Re-staging Revolution and Remembering Toward Change: National Liberation Front Women Perform Prospective Memory in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT
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Re-staging Revolution and Remembering Toward Change: National Liberation Front Women Perform Prospective Memory in Vietnam (Under the direction of Della Pollock)

This dissertation explores the politics of memory, and performances of remembering, among the older women who comprise a war veterans association called the Former Women Political Prisoner Performance Group (Doi Van Nghe Cuu Nu Tu Chinh Tri) in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Engaging the women’s narrative histories, commemorative performances, and current community and international actions on behalf of children living with Agent Orange-related disabilities at the Lang Hoa Binh orphanage-hospital, this ethnographic and oral history-based project addresses the politics of memory and social activism among the women veterans, and the transgenerational dynamics of violence that affect the children.

As a study rooted in the specificity of embodied performance, I attend to the cultural/historical content of the veterans’ narrative and staged performances; the way they tell their respective and collective histories; their reflexive self-theorizing; and the historical, cultural, and political contexts that conjoin their lives with others in Vietnam, specifically exemplified through their relationship to the Lang Hoa Binh children. Among the primary questions addressed are: how are the veterans engaging a performative politics of memory? How does their hauntological memory politics inform the way they address current social transformations in Vietnam as well as problems of transgenerational, transnational violence?
What can be learned from the women’s discursively located, insistently anticipatory remembering and the children’s performance-based social interventions?

The dissertation’s three core chapters focus on the lives of four veterans. Their remembering prompts discussion of: the powers of performance and performativity in enactments of patriotic femininity, revolutionary masquerade, the politics and pleasures of commemorative tourism, surviving torture, haunting, and the Vietnamese women’s “tradition of pain-taking.” The final chapter forwards the idea of “prospective remembering” through discussion of the veteran’s connections to the Lang Hoa Binh children. Prospective remembering describes the veterans’ ethical life-practice of bearing and witnessing the past, of performing remembering into meaningful social action in the present and future.

Through the study of individual lives, particular sites, and intimate exchanges, this dissertation explores what it is, or might be, to live more justly with others by way of discerning and practicing a hauntological, performative politics of prospective remembering.
With love and gratitude to my parents
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PROLOGUE
A Hauntological, Performative Politics of Memory

Specters of Marxism(s) in Vietnam

In Vietnam, tensions between the practices and values of a communist governed, socialist state with increasingly capitalist market-styled economic policies are palpable, material, and ever-emerging. At the same time, differing ideological beliefs and actions mingle, mix, and coexist in Vietnam with remarkably flexible syncretism. Busts of Ho Chi Minh, shadowed by the profiles of Marx and Lenin, provide a ubiquitous backdrop in nearly every public meeting room and government office, while out in the streets vendors hawk wares from mobile stalls, living rooms, and flashy storefronts with energetic, innovative commitment. Walking along Ho Chi Minh City’s bustling streets today, it is hard to imagine what Vietnam was like just a few decades ago, as the country emerged from war. When bicycles were the central mode of urban transportation. When private businesses, and engaging in “capitalist” activities, even the petty selling of homemade goods, were illegal. When runaway inflation, food shortages, and numerous other lingering devastations were causing extreme, nationwide poverty.

I try to envision the streets emptied of vendors and roaring motorbikes. I try to imagine Vietnam without its palpable energy. Its unceasing activity. Its determined entrepreneurialism. The hammering din of construction from a new high-rise office building and its accompanying luxury condos for expatriate businessmen and the new Vietnamese upper middle-class interrupts my daydreaming. Vietnam is changing quickly. New
opportunities are opening. At least for some people. I walk past an opulent nouveau-French villa with fresh paint and sparkling silver chrome. Inside the gate a bougainvillea garden encircles a swimming pool with a bubbling fountain. A cyclo driver, sitting atop his rickety rickshaw, leans against the villa’s high yellow walls topped with metal spikes and barbed wire. Maybe he is waiting to take the proprietor to Diamond Plaza, or Zen Plaza (the “SoHo of Saigon”), in the city’s high fashion shopping district. Adjacent to the villa, literally built into its protective wall, is a one-room shack fashioned from old wood, bricks, plastic tarps, and corrugated metal. Through the doorway, a single light bulb casts a dim glow around the dark room. Further along the villa’s high wall, a woman and her two young children sell prickly-skinned jackfruit from a small cart. The fruit’s sweet fragrance wafts through the thick humid air, mixing with exhaust fumes and the nearby canal’s acrid, unmistakable odor of a stagnating sewer.

From high above, the construction workers’ pounding creates an arrhythmic heartbeat that seems to propel the ceaseless, bloodlike flow of rumbling motorbike traffic through the city’s pulsing boulevards. Even amidst the widening divides between rich and poor, within the diverse flurry of commercialism and capitalist-market activity, I see the signs, and sense the histories, of Marxism everywhere. On the Party’s bright red civic message banners strung across intersections. In the repeated phrases of people’s everyday speech acts. Enmeshed within the government’s great web of infrastructural bureaucracies like the People’s Army of Viet Nam (Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam) and the Ministry of Culture and Information (Bo Van Hoa Thong Tin). Vietnam identifies itself as a socialist country, with a single-party communist government. Yet the presence and practice of Marx and Marxism,
and the alternately lax and firm grip of the Communist Party, amidst the fervent flurry of commercial market activity, can feel jarring in present-day Vietnam.

Are the citational re-presentations of Marxism and communism, as materialized in Marx’s, Lenin’s, and Uncle Ho’s omnipresent porcelain busts, empty(ing) signifiers, relics, remains, or placeholders for a bygone revolutionary era? Or are these symbols, and the ideologies, ideals, histories, people, and political practices they conjure in Vietnam, still an expression of the nation’s vanguard? Each Wednesday, my walk to the Southern Women’s Museum (Bao Tang Phu Nu Nam Bo) takes me past a statuary store. Busts of Ho and Marx lean comfortably against replicas of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and an immodestly (un)dressed ancient Greek-looking woman. No one else on the street seems to notice, let alone feel surprised or amused by, this eclectic assortment of icons. My sense of dissonance and interest regarding the mélange of apparently contradictory ideologies in Vietnam, as embodied by the commingling of this store’s porcelain replicas, does not seem to be shared by other passersby. A few decades ago, all but Uncle Ho and Marx would have been forbidden. Today the store’s offerings are a prosaic part of everyday city life.

Thinking specifically of Vietnam, I find myself wondering, with many other scholars, “[w]hat remains of the socialist vision(s) after the ‘collapse’ [of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe] in 1989 [. . .] [w]hat is living and what is dead in Marxism” (Magnus and Cullenberg, “Editor’s Introduction” to Specters, viii-ix)? And more specifically, “[w]hat is to be the status of Marxist social goals that informed so many Marxist thinkers and social revolutionaries throughout the world—the egalitarian distribution of income, increased workplace democracy, the end of economic exploitation and the eradication of class differences—given the current rush to various forms of capitalism in
Eastern Europe, Russia, and China” (viii)? As Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg argue, communism and Marxism are complex, contingent, multiple, and not reducible to each other, so that the “death,” or perhaps more accurately the refashioning or remaking, of some communisms does not inevitably signal the “death” or withering of Marxism (x-xi).

Many aspects of Vietnam’s past and present can be viewed as a testament to the innovative, serviceable, transforming continuation of Marxism. The elder women veterans I spoke with in Vietnam—whose stories, everyday lives, and self-theories comprise the heart of this dissertation—provide something of an answer to the scholarly queries “Whither Marxism?” (Magnus and Cullenberg ix), “Where is Marxism going?” (xiii), “Is Marxism dying?” (xiii). To the latter, I can imagine the veterans’ answering with a surprised, resolute “no!” The spirits of Marx and Marxism still live in Vietnam. For one thing, Vietnam continues to identify as a socialist state, claiming Marx and Marxism as a critical part of its modern history of postcolonial struggle and nation-building. Secondly, in Vietnam, death is less the signal of an absolute “end” than the entryway into various forms of spirited, afterlife existence that have immediate material consequences. Vietnamese postcolonial Marxism, as the women veterans live it, complicates notions of the “living” and the “dead,” offering alternative ways of inhabiting and acting in the world. Out of death emerges the life of the ghost, existing in a spiritworld that interacts with, and depends on and conditions, the world of the currently living. The spirits of the past and future – including those of Marxism – coexist, in hauntological interdependence, with the living.

Where is Marxism (in Vietnam) going? To this, the women might answer, “with us, with the people.” Or maybe, “wherever the next generations take it.” For the veterans, Marxism is, among other things, an ethical social orientation. It is not a set of pure theories.
It is not strict orthodoxy. But it imbues everyday life practices. It is a guiding force in postcolonial Vietnamese nationalism. It is a way of being. A life project. A politics of memory, and generations, that centrally addresses ways of living more justly with others. As a form of filial piety, the veterans tend Marxism’s ghosts by remembering and honoring their comrade spirits (Ho Chi Minh, Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, Le Duan, Vo Thi Sau, brothers, sisters, parents, children, and many others), imagining toward more just futures. Based on what the veterans have told me, a more just future would entail making societies with less suffering, greater financial equality, access to basic human needs for all (food and water, shelter, health care), and less violence between people and nations. In essence, it would require less ambition about financial gain and “power over” and more ambition to assist and help empower others. With these and other aspirations in mind, the veterans teach the younger generations to respect and remember. They demonstrate the importance of living hauntologically conscious lives. The veterans and Derrida might agree that specters only die, in the sense of ceasing to have relevance or existence, if we bury the past, forget the ghosts, and no longer speak with spirits.

