LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS

How to Forget: On Lewis Hyde's "A Primer for Forgetting: Getting Past the Past"

By Sebastian Stockman

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APU HAS DONE the reading.

I know. I know that Apu — *The Simpsons*'s collection-of-South-Asian-stereotypes voiced by Hank Azaria in brown-throat — is canceled. I don't mourn his passing. But under consideration here are some of the assumptions of *The Simpsons*'s Ivy League–larded writers' room, and what those assumptions might reveal or suggest about the nature of our historical memory.

With your indulgence, then: roughly a generation and a half ago (season 7, episode 23), *The Simpsons* tackled immigration. Facing deportation, Apu takes an 11th-hour citizenship test. We see the denouement:

> **Citizenship Test Guy:** "Alright, here's your last question: what was the cause of the Civil War?"
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> **Apu:** "Actually, there were numerous causes. Aside from the obvious schism between abolitionists and anti-abolitionists, economic factors, both domestic and international played a significant—"
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> **Test Guy:** "Hey, hey."
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> **Apu:** "Yeah."
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> **Citizenship Test Guy:** "Just, just say 'slavery.'"

In yet another stereotype, Apu is over-prepared. That overpreparation allows the viewer to chuckle knowingly at the bored bureaucrat at best uninterested in, and at worst hostile to, the nuance Apu attempts. He wants the fourth-grade answer so that he can call it a day. In this light, the joke pokes at American intellectual laziness. Apu has done the reading, but when in America has that counted for much?

It's a rueful joke crafted by a roomful of rueful nerds. But it rests on a faulty assumption, one I grew up with and one you might have, too. That assumption: that "slavery" is the baby's answer to, "What caused the Civil War?" Fine for an elementary school test, but those of us who cared about our grades — me, you, most of *The Simpsons*'s writers — "knew" that "there were numerous causes." There was economic anxiety. People stood on the principle of states' rights. Some of them just really liked Virginia.

But the joke's on us. Slavery is the right answer. Those deep economic interests rested on the free labor that allowed King Cotton to reign. The states' right at issue was whether or not a state could enforce slavery within its borders.

Apu has done the reading, and so have the writers and so have we — or we were at least aware of it — but so much of that reading was shaped, warped, by the purveyors of the Lost Cause of the noble Confederacy.

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In *A Primer for Forgetting: Getting Past the Past*, Lewis Hyde notes that this warping began right away. In 1867, Horace Greeley told a mixed-race crowd in Richmond: "Forget that some of you have been masters, others slaves […] remember only that you are Virginians." This was, Hyde explains, "the main rhetorical trick of all Lost Cause orators," who focused "on the sincerity, valor, and devotion of individual soldiers, North and South, and […] sa[id] nothing about slavery and emancipation." This was the approach that noted segregationist Woodrow Wilson adopted. As president, he addressed veterans ("These gallant men in blue and gray") on the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg: "In their presence it were an impertinence to discourse upon how the battle went, how it ended, what it signified!" One can find this trick everywhere. I noticed it on the back cover of Michael Shaara's 1975 Pulitzer Prize–winning *The Killer Angels*, about Gettysburg. The summary (emphasis mine) reads: "In the four most bloody and courageous days of our nation's history, two armies fought for two conflicting *dreams*. One dreamed of freedom, the other of *a way of life.*" The copywriter elaborates neither on the nature of that way of life nor its economic underpinnings, and so the fears of Frederick Douglass are realized.

Because Douglass saw it coming: "May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I forget the difference between the parties to that … bloody conflict." "Disgusted by the 'hand clasping across the bloody chasm business,'" Hyde writes, "Douglass called out all who, 'in the name of patriotism,' ask us 'to remember with equal admiration those who struck at the nation's life, and those who struck to save it.'" In his speeches, Douglass issued point-by-point rebuttals of the Lost Cause narrative. In 1884, he sternly rebuked what would seem to be Hyde's thesis, which Hyde nevertheless quotes approvingly:

"We are often asked and exhorted … to forget the past," Douglass says. "I differ entirely. … If we forget the errors and evils of the past, we must also forget the intelligence, the courage and the moral heroism by which they were combatted and overthrown, and thus lose a vast motive power and inspiration to high and virtuous endeavor."

The late Tony Horwitz, in a *Fresh Air* interview about his book *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War*, said: "[A] black woman said something else to me that stuck with me; she said, 'They can remember that war all they want as long as they remember they lost.'" But people who fly the Stars and Bars aren't remembering that they lost. Even worse, Hyde suggests — they didn't. "In 1865, the South surrendered to the North at the courthouse in Appomattox," he writes, but "in 1877, the North surrendered to the South,

nationwide. Henceforth any story claiming abolition as the cause of the war [would] be forgotten."

We see this surrender in 1914, when Wilson honors "gallant men in blue and gray," and in 1975, when Shaara romanticizes two armies with "conflicting dreams." It is the reason that, in 1995, *The Simpsons* can make a joke in which "slavery" is not the correct answer but a punch line.

