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Gendered Corporeality and Bare Lives: Local Sacrifices and Sufferings during the Vietnam War

It was impossible to avoid noticing how the used syringes had been dropped into one of the big pots on the porch of the house. I had just arrived at my host family's home in Thinh Tri, a northern Vietnamese commune, where I was to conduct anthropological fieldwork.¹ The syringes bore witness to the medication that Nam, the father of this well-regarded family, injected on a regular basis. Obviously, Nam was not only a war invalid (*thuong binh*) but a war invalid in pain. Nam's wife Khai, who received honors for her actions during the war, helped him to inject the medication, which reduced the pain and enabled Nam to get out of the bed where he otherwise would spend many hours a day.

During the war between Vietnam and the United States (1965–75), which Thinh Tri inhabitants refer to as the American War (*Chien tranh My*), Nam served as a soldier in the People's Army of Viet Nam, also known as the North Vietnamese Army.²

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¹ The name of the commune and any personal names referred to in this article are pseudonyms.

² See Ruane (1998, 71–88) for a discussion of the inauguration of the war. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (of August 1964) formally marks the beginning of the U.S. conflict with North Vietnam, while the U.S. bombings in 1965 indicate the eruption of an open war. Another Vietnamese expression for the war is *Cuoc chien chong My*. Here, I use the local Thinh Tri expression *Chien Tranh My*.

His body was marked by the war. Most striking was the fact that he had only one eye; the missing eye had been damaged in combat and removed in an emergency surgical procedure during the war. In another time, one not circumscribed by war and poverty, an artificial eye could have replaced Nam's wounded eye. Today though, an artificial eye was not considered a realistic option; the surgical procedure would not only be costly but would also be a medical challenge. Furthermore, Nam had become somewhat accustomed to his modified body.

Right from the beginning of my stay in the commune, Khai told me that Nam did not want to talk about his impairment and poor health. Hence, I did not ask. He was kind, mild, and talkative but somewhat withdrawn from the family life of which I eventually became a part. The war had ended a long time ago, but it continued to affect the life of my host family in conspicuous ways. Not until five years after my first stay with Nam's family, when they once again offered to be my host family upon my return to Thinh Tri to carry out yet another period of fieldwork, did Khai let me know that Nam would like to share with me his war memories.³ This article is about Nam, Khai, and other Thinh Tri inhabitants upon whom the war between Vietnam and the United States inflicted harm and pain by radically fracturing their lives.

As Nam and Khai's relationship implies, the roles attributed to and enacted by men and women during the American War shaped individual war experiences and memories. While Nam was enlisted in the army, Khai organized the flow of urban refugees seeking protection in the countryside from the bombing attacks on Hanoi, and she even took care of wounded soldiers who returned from the battlefields. Nam's and Khai's examples show how men, more so than women, were drafted into the army and expected to make sacrifices (*hy sinh*) by investing their lives, while women

³ This article draws on two periods of fieldwork conducted in Thinh Tri, one of fourteen months spanning 1994 and 1995 and one of eight months spanning 2000 and 2001. During my first fieldwork period, I continuously observed the social interaction of five families in order to study gender socialization. I observed social interaction among children, their siblings, parents, grandparents, other kin, peers, and teachers, and conducted in-depth interviews with all these groups and with official representatives. I gathered more than sixty-four hours of recordings, which were transcribed into Vietnamese (see, e.g., Rydstrøm 2002, 2003a, 2004). During my second fieldwork period, I worked with four families and focused on intergenerational perceptions of violence and war (as well as sexuality). The data consisted of in-depth interviews with adolescents, their peers, parents, grandparents, other kin, teachers, and official representatives, focus group discussions, and participant observation. The fieldwork resulted in forty hours of tape recordings, which were transcribed into Vietnamese (see, e.g., Rydstrøm 2003b, 2006a, 2006b, 2007).

were asked to provide a supportive force at the rear, ready to make self-sacrifices by enduring suffering (*chiu dau kho*).⁴

The war, however, also blurred the rigid roles of women and men whenever women replaced men: not only men but women too would enlist in the army; women would take over production tasks and even act as heads of household in the absence of a husband. The potential for empowerment inherent in such changes was questionable, though. For Khai, as for many other northern Vietnamese women, maintaining her role as head of the household after the end of the war was at the cost of a fragile and tormented husband. For other women, continuing in the role of head of household meant replacing a husband who had never returned.⁵

Previous research on war has rarely addressed local gender configurations or how expectations about female and male roles, obligations, sacrifice, and suffering relate to particular conflicts. A gender perspective on war tends to be conflated with a focus on women, as illustrated, for instance, by the work of Jeanne Vickers (1993), Penny Summerfield (1998), Karen G. Turner (1998), Cynthia Enloe (2000, 2007), Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman (2004), Cynthia Cockburn (2007), and Sandra Taylor (2007). Studies on war seem inclined to consider the roles of either women or men (Goldstein 2006) but less often the ways in which gender as a female-male relational sociocultural “logic” (Bourdieu 1992) permeates warfare, war experiences, memories, and official commemoration.

I address this paucity in current feminist research on war by applying a corporeal view to my field data from Vietnam. I do so by examining three distinct, yet intimately intertwined, bodily dimensions that together elucidate how the war machine, in a continuous motion of reciprocity, was informed by, while simultaneously twisting, local gender constructions.⁶ The first dimension considers the ways war and its violence are inherently corporeal, embodied in the social and individual body as memories of brutality and pain (Das and Kleinman 2000; Nordstrom 2004). The second dimension refers to the gendered distinctions among war experiences as they are shaped in accordance with attempts to reduce women and men to bare life in a game of war obsessed with the desub-

⁴ See Bao (1998), Bradley (2001), Malarney (2001), and Tai (2001).