Hybrid forms of Marxism and communism are not a new phenomenon in Vietnam. Current articulations of governance, ideology, and practice may be “new” and emerging, but Vietnamese “brands” of Marxism and communism have always been eclectic and mutable. As Patricia Pelley shows, beginning over a half century ago, in an effort to “decolonize the past” and to win recognition within global contexts, official historians working for the north’s communist government set out consciously to construct “new national histories,” and a new national culture or a “new cannon of culture” (Pelley 7, 6, 114). In this effort, postcolonial Vietnam developed a “highly coded vocabulary, a vocabulary whose referential
value mattered far less than its power to signal and mark” (61). In other words, then and now, Vietnamese officials and regular citizens, in large part, meet nationalist requirements and signal their postcoloniality, through chains of Marxist looking or sounding, or “Marxish” signification (61).

So maybe the question is: where are the specters of Marxism in Vietnam today? Some may argue that Vietnam’s Marxish socialism is not, and never has been, proper Marxism. Others might contend that Vietnam’s adaptive, eclectic, postcolonial nationalism is precisely what Marxism(s) can, and maybe, should be. Vietnam is again, or maybe is still, quite consciously engaged in processes of reinvention. If Vietnam has always made its own forms of Marxism, and communism, I expect it will continue to create, innovate, and surprise with its concurrent variations on capitalism.

Wither Marxism? Not if we still live with its specters. Not if we continue to embody and enact possibilities for imagining and making less oppressive, more equitable societies the women veterans project. Not if we commit to practicing historical, hauntological consciousness, wherein we learn from, speak with, and remake our social worlds with ghosts.

Wither Marxism? In his seminal social critique, Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International, Derrida contends that Marx’s specters continue to haunt. In Specters Derrida 1) argues that Marxism is still meaningfully alive in the world, even as powerful capitalist organizing structures, practices, and ideologies appear to be gaining increasing global power, 2) elaborates an historical, Marxian, processual, and radically intersubjective ethics of answerability and responsibility (which centrally involves correspondence with ghosts), and 3) models this hauntological, communicative practice of transgenerational and transnational social justice in poetic form,
instructing that speaking with specters is essential for “the ‘scholar’ of the future, the ‘intellectual’ of tomorrow,” and all others who seek to make a more just, hospitable, and habitable world (176).

As Joshua Gunn writes, Derrida’s Specters articulates a “[p]osthumanism [that] is *not* an anti-humanitarianism, but represents the view that the subject is neither singular, nor self-transparent, nor at the center of the universe, and that the self-important ‘haughtiness’ of the subject of certainty, as Nietzsche put it, ‘deceives him about the value of existence,’ in retrospect having done more harm than good” (81). As an “orientation or posture of indeterminancy,” and moreover a practice of being-with-specters, Derrida speaks with ghosts, remembers Marxism’s critical social aspirations as well as its bloody, tyrannical histories, in order to refigure a political, poetic praxis of hauntological justice and ethical human relations. “Hauntology,” or hauntological consciousness, is a posthumanist, deeply humanitarian activity (Derrida, Specters 10). It is a life project and practice dependent on the individual’s recognition of radical subjective interdependence, the resulting responsibility that this covalent formation of subjectivity carries, and the personal and collective actions it inspires and compels across generations and cultures. The women veterans I came to know in Vietnam live what I understand to be a form of hauntological consciousness; their politics and practices are akin to the memory-based, spectral, processual, and performance-centered justice evoked by Derrida.

Following Gunn, throughout the dissertation, I use haunting, or hauntology, as a founding framework, or idiom, to illuminate, enact, explore, and “[denote] a conceptual repertoire for listening to and speaking about [and with] the dead, literally and figuratively” (79). Derrida’s formulation of Marxian haunting, as a spectral, historical, unending practice
of/toward ethical social relations, is particularly relevant within this study in two overriding, interrelated ways. As a central, implicit and explicit, trope throughout the dissertation, I rely on Derrida’s evocation of haunting as a means of 1) addressing the question w(h)ither Marxism, in Vietnam and perhaps beyond, and 2) understanding ways in which the women veterans with whom I spoke practice a performative, spectral politics of memory. The dissertation explores the specters of Marxism through the particularities of the veterans’ hauntological politics, remembering performances, social commitments, and self-theorizations. My engagement with haunting, in the context of Vietnam, has a four-part intention: 1) to discern the politics of remembering practiced by the women veterans; 2) to historicize their stories, views, and past and present acts of revolutionary commitment; 3) to learn if and how the practices that circulate around the women’s civic work contribute to an ethics of transnational, transgenerational, hauntological responsibility; in order 4) to address how I am, and how we are, implicated within others’ histories and lives. What is my, and what is our, responsibility to justice within a politics of hauntological remembering? I turn to Derrida’s text for more questions, guiding claims, decidedly unfinished answers, and a framework for rehearsing a performative, transnational, and transgenerational politics of memory.

**Learning to Live Justly**

Derrida asks, “to learn to live, to learn it from oneself and by oneself, all alone, to teach oneself to live [. . .] is that not impossible for a living being” (*Specters* xviii)? His answer is yes. *Learning to live* is not the work a self can do exclusively by oneself. He replies:
[t]o live, by definition, is not something one learns. Not from oneself, it is not learned from life, taught by life. Only from the other and by death. In any case from the other at the edge of life. At the internal border and the external border, it is a heterodidactics between life and death. (xviii)

This kind of living and learning, Derrida claims, must be carried out by way of what “is not,” or, what one thinks one is not (xviii). Derrida calls for us to “learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts” (xviii).

This dwelling with ghosts is, Derrida attests, a way to “live otherwise,” and live “more justly” (xviii). Instead of mourning the dead, burying them, progressing through the proper stages of grief and moving on, we must keep corresponding and living with ghosts. For Derrida, “[m]ourning is [] a temporal fixing […] accomplished by knowledge, by claiming knowledge of the dead, by claiming to know the dead and their location, thereby silencing ghosts in their gestures” (Gunn 82). Too often, mourning performs “the closure of the past and future in terms of the present,” and therefore, for one who wishes to live more justly with others, and with historical, hauntological consciousness, mourning—as it is commonly understood and practiced in modern, scientific Western traditions—is “something to avoid” (82). As a critical praxis, “being-with specters” constitutes, among other things, “a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” (Derrida, Specters xix). To learn to live, or rather, to learn to live more justly with others, requires a certain kind of politics of memory: an historical, inherited, inter/transgenerational hauntology of “speak[ing] of the ghost, indeed to the ghost and with it” (xix).

To “reckon with” spirits, to practice hauntology, speaking and living with “certain others who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us,” is done “in
the name of *justice*” (Derrida, *Specters* xx, xix). Spectral awareness is necessary for a just life, as “no justice [. . .] seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility* beyond the living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are *not yet born* or who are *already dead*, be they the victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of experimentations” (emphasis added, xix). Haunting, as a politics of memory and a practice of justice, is transgenerational, transnational, and cross-cultural. The spectral practice of justice is, in this formulation, a politics of remembering others, and re-membering ourselves in ethical relation to/with others, out of a desire to address historical (and continuing) violence and to build more equitable, habitable and hospitable, social worlds together. Derrida’s politics of haunting asks us to “embrac[e] the figure of the specter or revenant as a haunting reminder that we can never completely reckon with the past, nor secure the future” (Gunn 83). And yet, despite this indeterminacy, we must continually strive toward, and make, more equitable human relations—entering into conversation with ghosts, being haunted by them, working with them—“out of a concern for *justice*” (Derrida, *Specters* 175).

Selves, in this Marxian, hauntological formulation, are socially made and sustained. Selves are shadowed and shot through with ghosts. Subjectivities are co-constituting, spectral, and radically interdependent. When willfully possessed by ghosts, by the spectral in “our” selves, the past, present, and future feel unfixed. Time may be “off its hinges,” “disarticulated, dislocated, dislodged,” but our (non)individual actions still matter. In fact, in this indeterminate, ghostly, fundamentally intersubjective world, our actions matter all the more. Hauntological consciousness shows that “the death of the [humanist] subject and the
end of certitude, rather than herald nihilism, actually demand[s] a kind of posthumanist conscience that is resolutely ethical” (Gunn 97). In the pursuit of justice, we must become responsible, and answerable to others within and beyond the living present. Our actions, our being-in-the-world, are not just about ourselves.

Our lives should be haunted by the specters of others—those living, dead, and yet alive—so that that “which we are calling [] justice, must carry beyond present life, life as my life or our life” (Derrida, Specters xx). Each life, and self, must take on the responsibility of becoming aware of, and then answerable to, other lives. Becoming answerable is dependent on spectral correspondence. Refigured here by Derrida, commitments to justice must be practiced and materialized in close relation to specters, to the is not, to absence, loss, and to living, distantly haunting others, as well as to those who are familiar, filial, geographically or socioculturally close, or physically present and living. We are responsible, diachronically and synchronically, beyond the living present and beyond our own lives, to a kind of co-constituting inter-spectral subjectivity such that “justice carries life beyond present life or its actual being-there, its empirical or ontological actuality: not toward death but toward a living-on” (xx).

Living-on with hauntological consciousness, is an activity that “is historical, to be sure, but not dated” (Derrida, Specters 4). That is, as an ethical practice, engagement with specters may be temporally complex and multiple, but never ahistorical. For haunting to be political it must be contextual even while it is “out of joint” (Derrida quoting Shakespeare’s Hamlet, 3). Haunting is historical but not dated. History is never “gone.”

Living-on, historically and hauntologically, toward justice is a human responsibility. And the pursuit of justice is imperative despite Derrida’s formulation of justice as ever-
receding, and unattainable, in any full sense of arrival or acquisition. The pursuit of learning how to live historically-imbued lives—to live with memory, with ghost-others, within and across time, geographies, and haunting dreamscapes—is an unending search for an ethics of remembering, imagining, and being in more equitable, interdependent relation with others. Learning to live more justly with others is a hauntological, fundamentally intersubjective practice. Justice, for Derrida, is not a destination or endpoint. It only exists through doing, through individual and social practice. It requires awareness, willingness, intention, and action. It is not just about the creation and implementation of national or transnational legislation. It entails, and relies on, seemingly small acts. It depends on the covalent power of individual and collective action. Living more justly with others—those living, dead, and yet unborn—is a hauntological process, a consciously enacted daily activity carried out through the minutiae of everyday life.