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Hyde describes *A Primer for Forgetting* as "a thought experiment seeking out places where forgetting is more useful than memory," so the deployment of this hijacked historical memory might seem curious, as it militates against Hyde's thesis. But Hyde is always an honest broker of ideas. An open-hearted interdisciplinarian who traces arguments across anthropology, history, poetry, and other fields, he is best known for his first book, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. A 2008 magazine profile of Hyde called his work "almost impossible to summarize," but let's just say that in *The Gift*, it is Hyde's assumption "that works of art exist simultaneously in two 'economies,' a market economy and a gift economy," and the book is in part an attempt to address the opposed imperatives of those systems.

Hyde's arguments are complicated, but one can think of them as stubborn refusals to take the established order for granted. In *The Gift*, it's the market economy. In *Common as Air: Revolution, Art, and Ownership*, it's the copyright regime. In *A Primer for Forgetting*, Hyde wants to trouble our notion of memory as always preferable to forgetfulness. In a series of sometimes interlocking and sometimes obliquely connected "notebook" entries, Hyde makes his case — or examines its failure.

On the most basic level, Hyde argues that we need "forgetting" in order to access abstract concepts: we must "forget many particular trees before we can know Tree itself," he observes. We also need forgetting to both make and experience art. This leads to Hyde's omnipresent concern: by what magic do creators conjure their creations? He quotes E. M. Forster: "The poet wrote the poem no doubt, but he forgot himself while he wrote it, and we forget him while we read."

That idea, being what we might call "in the zone," has a name in positive psychology: "flow state." It's that feeling of being present and fully absorbed in a task. The concept's originator, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, modestly calls it "the secret to happiness." In Hyde's telling, our brains must be nimble in acquiring and discarding ideas, while keeping open a space in which new ideas may occur. If we pitched *Primer* to TED Talk habitués, we could call it "The Life-Changing Magic of Letting Things Go." But Hyde could never give a TED Talk. He refuses to sand the edges or round off the corners of his ideas. And when he extends his thought experiment from the individual to the communal, or national, uses of forgetting, he confronts the limits of his approach.

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Hyde quotes Ernest Renan: “The essence of a nation is that all its individuals have many things in common, and also that everyone has forgotten many things.” No French citizens, Renan says, remember the 16th-century St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre. This leads Hyde to consider Slobodan Milošević, whom he calls “a skilled apologist for the memory of difference,” and that strongman’s 1988–’89 commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo. Muslim Turks defeated forces led by Lazar Hrebeljanović, who became a sort of Serbian national saint. The defeat led to 400 years of Ottoman rule, plus two centuries of festering resentment. (The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, in Sarajevo, occurred on the 525th anniversary.)

Hyde identifies the Serbs’ fetishization of their defeat as “a chosen trauma,” a wound continually picked at and encouraged to fester, one that preserves “identity by way of mourning without end.” The implication: everyone would be better off if the Serbs could forget Kosovo the way the French have forgotten St. Bartholomew’s Day. He suggests replacing Renan’s answer to, “What is a nation?” with Karl Deutsch’s: “A nation is a group of people united by a mistaken view of the past and a hatred of their neighbors.”

Hyde tells us he’d “prefer to forget about the national soul, along with all the rest” of nationalist trappings. But he finds Renan’s formulation useful, since “all group identity, all abstract knowing, has such origins. Families know themselves by mixing recollection and elision.” Given that we form these abstract groupings — family, community, nation — the question arises: Are we forgetting the right things? Are there things we’re required to remember?

Avishai Margalit takes up the latter question in *The Ethics of Memory*. Margalit says that while the book is about neither his parents nor the Holocaust, it is inspired by their reactions to it. He paraphrases his mother’s position as “[t]he only honorable role for the Jews that remain is to form communities of memory,” while his father believed it “[b]etter to create a community that thinks predominantly about the future and reacts to the present, not a community that is governed from mass graves.”

Hyde’s abstract group identities are what Margalit calls “communities of memory,” of which the nation is one type. In relating the “ethic of memory” to an “ethic of care,” Margalit offers the story of a colonel who, earlier in his career, lost a soldier to friendly fire. The colonel did not remember the soldier’s name; the public was outraged. After asking whether failure to remember the soldier’s name means the colonel failed to remember the soldier, Margalit connects caring, ethics, and memory: “If I care for someone or for something, and then I forget that person or that thing, this means I have stopped caring for him or it.” We can remember something without caring about it, but we can’t care about something we don’t remember.