⁵ Reasons for a missing husband include his death or the fact that he had built a new family elsewhere.

⁶ For a discussion of the human body as a socioculturally constructed corporeality composed of sex, gender, and sexuality versus the body as a gendered materiality absorbing sex and sexuality, see Butler (1993) and Rydstrom (2002, 2003a).

justification through destruction of human beings—that is, killing (Scarry 1985; Agamben 1998). The last dimension concerns local intercorporeal understandings of women’s and men’s war involvement: while men’s sacrifices relate to the fictive brotherhood of the armed forces, women’s self-sacrificial suffering refers to their real kin position, especially as mothers of enlisted sons.

In order to explore these three dimensions of the gendered corporeality of war and the ways in which they have framed and continue to frame the lives of Think Tri women and men, I bring my data from this Vietnamese community into dialogue with studies on memory and war. I then proceed with an examination of my ethnographic data that highlights local ways of construing women and men, the war-related roles ascribed to and enacted by women and men, the ways in which individual and collective agency are contested or supported, and how local memories correspond with or diverge from the official Vietnamese commemoration of the war. In doing so, I hope the article will contribute useful insights to feminist studies about how gendered connections between corporeality and war in particular ethnographic settings perpetually revolutionize the lives of women and men, both during and after war.⁷

The incorporation of war memories

Anchored in the body, memories refer to multiple plateaus that consist of a complex blend of emotions, experiences, habits, practices, and knowledge of the past (Merleau-Ponty [1962] 1996; Scarry 1985; Bourdieu 1992). “So many tragic memories,” says a former North Vietnamese soldier in the novel *The Sorrow of War* (Bao 1998, 40). “So much pain from long ago that I have told myself to forget, yet it is that easy to return to them. My memories of war are always close by, easily provoked at random moments” (40). Evoking similar sensations, the author Duong Thu Huong (1994) concludes in her novel *Paradise of the Blind* that “memory refuses to die” (258). Just like the former soldier, Duong reminds us that agonizing memories may haunt a person in ghostly ways, as persistent flashbacks, vibrating images, bodily pain, or elusive shadows (Carsten 2007).⁸

⁷ Anthropological studies have highlighted the intersections between constructions of the body and war; see, e.g., Nordstrom (1991, 2004), Olujić (1995), Das (2000), and Todeschini (2001).

⁸ Not only Duong (1994) but also Wayne Karlin and Ho Anh Thai (2003) have described how war memories circumscribe life in postconflict Vietnam. See also Weaver (2010) on rape during the Vietnam War, Gustafsson (2009) on post-traumatic stress disorders, Kwon (2006, 2008) on ghostly memories, and Rydstrom (2007) on reconciliation.

The ghosts of war experiences show us how disruptive incidents leave people with memories of sudden and inexplicable pain from which it is difficult to detach themselves (Das and Kleinman 2000).⁹ An overwhelming memory is ingrained in a plagued body—and pain holds a particularly powerful potential to revolutionize our memories. The worse the pain the memory inflicts, the more difficult it becomes to forget (Grosz 1994; Frank 1995; Becker 1999). Extreme physical pain might provoke trauma, because “the images one experiences during the [extraordinary] event, and associates with it afterwards, are placed outside the bounds of normal memory” (Brown 2006, 137; see also Jackson 2002). As defining moments in a person’s life, traumatic incidents are not experienced as belonging to the past. Rather, as embodied knowledge they are remembered with arresting clarity and thus refuse to fall into oblivion (Frank 1995; Leydesdorff, Passerini, and Thompson 2007). They cannot be unraveled. Remembered and incorporated knowledge cannot be eradicated without injuring the body itself (Scarry 1985).

Gendered desubjectification through destruction

The war machine is exceptional in that it sanctions the act of killing as a demonstration of how human beings can be desubjectified through destruction (Scarry 1985).¹⁰ In warfare, the human body materializes as a site upon which “inflicting physical suffering is actively practiced and also legally condoned” (Asad 1996, 1094). When exposed to death in war, citizens metamorphose into subjects in a double bind. They are framed as objects to kill, in both the agentive and objective senses of that verb. They are also wrought as both fighters for and sacrifices to the idea of the nation-state.

The reduction of humans to targets of destruction is the basis for “bare life,” as conceptualized by Giorgio Agamben (1998) in his discussion of the figure of the *homo sacer*. Agamben borrows the term *homo sacer* from Roman legal treatises. In the Roman Empire, a man who had committed a severe crime would be banned from society and his citizenship rights revoked. He would be deemed sacred by a sovereign political power, one

⁹ Yet another ghostly aspect of war is the aggravation of the power of ghosts due to inadequate funeral rituals for fallen soldiers, for instance; see Bao (1998), Kwon (2008), and Leshkovich (2008).

