG AMERICAN EDUCATION

by Bic Ngo

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In the novel *The Buried Giant* by Kazuo Ishiguro (2015), an old couple embarks on a quest to find a son whom they seem to barely remember. A fog overtakes their memories, and recollections emerge only in fragments. They realize that a mist had been cast to make people forget troubled pasts, and when the dragon that maintains the mist is slain, they face forgotten personal and social memories of massacres and war violence that had torn their communities apart. This enchanting tale about forgetting and remembering resembles the stories that Bic Ngo tells in her book *Re-membering Culture: Erasure and Renewal in Hmong American Education*—of a Hmong American community that also contends with a fog pervading its experiences with educational systems in the US, where they are pushed to forget their cultural values, community histories, and memories of war and displacement. Ngo's book lifts the mist to reveal the ways in which schools play a central role in the erasure of minoritized cultures and the resistance communities forge against such erasures.

From the histories of ancient civilizations to the math behind quadratic equations, schools inscribe various kinds of knowledge onto students. Yet, in teaching, upholding, and instilling lessons that reflect power differentials, schools strip away knowledge that minoritized communities hold and replace them with white, Western knowledge systems. Ngo names this process “structured forgetting” (2). While forgetting is often rendered as an individual act of losing memory, structured forgetting addresses structural dimensions of power and dominance that shape what gets lost, erased, and forgotten in schools through the exclusion of minoritized communities' perspectives, the devaluation of minoritized students' ways of being and knowing, and the demands of assimilation into white hegemonic culture.

Re-membering Culture is rooted in a critique of colonial and imperial formations that shape the schooling experiences of minoritized diasporic communities. Ngo locates structured forgetting in relation to wa Thiong'o's (2009) theorization of the colonial production of dismemberment, which severs and

uproots colonial subjects from their ancestral heritage, collective memories, and knowledge systems. Drawing on this decolonial critique, Ngo argues that schooling is a project of coloniality that sustains long-standing patterns of power that shape knowledge production, social relations, and culture (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). In continuing the legacies of colonialism, schools advance the cultural logics of Western knowledge at the expense of the language, culture, and memories of minoritized communities.

As sites of structured forgetting, schools contribute to Hmong students' language loss, ignorance about older generations of Hmong refugees' experiences, and disengagement from cultural values and responsibilities. Hmong American students particularly "traverse a disproportionately dense border" (67) as they negotiate the values of hegemonic culture, such as individualistic notions of success upheld in schools, and the collectivist Hmong cultural values they learn at home. Adding to existing work on the devaluation of Hmong cultural beliefs, knowledge, and identities in US educational and medical systems (Fadiman, 1997; Lee, 2005), Ngo understands Hmong Americans' experiences with schooling as being embedded in the fabric of US colonial and imperial structures. The book situates the experiences of the Hmong diaspora in the everyday residues of war and displacement as a direct result of US intervention in a civil war in Laos. Recruited to be proxy soldiers to battle communists backed by the Soviet Union, many Hmong and other Lao-tian Indigenous groups were abandoned by the US and had to flee political persecution and ethnic cleansing on their own after the war ended. As a part of the American empire's disenfranchisement, displacement, and fragmentation of people around the world, Hmong Americans have faced forced migration and ongoing dispossession due to US imperialism and settler colonialism. Drawing on this history, Ngo problematizes narratives that position the US as a welcoming host for refugees rather than a culprit in the forced displacement of people through its imperialist endeavors. Countering colonial and imperial discourses, Ngo positions this book as an "intervention to the fragmentation and erasure of Hmong cultural heritage, identity, and community" (11). *Remembering Culture* seeks to center and uplift Hmong American narratives and experiences around culture in education.