Living-on with Spirits and Specters in Vietnam

Living with spirits and ghosts is a matter of daily practice in Vietnam. Spirits are not an exception, superstition, or contradiction to reality. On the contrary, in Vietnam, “ghostly matters are [an integral] part of social life” (Gordon 23). For example, each family tends an ancestral altar. This tradition is not understood as a practice of religious devotion. Remembering ancestors is a requisite of living. Spirits are a fact of being. People care for filial ghosts because if you do not honor and give proper residence to your ancestors’ spirits, by way of offerings and devotional practices, they will become wandering, unhappy souls that may bring chaos and havoc to the world of the living. The living generations owe their lives, and what good fortune they have, to their ancestors’ lives and enduring, protective spirits. All over the Mekong Delta, and elsewhere, families tend the ancestral altars in their
homes, and set up offerings in outdoor spirit houses and shrines. Traditionally ancestors' bodies are buried on the family’s property, their spirits are tended at the altar, while the unfortunate, vagrant spirits of unknown others are offered rice and wine in outdoor shrines. So, for many in Vietnam, “[h]aunted places are the only ones people can live in” (de Certeau, *Practice* 108).

Avery Gordon writes that “to study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it” (7). Addressing ghosts, the haunting dynamics of social life, “requires (or produces) a fundamental change in the way we know and make knowledge, in our mode of production” (7). Certainly for me, in all aspects of this research, “learn[ing] to talk and listen to ghosts, rather than banish them,” has been an essential “precondition for [] scientific [] [and] humanistic knowledge” of Vietnam (Gordon 23). When walking along the streets of Ben Tre, I cannot help but feel the strangeness of knowing this is the town that, according to a commanding U.S. military officer during the war, had to be destroyed in order to be saved. Ben Tre was leveled.

Today the town is rebuilt. But there are still ghosts. I know “this process of disappearing has to leave some kind of trace” (Baudrillard 28). The town is a haunted space. As I walk down the clay paths I feel the bones of the people who died here pushing up under my feet. Layers of bodies. Strewn and torn by war. As we move through the interlacing Mekong canals, I see military boats patrolling. Out of the corner of my eye, I see fleeting human shadows slipping into the shoreline rushes. People hide in these tall palm grasses as the boats pass. Bombs are falling. The earth is shaking. It happened in the past, but this history is so palpable, so unfinished, that it lingers and soaks the present, sometimes with torrential force. In Ben Tre, and in many other places in Vietnam, I feel the necessity of
“learn[ing] how to identify hauntings and reckon with ghosts [. . .] mak[ing] contact with what is without doubt painful, difficult, and unsettling” because of the persistence of “modernity’s violence and wounds” (Gordon 23, 25).

Being haunted, feeling the mysterious but unmistakable presence of ghosts, can be both debilitating and generative. As a form of productivity, “[b]eing haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition” (Gordon 8). Whether a struggle or an easy pleasure, ghosts help us think and “write about permissions and prohibitions, presence and absence, about apparitions and hysterical blindness” (17). Ghosts invite and demand us to engage in critical explorations of “sensuous knowledge,” that exists as “a different kind of materialism, neither idealistic nor alienated, but an active practice or passion for the lived reality of ghostly magical invented matters” that are “receptive, close, perceptual, embodied, incarnate (Gordon drawing on Marx, 205). In contrast to cold knowledge, haunting, sensuous knowledge “tells and [] transports at the same time” (205).

“In haunting,” Gordon explains, “organized forces and systemic structures that appear removed from us make their impact felt in everyday life in a way that confounds our analytic separations and confounds the social separations themselves” (19). Sometimes, in Vietnam, haunting and spectered presence is the only way to “make sense” of things: the “ghosts and gaps, seething absences, and muted presences [. . .] the ensemble of cultural imaginings, affective experiences, animated objects, marginal voices, narrative densities, and eccentric traces of power’s presence” (21, 25). For me, becoming “inhabited in its inside, that is, haunted by [] foreign guest[s],” in order to “learn to live with ghosts” in “the space of
invisible visibility,” is the most viable, ethical option for encountering memories of war and the haunting, rematerializing legacies of violence in Vietnam (Derrida, Specters 4, 126).

As Derrida, Gordon, and others suggest, there is a critical politics to haunting. It is deeply social. It is centrally entwined with memory and the practice of remembering. It can be an ethical practice, for “[f]ollowing [. . .] ghosts” thinking with and speaking with spirits, is in part, “about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible” (Gordon 22). Writing “ghost stories” or stories with and about ghosts, specters and what is gone but still “seething[ly]” present, “strives to understand the conditions under which memory was produced in the first place,” working “toward a [more just] countermemory, for the future” (Gordon 8, 22). We must live within a “constellation of haunting,” “beyond the opposition between presence and non-presence, actuality and inactuality, life and non-life, of thinking the possibility of the specter, the specter as possibility” in pursuit of living otherwise and living more justly in a social, shared, haunted world (Derrida, Specters 174, 12).

**Haunting as Politics, Poetics, and Practice**

Jacquelyn Hall writes that working with memory requires “leavening politics with poetics,” in that “politics demand[s] that we choose a side, take a stand,” and at the same time, “poetics demand[s] that we hold seemingly contradictory beliefs at the same time, that we embrace multiple levels of meaning” (441). Theorizing politics with poetics, she asks:

[how, in practice, is memory transferred from one generation to another, impressed on the body, and sustained by everyday performance of self? What is—or what should be—the relation between individual memory, social memory, and history? (465)}
Bringing the enduring presence of ghosts to Hall’s questions of memory, generations, politics, and poetics Derrida adds: “to whom [] would an obligation of justice ever entail a commitment [. . .] if not to the life of a living being? Is there ever justice, commitment of justice, or [] responsibility [. . .] before anything other” than the “natural life or the life of the other spirit” (Derrida, *Specters* xx)?

Hall and Derrida contend that the politics of *living with memory* entails an ethical relation, a sense of justice that reaches beyond literal readings into critical, poetic practices of deeply embodied inquiry, *sensuous knowledge*, and active witnessing. Taking up Hall’s questions as well as her call for politics and poetics by way of Derrida’s evocation of spectral correspondence and responsibility, I will briefly outline eight ways the praxis of haunting helps me to encounter, think with, and re-member histories of violence and survival in Vietnam and beyond. Haunting both compels and enables me to:

1. Address the problematic limitations of “rational” claims on truth, power, and knowing by opening the practice of witnessing to the unseen, unsaid, unknown, and unfinished in memory, history, and being.
2. Reckon with violent histories (and their haunting legacies) that are not my own, but within which I am nonetheless implicated.
3. Sustain and respect the complexity, and incommensurability, of individual lives, memories, sociocultural practices and beliefs.
4. Discern a performative politics of memory by which remembering is a vital activity performed in “the now,” but not bound within the present.
5. Theorize history (and time) beyond debilitating linear and/or cyclical fatalism.
7. Question normative rituals and beliefs concerning mourning, burial, and death in order to continue vital correspondence with specters.
8. Learn how to *live-on* with memory, and ghosts, in the shared pursuit of mitigating suffering and making more just social worlds.

Practicing the politics and poetics of haunting, this dissertation is, in part, “a story about what happens when we admit the ghost—that special instance of the merging of the visible and the invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present—into the making of worldly relations and into the making of our accounts of the world” (Gordon 24). This study explores haunting legacies of violence, performances of remembering, powerful traditions of survival, and our shared responsibility to live in the world in ways that lessen suffering and counter oppression. In the spirit of Derrida’s radical, spectral interdependence, we must challenge ourselves to live as if the lives of all others—those near to us, familiar to us, *and* those who seem temporally, geographically, or culturally distant—vitaly matter to the sustenance of our own.

It is often said that “those who do not study history are bound to repeat it.” This phrase appears wise and benign. But in fact the popular sentiment it carries may be counter-productive, even dangerous and complicitous. This saying reflects, performs, and perpetuates a debilitating, apathetic and privileged, determinism. It flattens different
historical moments, events, and lives into “just the same thing, all over again.” It falsely touts that “studying history” is all that is needed to prevent further historical “mistakes.” It forecloses possibilities for meaningful action and intervention by indicating that we are, really, already bound into history’s grinding, repetitious wheel. It reduces time, and history, into being linear and/or cyclical. Therefore, this dissertation is decidedly not about “studying history” in order to avoid the “repetition” of atrocities. It is about witnessing and inheriting the past, performing remembering with others (including ghosts), addressing the ramifications and rematerializations (not repetitions) of historical violence, practicing the possibility of critical social change, and moving memory into meaningful, prospective action.

Con Dao’s Ghosts

Vietnam’s Con Dao prisons are remembered by those who were once incarcerated there as “hell on earth.” Although today soft ocean breezes wind gently around crumbling cement walls, glide between rusting bars, and pass easily through barbed wire fences surrounding the island’s “tiger cage” prison cells, Con Dao will not soon shake its well-earned epithet. The decaying buildings, with their bleached and peeling yellow paint and opened doors leading to dark cells, are now empty of prisoners and gun-carrying guards. At first the prison’s deterioration makes it seem benign. The buildings appear to have all but lost the hard-edged reality of their horrifically brutal past.

However, upon entering the dilapidated compound, one increasingly senses the persisting presence of the prison’s long history of human suffering. Ghosts are lurking in the shadows. Their voices flow in with the wind, echoing down the deserted hallways. Inside the cells, hand-written messages are etched into the concrete walls. The cement floors still bear indelible, blotched stains from human waste. Even the pounding monsoon rains cannot
erase these haunting residues. No matter how fresh the ocean breeze may be, the air lingering in the prison’s cells smells spoiled and sickly. Solid concrete blocks used for arresting prisoners’ movement are visibly eroding in the tropical climate, but the shallow, heel-shaped indentations from once-shackled ankles endure, catching dust and flaking metal from corroding chains and leg restraints.