¹⁰ In Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s work (2002), the war machine does not have only real war as its object. Understood both as a manifestation of destruction within the nation-state and as a potential progression external to the state, the war machine remains ambiguous.

primordial to the distinction between the sacred and the profane, the religious and the juridico-political. In this sense, *sacer* designates difference, and it is like a curse. A cursed man is excluded from two legal orders: “by being permitted to be killed, *homo sacer* does not enjoy and cannot appeal to the protection of human law forbidding homicide. By being prohibited from sacrifice, *homo sacer* is removed from the divine law governing the economy of sacrifice” (Robert 2009, 13). Exceeding the sphere both of law and sacrifice, *homo sacer* is a subject transmuted into an object of violence, a naked life that can be killed by anyone (Agamben 1998; Robert 2009). Agamben sees *homo sacer* as an emblematic figure emancipated from sacrificial ideology, one that recurs in many different materializations throughout history as bare life exposed to political violence “in the most profane and banal ways” (Agamben 1998, 114; see also Arendt 1970; Ek 2006; Robert 2009).¹¹

Women in ancient Rome were restricted to the domestic sphere. They were outside the political realm and could not be deemed sacred. The figure of the *homo sacer* is therefore necessarily male, and it thus excludes women. The gendered aspects of bare life, in other words, remain absent in Agamben’s theory. It also overlooks the clandestine and ambiguous forces of sacrifice as they are recurrently introduced in political ideology. In present-day wars, not only is the religiously influenced sense of “sacred” accentuated, it is also highly gendered. Political strategies and fights for larger purposes are draped in semireligious terminologies imbued with expectations about gendered sacredness and sacrifice (Nordstrom 2004). Even though the *homo sacer* figure is helpful, it does not account for its own gendered dimensions. Yet studies of the configuration of bare life in wartime call for the inclusion of gender and its intersections with politicized economies of sacrifice (Ek 2006; Robert 2009).

During the war between North Vietnam and the United States, the North Vietnamese state perpetually exhorted women and men to make sacrifices in order to win a war that was referred to by the secular state precisely as sacred (*than thanh*; see Duiker 1995; Bradley 2001). In official discourse, “sacred” denoted something particularly valuable that demanded an extraordinary contribution; that is, it demanded a sacrifice (see also Robert 2009). Caught up in the conflict, North Vietnamese inhabitants were transfigured into bare life. But that bare life was gendered. It demanded distinct roles and obligations associated with specific sacrificial behaviors of women and men.

¹¹ Camps exacerbate how spaces of exception frame the violation of bare life; see Agamben (1998).

Local gender configurations

The firm imprint of destruction caused by the American War is particularly conspicuous when making one's way to Think Tri. Traveling to the commune through Ha Tay Province, the visitor crosses the landscape of the Red River delta, which is strewn with cemeteries for soldiers and with bomb craters that have been turned into small lakes. At the entry to the commune, visitors pass a cemetery for fallen soldiers, which, with its large official monument of commemoration, embodies the torment of the past in the present.

By local standards, Think Tri is a well-to-do commune that does not suffer from any particular social, economic, or political problems.¹² The commune is divided into seven villages and is governed politically and administratively by the local People's Committee, while the ideological line of the commune is provided by the Communist Party. As with anywhere else in Vietnam, the mass unions such as the Veteran's Union, the Women's Union, and the Youth Union are well-established bodies in the commune.

Understandings of women and men are informed by a Confucian and Taoist sociocosmological order. In accordance with the tradition of patrilineal ancestor worship, males are defined as "inside lineage" (*ho noi*), and a son is recognized as an embodied link between the deceased and future members of his patrilineage. Females, on the other hand, are related to the "outside lineage" (*ho ngoai*) since they are not regarded as able to connect the past and future members of their patrilineage. While males are expected to continue their father's patrilineage, females are assumed to continue their husband's patrilineage by producing male progeny. A daughter is thus inescapably rendered inferior within the patrilineal social structure (Rydstrøm 2002, 2003a; Luong 2003; Werner 2008).

Women and men are also defined by what are seen as their complementary body forces. While female bodies are associated with the forces of *Am* (*yin* in Chinese), male bodies are linked with the forces of *Duong* (*yang* in Chinese).¹³ Because of the forces of *Duong*, a male body is considered to be hot (*nong*, also meaning bad tempered), while the forces of *Am* are perceived to make a female body cool (*lanh*). In accordance with such assumptions, men are said to have a hot character (*tinhh nong*), which

¹² About twelve thousand people, mostly *Kinh* (the majority ethnic group in Vietnam), live in the commune. Patrilineal three-generation households predominate; see Rydstrøm (2003a).

¹³ For further information about *Am* and *Duong*, see Huard and Durand (1954) and Rydstrøm (2004).

in addition to generating physical strength in a man might even make him aggressive or able to “explode” (*bot phat*). Women, on the other hand, are said to have a cool character (*tin h lanh*) and are thus thought to be less likely to conquer social and physical space.

A war zone

In August 1945, despite ongoing French colonial rule in Vietnam, the leader of the Communist Party, Ho Chi Minh, was able to proclaim the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), with its capital in Hanoi (in northern Vietnam). Ho Chi Minh’s government was supported by the Soviet Union. France, the United States, and Great Britain, on the other hand, all preferred to uphold an alliance led by Ngo Dinh Diem and based in Saigon (what is now Ho Chi Minh City, in southern Vietnam). Because of the escalation in the conflict between Vietnam and the French colonial power, under the 1945 Potsdam Agreement, the Allies decided that Vietnam was to be temporarily divided into two parts, a North and South (see Duiker 1995; Ruane 1998).¹⁴

Because of its administrative, military, and economic engagement, the French colonial power nevertheless maintained influence in both the North and South. On December 19, 1946, the Communist Party and the Vietnam Independence League therefore announced a revolution against French dominance in Vietnam with the explicit aims of expelling the French colonial power and uniting Vietnam as one country. In 1954, after eight years of bitter struggle, North Vietnamese troops stormed the strategically important French garrison at Dien Bien Phu (in northwestern Vietnam) and brought an end to nearly a century of French colonial rule.¹⁵

As did Kevin Ruane (1998), Edward Miller and Tuong Vu (2009b) have also stressed that the approaching conflict between Vietnam and the United States was dictated by Cold War policies. The United States and the Soviet Union had profound interests in gaining influence in Southeast Asia, and between 1955 and 1960 U.S. assistance to South Vietnam reached almost \$7 billion in total (Ruane 1998, 45). By the late 1950s, the United States had gained strong political and military influence in South Vietnam. In 1957, the first American soldiers entered South Vietnam, officially to advise and train soldiers enrolled in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (Duiker 1995; Taylor 1999).