Does Hyde want us to care about fewer things? In one sense, yes. “Monuments,” Margalit says. “[E]ven those located in salient places, become ‘invisible’ or illegible with the passage of time.” Margalit is pointing out the inadequacy of monuments as loci of meaningful collective memory. Hyde suggests this is a feature, not a bug: his ideal monument is the gravestone “we may visit but need not do so.” This describes the markers for the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre or the Battle of Hastings, but not the markers on the Battle of Kosovo’s Field of Blackbirds. In the

former cases, people remember but don't care; in the latter, people remember, care, and act upon that care.

Having surrendered densely layered argument for "prose collage," Hyde admits failure twice, in the post–Civil War narrative, and in the displacement and genocide of the indigenous peoples of this country. We shouldn't forget these — at least not yet. We still need to care.

In *A Primer for Forgetting*, a particular bloodletting, at Sand Creek in Colorado, stands in for centuries of mayhem. Hyde's account is taken from the description of a Captain Silas Soule, who refused to take part in the attack by Colonel John Chivington and 700 men on a Cheyenne and Arapaho encampment. Soule's account turns the stomach: "I tell you […] it was hard to see little children on their knees have their brains beat out by men professing to be civilized. […] White Antelope, War Bonnet and a number of others had Ears and Privates cut off." After eight hours of brutal slaughter, Chivington's men burned down the camp. "We" haven't forgotten the Native American genocides, exactly — there is a monument to mark the massacre outside (note the name) Chivington, Colorado — but it is hard to say "we" care.

In *The Buried Giant*, Kazuo Ishiguro employs Arthurian myth to interrogate the uses of national or collective memory. The land — a storybook, just-past-medieval, not-exactly England — is shrouded in an amnesia-inducing mist. Axl and Beatrice, an old couple, travel to find their dimly remembered son. The couple end up in a Saxon village, where they find and travel with a small boy and a Saxon swordsman disguising himself as a shepherd.

We slowly discover that King Arthur perpetrated a genocide against the Saxons. In order to return peace to his now "united" kingdom, Arthur had Merlin cast a spell on a dragon who, sleeping, exhales this mist of forgetfulness. Gawain, the lone surviving member of the Round Table, patrols the mountains. Ostensibly hunting the dragon, he instead protects its sleep to preserve the mist, and the peace.

The Saxon asks Gawain "[b]y what strange skill" Arthur managed to "heal the scars of war." Arthur, Gawain says, "was a ruler never thought himself greater than God, and always prayed for guidance. So it was that the conquered, no less than those who fought at his side, saw his fairness and wished him as their king." Gallant men in blue and gray. Armies fighting for two conflicting dreams. We're all Virginians now.

If the allegory seems a little heavy-handed — an actual dragon of forgetfulness? — consider Ari Kelman: "[F]rom the start of the reservation era until relatively recently, Cheyenne and Arapaho people were discouraged, sometimes violently, from telling their Sand Creek stories. […] [W]hite authorities believed that keeping alive memories of the massacre preserved links to the past, to a traditional way of life, hindering acculturation." Forgetting, it would seem, privileges the powerful.

Gawain's response shows the shape of the needle Hyde is trying to thread. Hyde has conceded his thought experiment's failure, both at Sand Creek and in the Civil War's continual misrepresentation, but still thinks proper forgetting is the answer:

> If, in the psychology of individuals, unresolved traumatic memories present themselves symptomatically […] does something similar hold for the psychology of nations? Does unexamined history reappear in some form of collective acting out, nightmare, flashback, and so on? If so, then forced forgetting doesn't resolve or transcend a violent past but obliges it to live on by displacement.

As Wistan, the Saxon out to end the mist, asks: "How can old wounds heal while maggots linger so richly? Or a peace hold for ever built on slaughter and a magician's trickery?" Hyde wants peace, and forgetting, but on the proper terms.

Hyde says his experiment fails, or at least "has yet to be carried to closure." We have tried to keep the wounds from these traumas bandaged, out of sight. But Hyde doesn't want them covered. He wants them to heal, to scab over and leave scars on the body politic. That requires the proper treatment of these infected wounds.

The way we have treated this infection heretofore has been to deny it: "That's not us." Hyde's call to forget the past first requires confrontation: the "real work of forgetting," Hyde says, involves "the working through of a memory rather than its repression." The first step of this real work is to acknowledge our role, to say, "Yes, that's us."

The 1619 Project recently launched by *The New York Times* and its lead writer, Nikole Hannah-Jones, as well as work by Ta-Nehisi Coates and many others might be a prelude to a reckoning, to the beginnings of a working-through. More than any checks cut for reparations, Coates wrote in "The Case for Reparations," "[a]n America that asks what it owes its most vulnerable citizens is improved and humane." That asking is the vehicle for the country's "maturation out of the childhood myth of its innocence into a wisdom worthy of its founders."

In other words, there's more reading to do.

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Sebastian Stockman is an Associate Teaching Professor in English at Northeastern University. He has written for *The New York Times Book Review, The Boston Globe*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, among many other outlets. His essays have been "notable" selections in the Best American Essays and Best American Sportswriting collections. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.