First the French, and later the American and South Vietnamese governments, used these prisons as the ultimate site of punishment for those determined to be criminals or political radicals. Thousands of people were tortured and an unrecorded number perished. Today, the prisons are encircled by a vast cemetery: a network of burial sites connected by narrow stone pathways snaking through the dense forest. Hang Duong cemetery radiates outward, ringing the prisons with over 20,000 graves. Although mostly unmarked and anonymous, Con Dao’s “graves [] mine the representational field,” silently, steadfastly testifying to the magnitude of human suffering that took place on this remote patch of earth (Phelan 28). Remarkably, there are some who made it out of Con Dao, scathed but alive. Among them, a small group of southern women war veterans and former political prisoners who continue to remember and retell personal memories and social histories of Vietnam’s, and the world’s, longstanding legacies of violence and determined survival. The following is a retelling, and a political and performance-centered exploration, of some of some of these women’s memories.
By diverse paths (condensation, displacement, expression, or representation), one can always decipher through its singularity so many other kinds of violence going on in the world. At once part, cause, effect, example, what is happening there translates what takes place here, always here, wherever one is and wherever one looks, closest to home. Infinite responsibility, therefore, no rest allowed for any form of good conscience. (Derrida, Specters xvi)
Figure 1 – Photograph of mural displayed in the Southern Women’s Museum
INTRODUCTION
(Re)Performing the Past in Vietnam:
Cultural Contexts, Political Histories, & Analytic Frameworks

Meeting the Performance Group Women

It is a hum id November afternoon and I walk hurriedly down Vo Thi Sau Street on my way to the Southern Women’s Museum (Bao Tang Phu Nu Nam Bo). I am nervous. I hope I am not late for the rehearsal and that co Lien, the vice-president of the all-women veterans’ performance group, is expecting me today. A few minutes ago, I bought flowers from a street vendor on Dien Bien Phu Street, then cut across Le Van Tam Park. Just a week before, my Vietnamese teacher told me that until shortly after “Reunification Day” (Ngay Thong Nhat) in 1975, this city park, with its tall willowing trees, centrally-placed national monument, early morning tai chi gatherings, and wading pool always brimming with frolicking children, was the site of a cemetery where notables from French colonial times and, later, officials from the former noncommunist Republic of Vietnam (including president Ngo Dinh Diem) were buried. Stepping through the grass I imagine bones buried beneath my feet, some of them silently poking up under roots and between paving stones, as the dizzying fumes and rumbling din of motorbike traffic encircles the park.

Today, nothing remains of the cemetery. Every time I walk through the park, I think of its rubbed-out, supplanted, doubly-buried history. No one would ever know it existed. It was bulldozed and resculpted so as to leave no trace (except in memory) of its presence and

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1 All Vietnamese words used in this dissertation (such as Vo Thi Sau and Bao Tang Phu Nu Nam Bo) appear in English transliterations, adhering to their Vietnamese spellings but lacking proper diacritical markers.
purposeful destruction. What’s more, the park (cemetery) is flanked by two of Ho Chi Minh City’s most bustling boulevards, each bearing names from the country’s communist national history. Dien Bien Phu is the site and name of the infamous battle where the French fell to the Viet Minh in 1954, under the command of General Giap, ending nearly a century of colonial rule in northern Vietnam. Vo Thi Sau Street, where I now briskly walk, is named for a young girl, a southern communist guerilla fighter captured and executed by the French who is now revered as a national martyr. Today, nearly all cities in Vietnam share the same street names, most of them rewritten by the communist government to mark significant people, places, battles, and dates in their version of national history. As I approach the museum, to meet the members of the “Former Women Political Prisoner Performance Group” (Doi Van Nghe Cuu Nu Tu Chinh Tri) for the first time, I am reminded afresh of how in Vietnam, as in other places, some memory is hallowed, praised, and canonized while other memory is suppressed, erased, and governmentally disavowed. And yet, as here in the park (cemetery), subjugated memories are still powerfully, palpably present, living quietly within the shadowed recesses of private memory or buried deep within the nation’s soil.

These daydreams are displaced by the sight of three guards relaxing in plastic chairs at the museum gate and a towering bronze statue of an old woman clad in traditional peasant dress. The old woman stands with straight back, a finely wrinkled face, hair knotted at the nape of the neck, left hand on her heart and her other arm outstretched in a beckoning stance as her eyes gaze unflinchingly forward. Behind her is a bright yellow and white French-style villa, and further behind that stands a drab 1970s-style modern cinderblock building with few windows and the words Bao Tang Phu Nu Nam Bo (Southern Women’s Museum) over the stairwell. Glancing back at the French villa and the small garden courtyard with the statue, I
see the words *anh hung* (heroic), *bat khuat* (unyielding), *trung hau* (faithful/kind-hearted), *dam dang* (resourceful and hardworking) inscribed under the statue of the old woman. These are the “Eight Golden Words for Women” (*Tam Chu Vang*) set forth by Ho Chi Minh during wartime. These eight words encapsulate women’s wartime responsibilities to the nation as well as embodying what many in Vietnam feel are Vietnamese women’s culturally traditional and naturally imbued virtues. In just a few minutes I will meet a group of women who are the living embodiments, during wartime and still over thirty years later, of these Eight Golden Words.

**Orientations**

This introduction begins with an overview of the project that began in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam with the members of the Former Women Political Prisoner Performance Group on that balmy November afternoon in 2004. After giving a brief account of the project and some of its guiding questions, I discuss the cultural dimensions of memory and then the politics of memory in Vietnamese contexts, noting some specific historical and contemporary conditions that shape the form and substance of memory practices. I then broadly engage with the symbols, roles, and representations of women in wartime and postwar Vietnam. Discussing the culturally imbued, discursively constructed, and historically marked representations of women and their deployment within popular culture helps contextualize the veterans’ performance group within larger, gendered, socio-political frameworks in Vietnam. Next, I address the cultural politics surrounding the group’s inception, the group’s pedagogical imperatives, the nature of their rehearsals, meetings with particular members of the group, as well as the content and style of their stage performances. Following this section on the performance group, I give an outline of my research methods.
and data collection practices as a preface for longer explications of ten central, performance-centered subjects/theoretical models that guide my inquiries with the women and my theorization of their remembering performances. The introduction concludes with a brief summary of each chapter.

**Background and Project Description**

From July 2004 to July 2005, and from June thru August 2006, I lived in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam and conducted fieldwork with the older women who comprise the Former Women Political Prisoner Performance Group.\(^2\) What I learned from these women prompted me to explore questions of memory, the historical and contemporary violence of war, and the politics of social responsibility, particularly in relation to the kids, doctors, and nurses at the Peace Village (*Lang Hoa Binh*) orphanage for children with Agent Orange-related mental and physical disabilities located in Ho Chi Minh City’s largest women’s hospital (*Benh Vien Tu Du*). Through conversations and friendships with the veterans and the people living and working in the orphanage-hospital, I came to learn more about the ways pasts, particularly war-torn pasts, actively live in enduring material ways within the transnational present.

Consequently, the dissertation’s three core chapters center on the lives, memory narratives, and performances of remembering by four women war veterans who are members of the veterans’ association. Then, as a necessary step in addressing the transgenerational implications of violence, the conclusion discusses the veterans’ connections to the Lang Hoa Binh children as well as the children’s everyday struggles for social inclusion and basic

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\(^2\) From its inception, and on a yearly basis, this study has been approved by the Academic Affairs Institutional Review Board (AA-IRB) of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (study #: 05-0027, also documented as COMM 2005-013).
survival. Together, the veterans’ past and present social actions and the children’s unjust conditions suggest that violence, and responsibility for violence, must be understood transgenerationally.

What I learn from the four women veterans speaks to the specificity of their individual experiences of war as well as to the collective generational memories, communal spirit, shared beliefs, and social practices of the veterans’ group as a whole. Discussion with these women and others in the performance group also leads me to understand better the veterans’ deep sense of social responsibility within the present, exemplified in the dissertation through one veteran’s personal connections to and work on behalf of children suffering from Agent Orange-related disabilities. What I come to call the veterans’ performative politics of hauntological, “prospective remembering” enables me, in the final section of the dissertation, to engage directly with the political-historical dimensions of transgenerational violence that I witness through the lives of the Lang Hoa Binh children. The kids’ own remarkable, performance-centered social interventions show me how, despite their disadvantaged positions, they can and do find ways of performing vital, small and meaningful acts of agency within their everyday lives.

As an oral history and ethnographic study rooted in the specificity of embodied performance, this study attends to the cultural and historical content of the veterans’ narrative and staged performances (including wartime prison performances and contemporary public shows); the way they tell their respective and collective histories; their reflexive self-theorizing; and the historical, cultural, and political contexts that conjoin their lives with others in Vietnam and beyond. Broadly, the veterans’ various performances of remembering show, among other things, the power of performance as 1) a vital individual/social act of
resistance, 2) a way of (re)making the self, community, culture and nation, and 3) a means of personal and collective survival and continuing social agency.

The veterans link themselves, and their histories, to contemporary social contexts and issues, including the lives and living conditions of the Lang Hoa Binh children, through historically-imbued, memory-based, processual and prospective social ethics. The veterans’ sense of connection to and responsibility for present-day social concerns stems from their early communist revolutionary commitments to social welfare and societal transformation, their personal experiences of violence during the colonial era and the American War, as well as the lingering psychological and physical impacts of colonial and wartime brutality on their present lives. As demonstrated through the narratives, self-theorizations, and politics of the performance group’s founder, the veterans’ sense of connection to the children is historically, bodily, socioculturally, generationally, and narratively based. The children may not be the direct relatives of the performance group women; however, in a national and sociocultural filial sense they are viewed as descendants, implicating their elders in responsibility for their social welfare.