¹⁴ Vietnamese politics referred to many factions, some of which did not exclusively support the North or South (personal communication with Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong).

¹⁵ See Bergman (1975), Duiker (1995), Ruane (1998), and Tonnesson (2010).

In early 1961, the Hanoi government in North Vietnam moved to implement a new strategy in the South, attempting to reunite the North and the South by establishing an integrated command called the People's Liberation Armed Forces (*Quan doi nhan dan giai phong* in Vietnamese).¹⁶ The United States, meanwhile, intensified its engagement in the conflict. In 1965, American forces carried out systematic bombing raids on North Vietnam while U.S. Marines landed on the beaches of central Vietnam (Mai and Le Thi 1978; Duiker 1995). According to U.S. President Lyndon Johnson, these actions were taken to “help in defending freedom in South-East Asia” (quoted in Keesing's Research Report 1970, 71), and an open war between Vietnam and the United States erupted.¹⁷

In 1967, the entire Ha Tay province, and thus Thinh Tri, was bombed heavily because of its proximity to the capital of Hanoi (Chaliand 1969). Thinh Tri inhabitants remember how the war abruptly destroyed daily life by killing loved ones, separating couples as well as parents and children, and instilling a constant fear of destruction. People also recall how peace came in 1975, when North Vietnamese soldiers entered Saigon and declared the liberation of South Vietnam.¹⁸

Fighting

As the conflict between Vietnam and the United States escalated and the demand for recruits rapidly increased, the 1960 draft law formalized the induction of North Vietnamese men over age 18 into the army. In 1967, the number of active armed forces in the North numbered between 350,000 and 400,000 soldiers. By the late 1960s, about 120,000 men from an annual cohort of 190,000 were enlisted annually into the People's Army (Teerawichitchainan 2009, 64). During the 1960s and 1970s, military service was almost considered a rite of passage for young men in North Vietnam, since almost 75 percent of men in each birth cohort were enlisted into the military (Teerawichitchainan 2009, 90–91).

Virtually nowhere in the world are women drafted and forced to fight

¹⁶ Giving the group a pejorative connotation, Ngo Dinh Diem dubbed the People's Liberation Armed Forces the Viet Cong, i.e., Vietnamese Communists (Taylor 1999, 34–35).

¹⁷ War operations included, for example, the Tet Offensive organized by the North in 1968 (Duiker 1995, 209) and the American Operations Rolling Thunder I–II and Linebacker I–II, which resulted in comprehensive bombings of the North (Taylor 1999, 121). The horrifying massacres in My Lai and Ha My carried out by American soldiers also mark the conflict (see Kwon 2006).

¹⁸ For a discussion of the deaths in the South, see Nguyen-Vo (2008).

in wars in the same ways as men. Of the millions of members of the world's armed forces, only a small minority consists of women who are engaged in wars as guerillas, combat forces, and support troops. And these exceptions occur within a nearly uniform cross-cultural pattern that links men with fighting wars; hence 97 percent of today's uniformed standing armies consist of men, and 99.9 percent of the designated combat forces in the world's state armies are men (Goldstein 2006, 10–11). Most women involved in war are volunteers or are called on because they have specialized knowledge useful to the military, such as nursing or typing (Connell 2000; Cockburn 2007).

Yet Vietnamese women did participate in combat during the war against the United States, for example by joining the long-haired army (Mai and Le Thi 1978; Le Thi 1989).¹⁹ Inspired by the saying, “When war comes, even the women must fight” (*giac den nha, dan ba cung danh*), North Vietnamese women volunteered to go to the front during the war, took charge, and carried out tasks equal to those of men, as Turner (1998) and Taylor (1999) have noted. In doing so, they transgressed the lines of stereotypical gender roles assigned during wartime.

Both Thinh Tri men and women emphasized to me how the DRV would not have been able to defeat the United States (and the South) without the contribution of women. Women's support was vital because women ran the households, worked at the front or at the rear (e.g., as nurses or doctors), went to the jungles to clear blocked areas, carried ammunition, constructed roads, provided the front line with food, encouraged the soldiers, and even fought. However, local inhabitants recognized differences in men's and women's characters as natural preconditions for a gendered division of labor, even in wartime. Mai, a woman from the local community, for example, remembered how “women and men endured suffering in different ways during the war. Women usually were at home while men were determined to go to the front.” Cuong, a male veteran of the North Vietnamese Army, summarized the war-related roles of women and men:

Women had work that was suitable to their character. Not too hard work and not like the work of men. Men had to go directly to the battlefields and to clear the roads and cover the bomb craters. Men are stronger and healthier, and therefore we are called upon to go to the front. Men are more courageous and self-controlled when

¹⁹ For an overview of to whom the term “long-haired army” can be applied, see Taylor (2007).

confronted with dangers. At the battlefields, women do not do as good a job as men. They are weaker and less brave than men. When it was war, men went to the front while women had to stay at home to work and take care of the children and old people. This was how it was in almost all villages.

This traditional and prevalent division of labor between men and women in wartime derives, according to Nira Yuval-Davis (1997), from essentialist discourses that construct men as being naturally more aggressive than women and therefore more suited for combat. Yuval-Davis's assertion sheds light on local ways of defining women and men due to assumptions about hot and cool body forces. In this optic, women are rendered inferior and somewhat passive as mothers, daughters, and sisters, and men superior and active as hot fighters.