Drawing on ethnographic research carried out at a public high school with a large Hmong American student population (46.4 percent) and interviews with Hmong American students, parents, staff, teachers, and community leaders, the book details how Hmong Americans combat structured forgetting in school through *re-membering* their culture. Ngo conceptualizes re-membering culture as "the recovering of memory of the past (e.g., language, heritage, epistemology) as well as the reclaiming of (ethnic/indigenous group) belonging and connectedness from that which was fragmented" (7). Notable in the conceptualization of re-membering is the attention to both memory and membership, accentuated by the hyphen. Re-membering the past unearths insurgent memories that have been buried away under projects of dismemberment,

and re-membling as belonging seeks to nurture and sustain communities. Encompassing efforts to rebuild knowledge, memory, and community, re-membling captures diverse everyday practices of resisting hegemonic structures and power.

Ngo's conception of re-membling includes three facets. First, through (re)storytelling, which recounts alternative stories that speak back to dominant narratives, Hmong Americans contest essentialized depictions of Hmong culture as patriarchal, homogeneous, and premodern and highlight the multiplicity and complexity of Hmong American experiences. Second, resurgence, which seeks to reclaim and regenerate dismembered cultural practices, manifests in the activities of the school's Hmong club to connect students with their heritage, affirm their language and culture, and foster community. As an example, the club's Hmong New Year event enabled students to celebrate Hmong food, clothing, and performances and reinstate Hmong cultural repertoires in school spaces. Finally, Ngo sees refusal—rejection of cultural logics of colonialism and engagement with alternative structures of thought—in the Hmong American community's intervention in the cultural neutrality of schooling through their advocacy for Hmong representation in school district leadership. This analysis, however, may not fully reflect Simpson's (2014) theorization of refusal as a political stance that unsettles their desire to be recognized under existing structures, as demands for cultural representation fall short of fundamentally disrupting settler colonialist order. While the book makes clear reference to the three tenets associated with re-membling, more explicit connections to the overarching notion of re-membling culture in its chapters could have helped further support its major framework. The framework of re-membling culture nevertheless provides important insights for readers to trace the significance of recovering memory and culture in disrupting the colonality of schooling.

Re-membling Culture offers an important reckoning of culture in education research. Discussions of culture in education have ranged from deficit-oriented perspectives that use culture to explain academic achievement to the asset-based lens of critical scholarship that affirms the community cultural wealth that students from minoritized backgrounds hold (Yosso, 2005). Adding another lens for understanding culture, Ngo "shifts the focus of culture in education from inclusion, competency, respect, and celebration to an analysis of culture that attends to the exigencies of recovery, renewal, and remembering due to the violences of empire building" (2). This paradigm shift is the book's ground-breaking contribution to the field of education. Attending to the ways that culture is deployed to enact and reject oppression, Ngo articulates the workings of cultural imperialism in US schooling that seek to replace immigrant and diasporic cultures with hegemonic white American culture and, in doing so, relocates the blame often placed on the cultural practices of the marginalized to problematize the white, Western gaze that reinforces othering and exclusion. *Re-membling Culture* thus offers an understanding of culture as a site of resistance to colonial and imperial erasures.

This leaves us with questions to grapple with in naming and disrupting the grammar of schooling that forces students to lose a part of themselves. How can future scholars examine educational experiences of minoritized communities at the nexus of racism, coloniality, and imperialism while also attending to the particularities of these structural forces? How might scholars build on or complicate Ngo's understandings of the ways culture is deployed across educational spaces by offering insights from other sites of study, such as depoliticized student cultural groups and neoliberal institutional policies? What implications does ethnic boundary-making (as in the case of the Hmong club that seeks to maintain a distinct space for Hmong students instead of merging with non-Hmong Asian groups) leave for building panethnic and crossracial solidarities? How can education scholars and practitioners foster a decolonial ethic in education that interrogates colonized knowledge and create spaces of re-membering?

What do schools teach us to forget, and how do communities re-member? *Re-membering Culture* powerfully declares school as a site of structured forgetting within US imperial architectures. Attending to the voices of Hmong American students and communities, it illustrates how they carve spaces for their memories, knowledge, and culture to protect against erasure. Writing against systems that replace diasporic memories with imperialist elocutions, Ngo asks readers to hold memories that are relegated to the margins. Recovering and re-membering these memories remind us that "memory is the link between the past and the present, between space and time, and it is the base of our dreams" (wa Thiong'o, 2009, 38).

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