The Lang Hoa Binh children are the inheritors of war’s lasting legacies. They, and the millions of others born after the war in Vietnam, are the beneficiaries of the wartime generations’ successful achievement of postcoloniality and communist self-governance. However, the children are also the recipients of modern warfare’s deleterious effects: pervasive and long-lasting socioeconomic struggles and inequities, massive environmental destruction, and—of central importance to the Lang Hoa Binh kids—biologically transmitted cellular aberrations from chemical contamination that are anecdotally/scientifically recognized as the cause of their mental disability, physical disfigurement, and resulting social
and economic marginalization. The disabled orphanage-hospital kids are living (re)embodiments of the Vietnamese-American War’s continuing violence. They are living proof of history’s materialism.

The dissertation addresses the veterans’ memories, and performances of remembering, intergenerationally and transgenerationally, while attending to the discrete specificity of the women and of their memories. By “transgenerationally” I mean the way memories and performances of remembering gather up individual and collective pasts, leaving their psychic and/or material “mark” on others’ lives as they travel within and through different temporalities. By “intergenerationally” I mean memory and memory performances within and between different generations. However, in relation to both terms, I want to suggest something more than familial relations. That is, I seek to address and explore the ways in which generational relations are embedded and articulated socially, culturally, historically and politically through performances of remembering. Accordingly, this dissertation seeks 1) to address the memories and politics of remembering performed by the women veterans, 2) to historicize the women’s stories, views, and acts of revolutionary commitment within current Vietnamese contexts, including their work on behalf of those suffering from Agent Orange-related disabilities, and 3) to learn if and how practices that circulate around and through the women’s work contribute to an ethics of transnational and intergenerational social responsibility.

This project began with the questions: How are the performance group women living with and performing memory? What are their feelings of responsibility to the past, present, and future of Vietnam? Over time, I became increasingly involved in the various ways in which the women express and enact their complex political and social interests, leading me
to wonder more broadly: What are the ethical responsibilities of those within and outside Vietnam to the past and to a more equitable and just present and future? Through the study of individual lives, particular sites, and intimate exchanges, this project seeks to learn more about what it is, or might be, to remember and witness the women’s histories and the Lang Hoa Binh children’s everyday acts in conjunction with the veterans’ hope of learning to live more justly with others by way of discerning and practicing an historically-imbued, prospectively oriented, performative politics of memory. Among the primary questions I ask are: How are the veterans engaging a transgenerational politics of memory? How does their hauntological memory politics inform the way they address current social transformations in Vietnam as well as problems of transgenerational, transnational violence? What can be learned from the women’s discursively located, insistently anticipatory remembering?

**The Cultural Production of Memory**

Memory is an individual and social phenomenon. It is received, (re)produced, and employed on individual and cultural levels. What Etienne Balibar asserts regarding identity is also true for memory when he says, “[a]ll identity is individual, but there is no individual identity that is not historical or, in other words, constructed within a field of social values, norms of behaviour and collective symbols” (94). For this study it is particularly important to be aware of both the individual specificity and shared sociocultural dimensions of memory and remembering performances in order to better understand the interplay between personal beliefs and practices and social ideologies and movements.

I find the veterans’ memory and remembering performances to be cultural creations in at least four central ways. First, following the work of memory and culture scholars such as Maurice Halbwachs, Mieke Bal, and many others, I understand memory as always a
culturally produced phenomenon. Halbwachs’s foundational theorizations describe a social architecture or “social frameworks of memory,” wherein “our individual thought places itself in [] frameworks and participates in [collective] memory” (38). Similarly, Bal chooses to use the term “cultural memory” rather than “individual (psychological) memory” or “social memory” as she understands all memory—whether individual or shared, practiced privately or in social setting—as fundamentally a collective, “cultural phenomenon” (vii). Following these theorizations, the veterans’ personal and social memory narratives are cultural by the very nature of their being.

Second, as will be discussed in more detail, within the cultural-political context of Vietnam, the veterans’ remembering and forgetting participates in a particular form of shared, cultural history-making, namely, that of the Communist Party and its determination of what constitutes (national) history. The stories the women tell are aligned with the government’s sanctioned, and promoted, versions of the past. Although in many ways the performance group women’s narratives and performances adhere to the government’s hegemonic version of national history, I argue that to view their memories and remembering performances as recitations of unoriginal, oppressive, party propaganda misses the vitality and creativity of their narratives and, moreover, misunderstands their central intentions.

Building on this contention, I see the third cultural dimension of the veterans’ remembering as located in the ontological understanding of performance as a culturally founded activity. The veterans’ narrative performances are collective, cultural, and social, in the sense that they actively involve, and depend upon, ghostly and living participant-witnesses. This makes the veterans’ performances cultural on a spectral level as well.
Lastly, the women’s reasons for telling their stories are cultural through their social orientation: the veterans perform their memories in order to promote and enable more equitable societal conditions.

**Regarding History**

If all personal and social memory (and remembering performance) is cultural, to better understand what memory is and how it is operating, one must address the particularities and politics of cultural-historical contexts. It is critical to locate the veterans’ memories and remembering performances within larger cultural, political, historical trajectories in Vietnam. To contextualize later discussions, I offer here a brief outline of recent Vietnamese history focusing primarily on the colonial era and American War periods. In the next section, I will address the politics and sociocultural contexts post-1975 when the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam, as it exists today, came into being. Rather than aiming to give a schematic and chronological history through the veterans’ narratives, this study explores meanings emerging from memories and remembering performances whose shape is more akin to Walter Benjamin’s “constellation[s]” of memory where “the present as the ‘time of the now’ [] is shot through” with other temporalities (263).

Following Benjamin’s poetic, messianic understanding of history and historical materialism, I agree that “[t]o articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke)” but rather “to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger” or risk, and to address the production and reception of memory through its performative, cultural, and political contexts (255). Therefore, additional historical background and historiographic analysis relevant in understanding the veterans’ narratives will be addressed throughout the dissertation as needed and determined by 1) the veterans’
narratives and remembering performances and 2) what I choose to focus on based on my guiding questions and 3) what I feel the women most want me to know about their lives, country, and culture. What follows is a skeletal framework of historical events that is meant to serve as a basic structure of reference. The events outlined below are recognized as contingent, politically fraught, and variously interpreted. This framework admittedly leaves out important, detailed information regarding different perceptions of how these events came about and, historiographically, how they are constructed and understood as history (or not viewed as history) within different cultural contexts.3

A Brief Historical Framework

In the area now known as Vietnam, or the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the last century and a half has been a time of extreme social struggle and violence. People have suffered under conditions of oppressive colonial domination and subsequent, decades-long bouts of brutal anti-colonial, anti-imperial, and civil warfare. The French forcefully occupied southern Vietnam in the 1860s, officially made the region of Vietnam a “protectorate,” ruled the area “as a colony” starting in 1883, and created the “Indochinese Union” (encompassing modern-day Vietnam and Cambodia, and in later years Laos as well) in 1887 (Karnow 674). However, the European presence in the area of Vietnam, especially in the form of Catholic missionaries from France and Portugal, has a much longer history of making inroads into the region and “had been gaining momentum since the fifteenth century” (55). From a

Vietnamese perspective, attempted (and sometimes successful) conquest by outsiders is nothing new for a civilization that has had to negotiate its tenuous relation to China for thousands of years, including being ruled by China for roughly a millennium between the first century B.C.E. and approximately 938 A.D. (Tuner viii).

Today and historically, Vietnam’s relationship with China can be understood as an always unsteady, ambivalent combination of “[s]inophobia” and “[s]inophilia” (Taylor, Goddess 68). It is important to note the dynamic between Vietnam and China because, while French colonialism and American imperialism have dominated much of Vietnam’s recent history, Vietnamese people often remark that warfare with the West is a relatively new phenomenon compared to their longstanding history of defending themselves against China. Vietnam’s claimed “tradition of resistance against foreign invaders” finds its roots in postcolonial history writing as well as in its entwined relations, and close geographic and cultural proximity, with China.

Under French colonial rule, the early 1900s in Vietnam were full of great social oppression and unrest. People were enslaved as plantation workers, imprisoned for anti-colonial activities, and brutalized and violently executed by the French. Hue-Tam Ho Tai notes the emergence of what she calls Vietnamese “radicalism” in the mid-1920s that as a precursor to Marxist-Leninist revolutionary practice was “essentially [a] nonideological current of reaction, both to colonial rule and to native accommodation to that rule, whose chief characteristics were iconoclasm and the marriage of the personal and the political” that was “not a true ‘ism’ as conventionally understood, but more of a political mood” cultivated and embodied by mostly young, educated urbanites (Radicalism 1). The Indochinese Communist Party, founded (or perhaps more accurately, reformulated and unified) in 1930
by Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues, emerged out of rising communist movements worldwide and Vietnam’s particular, radical, anti-colonial, nationalist climates.

Shortly after France succumbed to Germany during World War II, Japan seized control of Indochina. During Japanese occupation, colonial/war-related changes in crop production and environmental conditions (e.g., flooding) led to a widespread famine in northern Vietnam from 1944-1945 that killed “between 400,000 to two million people” (Hirschman 783). 1945 became a monumental year in Vietnamese history as a series of countrywide uprisings comprising the August Revolution led “Ho Chi Minh [to] declare[] Vietnam an independent nation, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)” from Hanoi’s Ba Dinh square on the 2nd of September (Turner xiv). In this speech Ho borrowed verses from the United States’ Declaration of Independence to describe his postcolonial national vision for Vietnam. After the Japanese and German defeat, the French returned to Vietnam aided, financially and militarily, by the United States. For nearly ten years between 1946 and 1954 the Vietnamese and the French engaged in what is often referred to as the “First Indochina War” or in Vietnam as the “War Against the French” and the “Anti-French Resistance War.” In the monumental battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the French were defeated in a surprise attack by the Viet Minh army under the command of general Vo Nguyen Giap. General Giap went on to lead the northern Vietnam People’s Army (Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam) against the United States, making him Vietnam’s most famous contemporary military leader and strategist.