Even though the primary mission of a soldier is to injure enemies, "killing in war does not come naturally for either gender" (Goldstein 2006, 6; see also Scarry 1985). Concerns regarding the military's imperative of killing were summarized by Van, a former soldier from Think Tri, when he explained: "War is about violence. The strongest will win and the weakest lose. If not strong and violent, one will die. During the war, we suffered a lot. Many people died and were buried at the cemetery for anonymous soldiers" (i.e., their remains could not be buried properly).²⁰ The war, former soldiers emphasized, was a thing of "blood and bones" (*xuong mau*) and a terrifying experience of "bloodshed" (*do mau*). Yet soldiers must overcome their reluctance to use violence and be able to stand the pain if subjected to violence themselves because, as a Think Tri veteran laconically pointed out, "war means to face death."

The sacrifices of soldiers

During the war, sacrificing one's life for one's country was construed in the public discourse as a kind of moral obligation (a "righteous obligation" or *chinh nghia*; Malarney 2001). An official narrative of "sacred war" (*chien tranh than thanh*) was invented by the North Vietnamese government to celebrate "the heroic resistance of soldiers, workers, and peasants in an effort to infuse a larger meaning onto the suffering and death caused by war and to legitimate the state's twin goals of national liberation and socialist revolution" (Bradley 2001, 197; see also Duiker 1995).

²⁰ Those who are not buried properly may begin to wander as angry ghosts; see Malarney (2001), Rydstrom (2003a), Kwon (2008), and Leshkovich (2008).

Former soldiers from Thinh Tri thus recalled the determination with which they themselves, as well as other men, were ready to join the army for the sake of the sacred war.²¹ For example Pham, a former soldier, explained: “Young people did not hesitate to sacrifice their life in order to follow President Ho Chi Minh’s slogan, ‘Constructing a better and more beautiful country.’ So we fought the invaders and fought for what we loved.” Once at the battlefield, soldiers usually stayed and fought until they were severely injured, until they were killed, or until the war was over (Malarney 2001, 58). For the Vietnamese Communists, true sacrifice was associated with those who died for the revolution. Party officials offered precise definitions of actions to be acknowledged as sacrifice. Only through death and sacrifice for the common good could true revolutionary virtue be demonstrated, and those who died by sacrifice would therefore belong to a particular heroic category (Malarney 2001). According to Mark Philip Bradley, “The body of the soldier killed in battle came to transcend death and was increasingly linked to the highest aspirations of patriotic nationalism. . . . A fallen soldier’s sacrifice for the state and revolution, rather than his relationship to his lineage or village, served to exclusively define the meaning of his life and death” (Bradley 2001, 199). Public expectations regarding sacrifice, ultimately manifested by the fallen North Vietnamese (male) soldier, resemble the obligations embedded in the Confucian tradition of patrilineal ancestor worship (Teerawichitchainan 2009; see also Marr 1981).²² Confucianism emphasizes a guiding set of moral obligations with regard to human relationships, which are always considered hierarchical—for example, king and subject, father and child, older brother and younger brother, husband and wife, and friend and friend (one always being older than the other). These obligations even specify how the superior should guide the inferior, as well as who in turn should obey his or her superior and, in doing so, demonstrate gratitude and filial piety (*hieu*; Rydstrom 2003a; Ngo 2004).

In transferring the Confucian set of guiding principles to the period when the DRV was involved in the war against the United States (and the South), that is, when the need for military recruits and citizen support was urgent, the state of North Vietnam and its army fused into a demanding sociopolitical power, one that sought fulfillment of citizen obligation and piety. The nation-state’s call for men to sacrifice their lives

²¹ Thinh Tri men did not hint at forceful enlistment practices, as discussed by Teerawichitchainan (2009).

²² Confucianism was introduced into Vietnam by the Chinese conquest (111 BCE–939 CE; Marr 1981).

as soldiers was answered, I would propose, not least because it subscribes to patrilineal intercorporeal male loyalty and solidarity, as exemplified by the filial piety of a son to his father and other senior male kin (see Luong 2003; Rydström 2003a; Werner 2008).

A widespread sociocultural construction of the world thus lent itself to the fostering of a solidarity and camaraderie without which the military could not function (see Yuval-Davis 1997). I would suggest that the fictive kin structure of the military, defined in terms of brothers-in-arms, materialized as an innovative lineage capable of substituting for a patrilineal kinship structure that was otherwise fractured by the war. As David H. J. Morgan (1994) has argued, “the very activities associated with the military life, ultimately to do with the taking of life and the exposure to extreme physical danger, serve to establish an almost unbridgeable gulf between the world of the soldier and the world of the civilian” (169). In daily life, therefore, the gulf between civilians and soldiers is marked by the former soldiers’ expectations regarding discipline within the family. As Phong, an adult son of a veteran, noted: “Men who joined the army changed completely. They are influenced by the army style and want order and discipline. They behave as if they were still in the army.”

Former soldiers remembered the unique solidarity to be found among brothers-in-arms. Sang, for example, recalled how, as a very young man who had recently enlisted in the army, he had missed his parents and home. The soldiers in his platoon supported him and helped him overcome his homesickness. Eventually, he came to consider his platoon members his blood brothers (*anh em ruột*). A strong sense of solidarity thus pervaded platoons. Injured soldiers could jeopardize the safety of their “brothers,” and it is therefore with ambivalence that former soldiers talk about how they were wounded in the war. The memory not only provokes pain but also regret about the unforeseen risks they caused for their comrades-in-arms and their platoon.

One day, however, Khai mentioned that Nam wanted to tell me about the last battle in which he had fought. On a rainy spring day, Nam thus recalled how he was severely injured in a violent battle when, on his way from the southern to the northern war zone, “we were in direct confrontation with the Americans, and many men in my platoon were wounded. But we controlled the area.” Nam was severely injured by a grenade and had to wait for a prolonged time to be removed from the battlefield by his fellow soldiers. He continued: “Some comrades and a nurse took care of my wounds, but I still needed an operation on my hurt eye.” Later on, attempts were made to bring Nam to a hospital, “but it was very dark and no one could find their way in the jungle. . . . I told

the soldiers to save themselves. ‘If I die, it is okay, never mind. . . .’ Finally, they got me to a hospital to get surgery. At the hospital, my damaged eye was removed with a knife.”

Nam sent a letter to Khai in which he vaguely mentioned that he had been wounded. His father and brother, also in the army, decided to try to find Nam. The stamp of the letter, Nam remembered, revealed where he was hospitalized: “They went on their bikes and slept on the roads. When they found me, my face and breast were covered with bandages.” One of the soldiers, who had carried Nam to the hospital, visited him: “He asked me if I could remember that my shoulder had been almost torn off, that I had been covered in blood and unable to speak because my tongue had been very swollen. I am lucky that I am not dead. Today, my body is damaged, as you can see; my shoulder is hurt and my eye is missing, but my face is smooth and not deformed. And I escaped death.”

While both the mental and physical harm inflicted upon the body in war are unalterable, bodily injuries are special in the sense that they work as signs that point both backward and forward in time. They make visible a past activity that continues to revolutionize individual and collective memory of the present. The hurt body incorporates a particular moment in the individual and collective history of war in ambiguous ways. As Elaine Scarry (1985) has observed, “visible and experienceable alteration of injury has a *compelling and vivid reality* because it resides in the human body, the original site of reality, and more specifically because of the ‘extremity’ and ‘endurance’ of the alteration” (121). In this sense, war veterans with bodily injuries appear as persistent reminders of how those who went to the battlefields were reduced to targets of destruction and thus desubjectification, and thereby rendered trivial as bare (male) life in a political game of war.

Being stationed for years in the jungles in the central and southern parts of Vietnam had protracted consequences for Thinh Tri men’s health. Former soldiers suffer from loss of limbs; from the remnants of mines, grenades, or bullets still in their bodies; and even from malaria. Soldiers who were exposed to the defoliant Agent Orange struggle with a variety of additional symptoms, and some of them had babies with deformities.²³ Besides causing physical impairment, involvement in direct battle has also had a psychological impact (Brown 2006). Veterans, I was told, often suffer from “mental disorder” or “nerves” (*than kinh*) and are “bad tem-

²³ During the war, the United States applied more than 72 million liters of herbicide (the defoliant Agent Orange), especially over South Vietnam (Warwick 1998). Concerning the legacies of Agent Orange, see Fox (2007).

pered” or “hot” (*nong*), something that implies increased and unhealthy levels of heat in a man’s body that might cause “explosive” (*bot phat*) outbursts and, even worse, abusive behavior (Rydström 2003b).

Combat experience is disturbing for local veterans, but many of them miss the male bonding so unique to military life. Nam and other Trinh Thi men thus frequently joined the meetings of the local Veteran’s Union, which is appreciated as a space where it is possible to readdress what they consider to be confidential war experiences that might be troubling to cope with personally and politically, since openly admitting to being haunted by the ghosts of war memories could be taken as an expression of disillusionment with the war and its aims (see Gustafsson 2009).

Suffering endured at the rear

In 1965, the national Women’s Union launched what was termed the “three responsibilities movement” to encourage women to support the soldiers in combat. The movement asked women to assume responsibility, first, for “production and other activities in place of the men who have gone to the front”; second, for “the running of family affairs as encouragement to men to join the army”; and, third, for “support to the front and the fighting” (Mai and Le Thi 1978, 258). During the war, the DRV recognized women’s contribution to the war effort and their noncombat activities by awarding medals. The medals were inscribed with the words “loyal, courageous and resourceful” and awarded to women who, like Khai, had distinguished themselves in any of the three responsibilities (Tai 2001, 176).

My data from Think Tri are sparse when it comes to narratives about local women warriors who went to the battlefields, as described, for example, by Taylor (1999) and Turner (1998). A female neighbor, a cousin’s sister, or “the group of young women who talked one another into going to the front” were singled out by the people with whom I spoke. But by and large Think Tri women remembered the challenges they encountered in managing the banalities of daily life distant from the sites of combat. While Think Tri men would remember how they or their comrades-in-arms were wounded at the battlefield, women would usually refer to the fear of losing loved ones and how they waited for news from the front. While in charge of duties inside and outside the household, women also offered special care for injured soldiers, orphans, and refugees from Hanoi who had been evacuated because of the American bombings. Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet, two official voices of the Women’s Union, summarize how women replaced men at the rear during the war: “At the

call of the Vietnamese Women's Union, five million [women] took on productive work, in the fields and collective farms as well as in the factories and State enterprises. In most places they replaced their own husbands, who had been called to the front, and they turned their love into ardor in the accomplishment of their new tasks" (Mai and Le Thi 1978, 260).

According to Turner (1998), however, the picture of women's role during the American War is primarily an official story about Vietnamese women's maternal duties not only to their families but also to the nation, as mothers of soldiers. Women's role as reproducers of the family, and even of the nation in a more abstract sense, has been discussed by Susan R. Grayzel (1999) in her study on World War I. Grayzel shows how, as with the role assigned to motherhood during the American War, during World War I motherhood became an image of "women's fundamental contribution to the state [that] provided a subject onto which a range of other issues and problems—from women's work to their morality—were transposed" (3).