This loss essentially ended French political involvement in Indochina, however Patricia Pelley accurately states that “one cannot precisely locate the moment when the colonial period is past” (5). The French departure led the United States, out of growing fear
about the spread of communism in Asia, to increase its presence in southern Vietnam. The Vietnamese victory at Dien Bien Phu resulted in a ceasefire agreement brokered by world leaders in Geneva. “Although the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu could not have been more dramatic,” the provisions of the Geneva Accords were difficult to interpret for “on the one hand” they “stipulated that Vietnam was a single state; on the other they also established an administrative division between North and South” making “two ‘administrative zones’” divided at the 17th parallel that “quickly evolved into a political boundary” (4). The Geneva agreement essentially set forth that: the French would leave the north; the Viet Minh would withdraw from the south; and the country would be divided temporarily to prevent further violence, with Ho Chi Minh as the leader of the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north and Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai (and, shortly thereafter, Ngo Dinh Diem) as head of the State of Vietnam (soon renamed the Republic of Vietnam) in the south. The understanding was that, in two years, there would be democratic elections held throughout the two regions to (re)unify the country under a single leadership.

However, in 1956, backed by the United States, southern president Diem refused to hold elections that likely would have resulted in Ho’s, and his communist government’s, victory. This refusal, among numerous other factors including intense social conflict stemming from governmental oppression in the south, caused war to break out between North Vietnam (backed by China and the Soviet Union) and South Vietnam and the United States. With no official declaration of war, there are various interpretations regarding when and how the war “started.” The war has numerous names, but is commonly referred to as the “Vietnam War” in the U.S., the “Second Indochina War” (marking a connection with the French colonial war), and in Vietnam as the “American War,” the “War Against the
Americans,” the “‘War of National Salvation Against the Americans’ (Chien Tranh Chuong My Cuu Nuoc)” among other related titles (Tai, Country 177; Malarney, “Fatherland” 48).

The United States deployed military advisors in southern Vietnam at least by the early 1950s, began directly financing the South Vietnamese government in 1955, and initiated ground warfare with American combat troops in Da Nang in 1965.

In the south, the latter half of the 1950s was marked by violent government crackdowns (especially on presumed dissidents) and insurgency against Diem’s American-backed government. For example, “[i]n 1956 anybody who had agitated for elections was arrested—about 50,000 people, of whom roughly 12,000 were executed” (Neale citing the work of Marilyn Young, 38). The National Front for the Liberation of the South (also referred to as the National Liberation Front or NLF, and the Viet Cong or “Vietnamese Communists”), a communist and anti-Republic of Vietnam guerilla organization with ties to the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam, began organizing and staging uprisings in the south during that time. The official formation of the NLF in 1960 was predated by a history of nationalist, anti-colonial/imperial, anti-RVN, communist and non-communist peasant uprisings in the south that, as Pelley notes, in the 1950s, 1960s, and afterward, were “converted” en masse “into expressions of [communist] nationalism and pro-state affinities” by government-appointed postcolonial historians (138). The women’s performance group consists of former members of the Viet Minh (during the French colonial period) and the National Front for the Liberation of the South (during the American War) who came to communism at different times, but who now identify as communist fighters who were working for the “liberation” and “reunification” of Vietnam.
The war’s devastating ground battles took place in southern and central Vietnam, with air bombings occurring throughout the country that, “between 1965 to 1973 [. . .] dropped over 7.5 million tons of bombs on Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia,” or the amount “equal to the explosive force of over 700 Hiroshima-type atomic bombs” (Luong citing Harrison, 2). The communists’ Tet Offensive in 1968, staged in numerous locations across the Republic of Vietnam, finally marked a turning point in the United States’ direct military involvement. With the loss of popular support for the war in the U.S., and with more than fifty thousand Americans killed, the U.S. pulled troops out of Vietnam in 1973 with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords. However, the U.S. continued supplying military training, matériel, and money to the South Vietnamese government. Without the American military presence, the Republic of Vietnam government was unable to sustain itself or its military and officially fell to North Vietnam on April 30, 1975 as tanks entered Saigon. This day is remembered as the “Fall of Saigon” and the “Day of Shame (Ngay Quoc Han)” by many of the several million overseas Vietnamese who fled to, among other places, the U.S. and France. In contrast, the date is festively celebrated as national “Reunification Day” (Ngay Thong Nhat) across Vietnam. But as Tai notes, “those who remain in Vietnam but fought against Communism do not have the luxury of publicly holding their own rites of remembrance” (Country 190).

The end of the war and “national reunification” marked the beginning of many new, as well as continuing, war-related difficulties as the country struggled to reorganize, rebuild, and just survive. Families and communities were left politically, socially, and economically broken and bereft, the country having lost somewhere between one and three million people (with recent estimates locating the number closer to one million between the years of 1965-
1975), civilians and military, with millions more injured (Hirschman 783, 807). In addition, it is estimated that millions of people from the south perilously risked their lives during the 1970s and 1980s, desperately fleeing the country by sea as “boat people” to escape what they feared would be oppressive communist rule and harsh punishment for anti-communist allegiance. Thousands died trying to make the escape. The communist takeover, or “reunification,” occurred with relatively little bloodshed and no real military battle. However, soon after, many people were held in hard labor and “reeducation” camps for years on end, some spending more than a decade imprisoned and dying due to poor conditions both in prison and throughout the country. Under the United States’ economic embargo, from 1975 to 1994, Vietnam’s economy grievously suffered. The country was ravaged by extreme poverty until the late 1980s/early 1990s, causing Vietnam War correspondent, author, and public historian Stanley Karnow to describe Vietnam in 1981 as “one of the most impoverished places on earth” (27).

Adding to these strains, Vietnam went to war with Cambodia (fighting the U.S.- and Chinese-backed genocidal Khmer Rouge government) in 1978/79 and fought China directly over border disputes in the north in 1979. In 1989/90, Vietnamese troops finally left Cambodia, marking the “[f]irst period of peace since 1945” (Turner, xvi). The longstanding U.S. embargo on Vietnam ended in 1994, and the following year normalized relations between the two countries were initiated. In 2006, Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization. Although economic laws and practices are changing, Vietnam’s government is receiving increased criticism from the international community (e.g., from the United Nations, individual governments, and nonprofit organizations) regarding its nontransparent government and legal system (especially as regards the death penalty), its inequitable
treatment of some ethnic minorities, intolerance of those holding non-state-sanctioned religious and political beliefs, control over public speech and media, political and business sector corruption, and environmental mismanagement. Today, Vietnam still has many problems to address, however at present the country as a whole is arguably experiencing the least war-stricken, most socially hopeful, and most economically prosperous era in its modern history and in most citizens’ memory.

Politics of Memory- and History-Making in Vietnam

During wartime and in postwar periods, under communist direction, the official Vietnamese past has been self-consciously produced, harnessed, and deployed for the explicit purpose of making a new postcolonial nation (Pelley 2002; Pettus 2003; Tai 2001). For example, Pelley states that “[f]or the Vietnamese in the 1950s and 1960s, [] the reconstruction of national history was an essential part of postcolonial recovery” (47). She claims that, “[t]o the extent that there is or was a shared sense of the past, it emerged, I believe, from the didacticism of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, when official historians tried to cultivate it by exploiting the pedagogical power of commemorative texts and events” (Pelley 13). State narratives and collective notions of national culture and history are crafted and sustained through individuals’ ideological and materially enacted support, for the “myth of

4 Although they were not created out of total harmony and agreement, official postcolonial histories often appear as seamless narratives of an unquestionable past leading to an inevitable present. Supporting the feel of “scientific” and omniscient congruence, historical texts are often coauthored (written by a number of scholars) or they are anonymous accounts (re)presenting a unified view, a consensus on the path and meaning of history. As with official postcolonial historical renditions, the women’s narratives perform concurrence and “social unity” as a result of the greater society’s need for “invulnerability” in the face of “insurmountable differences” during wartime, with threats of disintegration and failure, and afterward to combat the different, perceived risks to culture and nation during peacetime (Pelley 60). Like state history, the women’s stories embody the consolidating move of narrative consensus and plural authorship, commonly deferring individual heroism in favor of collective might, for the sake of down-playing differences and creating a sense of shared experience. This form of narrativity was and still is encouraged, in public and private spheres, in print and personal exchange, because it is said to embody a populist-oriented ethic and proper “national spirit.”
origins and national continuity” and identity must be continually enacted, “constructed daily, by moving back from the present into the past” or, rather, by (re)performing and (re)making both past and present (Balibar 87). But in these daily performances of national and cultural origin and identity there are rifts, discrepancies, and tensions. “Revising the past,” Tai contends, is always “a matter not only of disagreement of what is supposed to have happened but also the expression of yearnings for different futures, however inchoate” (Tai, Country 9). Remembering and (re)performing the past are not simply repetitive, reinscribing practices, they also may vitally contribute in remaking the past, present, and future.