In Vietnamese society, women are highly valued for their reproductive role and motherly capacities (see Rydstrom 2003a, 2004; Werner 2008). The significance credited to motherhood is amplified during wartime because of the ways in which it translates into a heroic principle for girls and women. Characterized by both privilege and duty, motherhood is imbued with expectations and promises about the future for both citizens and the nation-state. Because children are seen as projecting into the future, motherhood can be associated with a hope for a peaceful time radically different from a war-torn present. War narratives from the local community thus epitomize expectations about women's motherly endurance of suffering at the rear.

In one of the other Think Tri families with whom I worked during my stay in the commune, grandmother Mai lives with her husband, her youngest unmarried daughter, and her oldest son as well as his family. Her husband is a former soldier who demands that household members adhere to strict rules of discipline. Mai's memories give voice to the challenges faced by a young woman living with her mother-in-law and struggling to run a household while her husband was at the front for a prolonged period. On a quiet and sunny spring afternoon in Think Tri, she told me how troubled she was during the war: "I stayed at home with my mother-in-law, who was very weak, and [my] two children [a three-year-old daughter and five-year-old son]. My daughter was seriously ill, and I had to take her to different hospitals; first I brought her to a hospital in Ha Tay province and then to the Viet Duc hospital in Hanoi." Mai explained about the living conditions: "The rice production was very

low and we were very poor. My husband only got a salary for two of the ten years that he spent in the army, and his family had no special privileges [in regard to health care at the hospital]. So, I also had to work in the kindergarten.”

“After some years,” Mai continued, “my husband was permitted to go home for a short holiday. Other soldiers could not leave the front. Those who were allowed to have a small vacation [eight to ten days] brought news from the soldiers still at the front to their families back home. When they returned to the battlefield, they brought news to the soldiers at the front about their families. . . . I was very worried because one day we would get word about the death of this person, and the next we would get word about the death of somebody else.”

Mai’s husband was wounded by a mine and stayed in a clinic to recover before returning home. She remembered: “Finally, he came home. When we met again, he said to me: ‘I was wounded and it affects my nerves [*bi than kinh*]. From now on, I can get very “hot” [*nong*; i.e., angry, lose temper] and when the heat breaks out, I can get furious and even be mean to my wife.’ Everybody came to our home to hear how he had been wounded, about his health [he also suffers from the ongoing effects of malaria], and how we were doing. . . . At that time, it was war; death could come at any time.”

Many Thinh Tri women attempted to cope with daily life during the war, which meant living for a prolonged time with fear, with not knowing whether a (male) relative had been killed. Women’s position at the rear spared them from direct combat, but they did witness how the war destroyed family life not only by separating family members from one another but also through death. In other words, they “endured suffering,” an expression that in Vietnamese society is widely associated with women. During the war, the suffering took on new dimensions when compared with the suffering that women in Vietnam generally are expected to endure, for instance, by virtue of their burden of work. The war resulted in paramount hardship, fear, and distress for women who, like Mai, were in charge of the household and the care of family members.

Apart from the acute suffering encountered at the rear, female suffering in the local setting is also associated with the long-term consequences the war inflicted on women’s lives. Inhabitants would draw my attention to the fact that many women were never able to build a family because of the war and, hence, were unable to fulfill what is viewed as a natural call to motherhood. Some women did not get married before the war started and therefore never had any children; other women got married prior to the war but did not have any children before their husbands went to the

front (from which many never returned); still other women never started a family because they volunteered during the war. When peace came, according to Vietnamese standards, the female volunteers were far too old (i.e., over 25) to get married and have children (Turner 1998; Taylor 1999; Quinn-Judge 2010).

In addition, female suffering refers to the women's relationships with injured soldiers who eventually came back to their villages and, as disabled veterans, had to restructure their lives and futures; these men needed support, especially from their wives, in order to handle their impairments and battlefield experiences. The ways in which the war enforced an alteration of the conditions of marital life are thus also condensed in local references to women's war-related suffering.²⁴

Commemoration

In her study of women in Hiroshima and Nagasaki who were exposed to radiation from the atomic bomb, Maya Todeschini (2001) has reminded us of how "the public acknowledgment and appropriation of illness, loss, pain, and grief, and the establishment of gender categories in connection with suffering, are profoundly political acts, which draw boundaries and determine 'appropriate' expressions of suffering" (104). The ways that women's and men's contributions to the war against the United States are commemorated publicly in contemporary Vietnam, and even in scholarly work, demarcate the gendered lines for appropriate ways of demonstrating sacrifice. And for women, sacrificial behavior refers to the endurance of suffering.

With only a few scholarly exceptions, the American War is not approached from a gender perspective; when it is, the spotlight is usually on those women who joined military units.²⁵ For example, in a recent special issue of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* (Miller and Vu 2009a) dedicated to analyzing the war between Vietnam and the United States, none of the articles invokes a gender perspective. One piece, though, focuses on the involvement of women in the war by describing, in glo-

²⁴ Women's susceptibility to sexual abuse was also implied (see Bergman 1975; Weaver 2010).

²⁵ For example, Taylor (1999, 2007), Turner (1998), and Tai (2001) have included gender perspectives in their research on the American War, yet there is a tendency to focus on women involved in military units. Studies from conflicts other than the one between Vietnam and the United States that consider the meaning of gender in war not only for women combatants but also for those at the rear include, e.g., Vickers (1993), Summerfield (1998), Das (2000), Todeschini (2001), and Cockburn (2007).

rifying terms, the challenges faced and self-sacrifices made by young women enrolled in the Youth Brigade (Guillemot 2009; see also Quinn-Judge 2010).