Years of colonialism, revolutionary socialism, war, diaspora, and postwar national consolidation under a communist government have great implications for the ways public and private remembering is practiced, produced, and understood in Vietnam. Centrally, although “in the past decade [] the advance of globalization, including people’s [increased] access to the electronic media,” has made government regulation more difficult, speech, press, and all media are still under tight state control and surveillance in Vietnam. In terms

5 Though there is often a veneer of consensus given to Party images, proclamations, and policies in Vietnam, it should be noted that, currently and historically, there is considerable internal disagreement and negotiation over how to conceive of a shared national past and transforming visions of the future (Dixon 2004; McCargo 2004; Pelley 2002; Quinn-Judge 2004). Similar to the adaptive, pragmatic survival skills of individuals in Vietnam, “the Party has always been a coalition, which has survived by practicing the art of compromise in conditions of duress” and disagreement (Quinn-Judge, “Rethinking” 27). Due to geopolitics and “compounded by Vietnam’s small size [. . .] the VCP [Vietnamese Communist Party] needed to retain a pragmatic, flexible international stance reflecting its multiple strands of opinion” (McCargo 4). “Vietnam never was a monolithic one-party state, but always permitted considerable divergence of views and of regional practices, along with well-established mechanisms for consulting the masses,” so that the government is skilled at “‘absorbing’ rather than ‘repressing’ dissent,” making Vietnam what has been called a “soft authoritarian-corporalist” state where “retreat from authoritarianism has taken place unevenly” (McCargo 3; Dixon 25).

6 In his essay “Authorities and the People: An Analysis of State-Society Relations in Vietnam,” Kerkvliet clearly explains the situation of state control of media, information, and speech in Vietnam when he states: “[a]ll television, radio, and telephone systems; filmmaking; and Internet service providers in Vietnam are owned and operated by state agencies. All newspapers, publishing houses, and printing presses are owned and operated by government ministries, the Communist Party, and official organizations. Authorities in the Ministry of Culture and Information and the Communist Party’s Department for Culture and Ideology scrutinize and often intervene to determine the content of publications and of radio and television broadcasts. The state uses the media outlet not only to inform and educate citizens but also to inundate them with official positions on
of the current government’s influence on history and memory production, Christoph Giebel states, there are “particular commemorative practice[s] employed by the Communist Party-dominated state in Vietnam [to] satisfy its need for appropriate self-representation and to shape and control the ways in which the past is remembered” whether in print, stone, film, collective public celebration, or personally embodied memory (77). Accordingly, when addressing memory and history in Vietnam, it is important to consider the institutional capabilities and “interest of the state in shaping not only written history, but popular memory as well” (Tai, Country 7). In this context, the performance group women’s narrative remembering can be understood as an expression of popular memory that is powerfully influenced by the state. Oral histories and personal memories are not inherently individual, radical, liberatory, or counter-hegemonic. However, on the other hand, just because forms of popular memory appear to be extensions of state power does not mean they exclusively or necessarily operate as such.

Tai describes the pervasive presence of two “distinct and opposite [memory] phenomena” in contemporary Vietnam that she calls “hyper-mnemosis” and “willed amnesia” (8). Hyper-mnemosis memory practice refers “not just to the inability or refusal to let go of the past but also to the intense, even obsessive, effort to keep it at the forefront of consciousness, to shape it and to exploit it for a variety of purposes” (8). On the other extreme, willed amnesia is also a result of “the coercive intensity of totalitarian commemoration” where “[i]t is this very intensity [of forced remembering] that promotes its opposite, the wish to escape into oblivion” as “forgetting may be the only escape from the
tyranny of enforced memory, a refusal to internalize the script that is being pressed by a totalitarian state or overbearing individuals” (8). Tai describes how both memory practices emerge out of conditions of heavy state control, turbulent recent history, and present-day transformations in governance, social organization and practice, and economic policy that throw the state’s canonical renderings of the nation’s past, present, and future into potential confusion, uncertainty, and contest. As Pelley states, “[t]he effusion of [national] commemorative occasions [in Vietnam] may remind us of the crucial interplay between remembering and forgetting, and may recall for us that memory itself is [often] ‘a substitute, surrogate, or consolation for something that is missing’” or less certain, concretized, or stable than it may appear (Pelley elaborating Davis and Starn, 172).

Due, in large part, to longstanding histories of colonial domination, brutal warfare, and heavy state control, people in Vietnam have learned to practice willed amnesia as well as disguise disallowed views and beliefs as a means of familial- and self-protection. Thus, public discourse, opinion, and representations in Vietnam are often more nuanced than they may seem at first glance. Meanings and sentiments are often hidden, doubled, and coded. In many instances, Tai notes, “[l]acking a sanctioned outlet for debating political and cultural differences, Vietnamese public discourse often has an oblique quality; it is full of hidden meanings and allusions” (Country 9). Historically it has been, and in some regards still is, exceedingly risky (for one’s self, family, and close associates) to publicly voice opinions and beliefs that run contrary to those in power. Even within contemporary contexts, the state’s desire to influence and regulate all levels of personal and social life in Vietnam makes listening for complexities, elisions, silences, and contradictions a critical part of any oral history and ethnographic research. In the context of this research, although there may be
overt and overriding nationalist stylization to the veterans’ memory narratives, there may also be subtle references, discreet meanings, and indirect or seemingly contradictory expressions within their stories that are just as telling of their values and beliefs.

The Social Implications of Doi Moi and its Affect on Memory/History Production

In recent years, Tai observes a “commemorative fever” sweeping over Vietnam (Country 1). This impassioned, somewhat obsessive outpouring of commemorative activity is caused, she says, by the emergence and continuing development of Vietnam’s recently instated Doi Moi economic policy. Over the past two decades, similar to China’s socialist market economy, and following in the wake of Russia’s “perestroika” policy, Vietnam has been adopting an increasingly market-based economy while verging away from state-planned command economy models. Doi Moi, or “changing for the new,” is the name for the liberal-market economic policy reforms initiated in Vietnam in the mid 1980s, most specifically in 1986 with the passing of laws allowing some forms of free-market enterprise (1). With Doi Moi came “new objectives of nationalism [] focused on the containment of economic reform within existing, communist-led political systems” so that, in the Doi Moi era, past “goals of anti-imperialist class struggle” are arguably being supplanted by quests for “national prosperity and cultural strengthening in an effort to promote and control the process of economic growth” (Pettus 5).

The implementation of Doi Moi socioeconomic reform has been accompanied by significant transformations and tensions in the production, content, and performance of memory and history in Vietnam. The diversity of public responses to the post-Doi Moi era’s more volatile economic markets, tenuous political climate, and blurry social policies of increasing social freedoms punctuated by regressive government crackdowns causes Tai to
describe contemporary public memory in Vietnam as “characterized as much by confusion as by profusion” as the state and society struggle over how to remake the past and imagine new futures (Country 2). “The political liberalization that is a by-product of economic reforms is widely credited with opening a space for revisiting the past,” Tai says; however, “it is not only the loosening of state control over cultural life that has allowed for discrepant interpretations of the past to come to the fore; new historical conditions are forcing them into the open” (3).

By the early 1980s, among other social problems, nationwide poverty and the communist government’s failing economic policies were causing immense public dissatisfaction and civil unrest. The government had to make policy changes if it wanted to stay in power. As Hy V. Luong states, “Vietnamese economic reforms seem to have been shaped [. . .] by historically conditioned bottom-up societal pressures” (12). For the Party, adopting Doi Moi market reforms was an incredibly risky endeavor that could potentially undermine communist historically-grounded, social, and political visions of the future and thus also threaten to unravel the government’s past and current claims on power. Regarding Doi Moi reforms’ potentials for calling pasts and futures into question within the turbulent present, Tai states:

[i]n opting for Doi Moi, Vietnamese leaders were implicitly setting aside a socialist vision of the future that had sustained them through decades of

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7 The transformations associated with Doi Moi, which many outside of Vietnam might find discordant with the aims of communism, are often rhetorically recuperated by the Vietnamese government as being in accordance with the one-party state’s service to the people, preservation of national sovereignty, and sometimes even as a necessary stage within communist teleology. To many Vietnamese citizens, how the government wishes to characterize its political decisions is not of primary importance. It is what the government does, and how its actions and decrees affect people’s everyday lives, that matters most. Vietnamese people make and re-make their own brand of socialism. Pelley deftly calls Vietnamese communism “Marxish” rather than Marxist (61). In Vietnam, people make ideologies malleable to serve their changing needs and conditions, originally in the name of survival and autonomy, and today in pursuit of increased economic prosperity.
struggle; nonetheless they did not abandon their claim to historically based legitimacy, continued monopoly on power, or formal commitment to Marxism-Leninism. Even now that the need to mobilize war is gone, the leadership retains a stake in promoting a version of the past that inscribes it as the legitimate inheritor of the Vietnamese patriotic tradition and the dominant force in the recent history of the country. (3)

Rather than discrediting themselves by adopting economic reforms that are seemingly incongruous with a socialist state, through deft maneuvering, the communist government has retained its legitimacy, in good part, through its skillful rhetorical implementation of Doi Moi and subsequent economic reforms. For its own self-preservation, the Party chose to incorporate the public’s push toward liberal market policy into its own ideological, political project. Not surprisingly, the government has not relinquished its hold on history or its claims on power in the present and future. Thus, today in Vietnam, although “[n]ew visions of the past” are being vigorously remade, they still “must take their [subordinate] place alongside old ones that continue to give solace not only to the state but also to important segments of Vietnamese society” such as the performance group women and other communist veterans (3). However, “the unmooring of the historical past from its predicated end has [somewhat] undone the carefully erected structures of memory,” leaving the present and future open to a diversity of new interpretations and resulting in the confusion and profusion of seemingly discordant social ideologies and practices, as well as contradictory memories and performances of remembering (4).

Tai’s contentions concerning the social implications of Doi Moi on performances of memory and the high stakes of granting historical legitimacy to alternative versions of the past in present-day Vietnam are helpful in understanding: 1) why the performance group veterans continue to hold onto their pasts and tell their personal histories in a distinctively
Party-condoned, devoted, socialist style; 2) why the performance group, as will be discussed later in more detail, emerged at this particular political-historical juncture; and 3) why some in Vietnam and elsewhere feel the veterans’ pasts, politics, history-making style, and overriding worldview is outdated and sometimes used divisively by the state to bolster its power and maintain public control. The performance group women are part of the demographic which still attaches great importance to the continued legitimacy of the Party, the canonizing of the government’s version of history, and the reassertion of the core revolutionary values for which they fought and sacrificed throughout their lives. To question the preeminence of the state’s official national past, or individuals’ life narratives that help to tell the story of the communist victory in overthrowing colonial and imperial domination, could understandably be seen as a significant threat to the veterans’ subjectivity and to whole generations of people (living and dead) recognized by the state as revolutionary heroes and national martyrs.