Similarly, North Vietnamese women's fighting-related contribution to the American War is only seldom addressed in public Vietnamese commemoration discourse. If remembered, women's efforts are usually viewed, as in the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* article, as sad but nevertheless glorified tales of female self-sacrifice, for instance, through a woman's tragic death on the battlefield (see, e.g., Le Thi Lan 2007). In official Vietnamese commemorations of the American War, and even in scholarly research, the fallen (male) soldier and his ultimate sacrifice for the idea of the nation thus remain the center of attention.²⁶

In the aftermath of the American War, women have primarily been celebrated for the intercorporeal ways in which, as mothers, they are related to lost sons, an understanding that implies a more passive position (of waiting) at the rear. The Heroic Mother award offered by the Vietnamese government illustrates, according to Hue-Tam Ho Tai, how "representations of women-as-mothers vastly outnumbered depictions of women's war-related activities. . . . The equation of women as mothers and of men as their sons is a powerful one" (Tai 2001, 179). On top of the tendency to neglect women's direct war contribution, as Tai mentions, a focus on women's experiences at the rear is rare, even though these experiences represent the war memories of the large majority of the Vietnamese female population. Women's knowledge about life at the rear during the American War is only rarely venerated publicly in Vietnam or in scholarly accounts.

Women's narratives about how they were construed as bare life and requested to make sacrifices by enduring suffering at the rear thus tend to be muted in public discourse. Such memories generally do not invite immediate recognition for those individuals (mainly men) who went to the front, and these memories may therefore be credited with less significance by men—and even by women themselves (Summerfield 1998). With regard to scholarly work, female experiences at the rear may not be examined as extensively as men's experiences in the battlefields due to similar gendered mechanisms of categorization (see Miller and Vu 2009a).²⁷

²⁶ See Taylor (1999), Bradley (2001), Tai (2001), and Quinn-Judge (2010). The Vietnamese government has also publicly acknowledged self-sacrifice by particular patriotic peasants, workers, grandparents, and others (Bradley 2001).

²⁷ For example, Heonik Kwon's works *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (2008) and *After the Massacre* (2006), surprisingly, do not explore the meaning of gender.

My encounter with Khai's mother, Lan, when she visited Khai and her family in Trinh Tri, is a story not only of how a now-old woman became a Heroic Mother but also of how the ghosts of war memories frame the present. Because this was the first time I had met the old woman, Lan politely asked about my family. After having explained that I was in the commune on my own to conduct fieldwork while my partner remained in Sweden, it was now my turn to ask about Lan's family. When I politely inquired about her family situation, the small bent woman hesitated before telling me how fond and proud she was of Khai and Khai's three grown-up children. Then she burst into tears.

Crying and in obvious pain, the old bent woman told me how she had lost her two sons during the war. Since their remains had never been identified, her sons had not been buried properly. Both of her sons had been stationed in the South. After the war was over, word came that the oldest son had been killed in a bombing raid and the youngest when in direct confrontation with the American forces. In tears, Lan explained how other families with more than one son had avoided the enlistment of all their sons to guarantee the continuation of the patrilineage. She had not agreed with her husband when he insisted that both of the couple's two sons should join the army. As a result of her loss, Lan had been rewarded with the Heroic Mother title by the Vietnamese government.

The delicate ways that official commemoration of war victory are fused with individual memories of pain—for instance, when anguish is governed by official support systems that reward a mother who lost her two sons with public praise—accentuate the potential conflicts between individual memories and official commemoration. The official elevation of the women's intercorporeal role as mothers of fallen male soldiers not only directs focus away from women's contributions in combat but also from the multifaceted challenges they experienced at the rear when attempting to make ends meet and to manage daily life for children, older relatives, refugees, and injured soldiers.

Conclusions

Ethnographically informed studies that consider war as an intrinsically corporeal and gendered phenomenon enable us to identify how the fracturing of local life corresponds with particular sociocultural understandings of gender, on the one hand, and national gendered war strategies, on the other. A perspective that accounts for the gendered corporeality of war amplifies our knowledge of how war's manifestations are informed by, and simultaneously twist, the construction of women and men. Sanc-

tioning the act of killing as the ultimate demonstration of desubjectification, the war machine infuses value into women and men based on their anticipated utility in an overall and comprehensive war strategy. The publicly credited war efforts of North Vietnamese men and women were divided along gendered lines in accordance with ideas about appropriate manifestations of sacrifice.

That men are called on to sacrifice their lives on the battlefield for the idea of the nation while women are requested to endure suffering by being in charge of daily life at the rear elucidates how war is profoundly profane while it is simultaneously embraced by a sacralizing ideology, which in the North Vietnamese case corresponded well with a Confucian heritage and a Taoist worldview. Citizens who are caught in a war zone transmute from individuals to objects of destruction—to bare life. Yet, the notion of the sacred, as discussed in Agamben (1998), does not only render meaning as a curse with respect to the study of war. The sacred also refers to the semireligious rhetoric employed strategically by nation-states and other groups waging war. Such rhetoric demands distinct sacrifices of women and men for the sake of a sacred idea and nation.

The war memories of Nam, Mai, Lan, and other Thinh Tri inhabitants offer glimpses of embodied distress for both women and men in the context of a war-torn northern Vietnam. In unfolding the agony, as well as the ambiguity, with which women and men engaged in conflict when their paths were forked, the narratives from the local community interrupt simplistic and glorified images of the war and its aftermath. In this sense, they offer a “counter-memory” (Bradley 2001, 198) to dominant national commemoration discourse and remind us how human life is revolutionized not only during a conflict but also long after.

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