The veterans’ narratives and remembering performances always tell a personal as well as a national history, an individual as well as a collective experience of the past. The national history they tell demonstrates their continued allegiance to and support for the Party. However, to categorize the veterans’ memory performances as deleterious Party propaganda, naïve devotion, or the blind recitation of outdated socialist narratives is a problematic oversimplification. The women’s narratives and performances of remembering are significant not only for their traditional Party-line attributes, but also for their insistent flexibility and openness. Their collective memory performances carry forward their enduring commitment to the socialist ideals to which they devoted their lives during wartime, while also practicing a radical openness toward the changing conditions of contemporary Vietnam as it negotiates
its identity as a state governed by a single communist party with an increasingly market-driven economy.

Today, as ever, people in Vietnam are engaged in the process of self-consciously reinventing themselves and their nation. In Vietnam and elsewhere, “[e]ach struggle to create a new future through revolution, war, and counterrevolution has been accompanied by attempts to redefine historical meaning and, in the process, to remake the past” revealing that “[t]he past, like the future, is an eternally unfinished project, constantly under construction and constantly being revised” (Tai, Country 3). In Vietnam, “[t]he fluidity of the present [. . .] continually impose[s] new requirements on the past” (Pelley 235). As the veterans know well from their revolutionary past, remaking society (reforming or revolutionizing) requires that stories from the past be told in new ways that serve the changing conditions of the present, in the hope of making a more socially equitable future. They do not act as if their memory performances are “salvage operation[s] designed to preserve traces of a fast-vanishing past before they are obliterated by the forces of relentless capitalist-style modernization” (1). The veterans do not act as if they are afraid, or threatened by the social, economic, and political changes of the post-Doi Moi era. Rather, it is more common that the women see themselves as actively participating in retelling the past and remaking Vietnam’s present and future. As Lawrence Grossberg writes, “[w]e can only struggle between different articulations of reality to find one that is more humane for more (all) people” (260). Judging from the veterans’ past commitments, and how they continue to describe their present social endeavors and future aspirations, this is the kind of struggle in which they want to participate.
Contemporary Memory Contexts in Southern Vietnam

Although the country was “reunited” in 1975, cultural differences and popular perceptions of cultural differences persist between northern and southern regions in Vietnam. Some of these regional differences provide important contextualization for understanding the performance group’s pedagogical project and emergence as an exclusively southern organization in a country that likes to make nationwide networks of social/governmental associations (such as the Women’s Union, Fatherland Front, the Youth Union, and their affiliated suborganizations). I present here a brief, simplified rendering of what are complex historical, cultural, geographic, and politically intertwined reasons for the north and south’s real and perceived differences.

Historically, the south, with Ho Chi Minh City as its overflowing urban center, and southern culture are understood by the Vietnamese as “less formal and hierarchical [. . .] a frontier land only recently settled by the Vietnamese, it is a place where more individualistic, egalitarian, and spontaneous social relations pertain” (Taylor, Goddess 100). During the precolonial, colonial, and American War periods, the southern Mekong Delta region, more so than northern Vietnam, was a crossroads for people with diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. The southern region also differs from the north in its “lack of strong allegiance to Confucian ideology” (Tai, Country 182). It also has a precolonial history of being a more independent, market-based, agrarian society (because of a warm climate and multiple growing seasons), in contrast to the north’s pre-communist history of collective farming practices (attributed, in part, to the region’s harsher weather).

In popular perception, the south is seen as a place of more openness and acceptance of cultural, ethnic, and religious difference than the north. The south’s history of cultural
diversity, syncretism, and traditionally different social and economic organization from the north, along with historical occurrences like the mass migration of Catholic Vietnamese from the north during the partition in 1954, all likely contributed to its more open stance toward capitalism, and its rejection of many collectivist, command-economy social policies. The south’s particular historical conditions, coupled with South Vietnam’s anti-communist stance during the American War, have resulted in the Ho Chi Minh City area being perceived by the government and the populace as a culturally corrupt, Westernized, capitalist-oriented, degenerate place of loose and questionable morals.

Philip Taylor explains that, to the communist troops in 1975 at the end of the American War, “the big, bloated southern cities encountered by the liberating troops at the end of the war seemed like an alien world,” and instead of seeing places like Ho Chi Minh City as “nodes of avant-garde culture and engines of growth, they were considered reservoirs of dangerous phenomena, construed as harmful to the regime’s unifying and modernizing project” (Goddess 40). Taylor explains that, in the project of “reunifying” the country:

the Communist leadership faced the challenge of incorporating into the socialist party the former South Vietnam, an ethnically diverse region shaped by capitalist social relations and influenced by consumerism and popular mass culture (Duiker 1989; P. Taylor 2001b). The integration of this region of Vietnam created a major problem for the Communist government, which was confronted by a plethora of religious sects, edifices, practices, and images that had been eliminated or controlled in the north [. . .]. In addition were regionally specific religious forms that reflected strong influences from the ethnic Chinese, Cham, and Khmer peoples, as well as syncretic religions such as the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao. To most of those who came from the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam, these unfamiliar religious forms were indicators of South Vietnam’s corruption and drift beyond the frontiers of the Vietnamese cultural world caused by the region’s decades-long control by a foreign backed government. (39)
Subsequently, in the years after “reunification,” as Hanoi tried to economically unify the country under central state control, Luong explains that “[r]esistance [to communist economic policy] was considerably stronger in the southern third of Vietnam,” in and around Ho Chi Minh City and the greater Mekong Delta region “which had been incorporated into the world capitalist system since the days of French colonialism” (*Postwar* 1). Although perceptions are changing, and capitalist/Western condemnation is no longer in line with the country’s nationwide *Doi Moi* policies and social practices, the south continues to be looked down upon in these terms.

On a flight to Hanoi in 2005, I found popular perceptions of north and south summed up well in the Vietnam Airlines *Heritage* magazine article “Hanoi & Saigon,” which describes, and genders, the cities and the people who live there as the “yin and yang (am duong) of cultural diversity” in Vietnam (My 34). Among other contrasts, in the article Saigonese people are said to live a more “high-speed lifestyle[,]” have a more “Westernized mentality,” use more American words, have “[m]ore exaggerated body language,” be more party- (rather than Party-) oriented and “less athletic” than their traditional, refined, subtle, and proper Hanoian counterparts (34-36). The regional differences, and corresponding values, are crystallized in the author’s description of women’s choices in wedding attire. The author says a northern “fiancéed friend [. . .] was looking for something elegant but simple, long-sleeved, train-less, and conservative,” a style that “like the character of Hanoi” is “elegant, refined, classic” (36). Meanwhile, the unspecified Saigon brides are said to “spare no expense,” choosing ostentatious dresses that are “pricey and display a more stylistic, modern look, with slit skirts and sloping collars” often accompanied by a “white parasol” to “keep their make-up from dripping beneath the sun” (36). As will be addressed later on, the
gendering that accompanies perceptions of regional differences, and their accompanying value judgments, is a familiar trope.8

In contrast to the flashy and fickle south, the north, and especially Hanoi, is popularly viewed as the nation’s cultural core. As the national capital, Hanoi is the site of the highest offices of national governance and international relations, through which most national finances, international governmental aid, and NGO funding initially flows into the country. Hanoi is a place of great national-governmental power. However, the pervasive view of Hanoi as the epicenter of Vietnamese history, the origin of “authentic” cultural belief and practice, and the example of pure communist national devotion has been carefully reconstructed and cultivated. In her detailed account of the communist nation-building effort, Pelley traces the articulation of Hanoi as the center of Vietnamese national power and culture as a postcolonial “reinvention of the center,” particularly exemplified and concretized in official national historians’ publication of *The History of the Capital of Hanoi* “[i]n 1960 to commemorate the 950th anniversary of the [city’s] founding” (210). Pelley describes this volume as “represent[ing] a shift in the rhetoric of the nation” and initiating a “new style of [postcolonial] urban historiography” “poignantly” working to make a vital “counterhistory of French representations” of the Vietnamese past (210).

Vietnamese postcolonial historians were “aware of the French—especially Parisian—sense of the capital as the culmination of all that was desirable and good: cultural norms, political power, and economic potency,” with power and cultural norms “from the center [] radiat[ing] out into the provinces.” Postcolonial historians consciously used “prescriptive speech” to “normalize new notions of authority” in the making of official Vietnamese

8 For more on the deployment of gendered imagery in Vietnam, and in particular the feminization (and derivation) of southern Vietnam, see Tai’s “Faces of Remembering and Forgetting” in *The Country of Memory* (167-195).
national history (Pelley 211). The prescription worked well. Since “France promoted the idea of Saigon as the ‘Pearl of the Orient,’ officials and scholars in the DRV countered with the image of Hanoi as the center of power, on the one hand, and refinement, on the other” (211). The rendering of Hanoi as the pure and ancient center, and Ho Chi Minh City as the counter-symbol of frontier territory with longstanding cultural impurity, is widely accepted even now, in the post-Doi Moi era.9 Throughout primary, secondary, and college curriculums, students are taught ancient, precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial history that places Hanoi at the nation’s cultural core. This and other related beliefs regarding cultural authenticity are widely held and, it seems, rarely questioned (at least publicly), within popular discourse in Vietnam.

In the early 1990s, as Doi Moi market reforms “were beginning to produce their anticipated effects of stimulating production and unleashing economic growth” there was a “feeling that life was improving [. . .]. Yet there was equally a sense of foreboding that such positive changes were accompanied by a downslide: materialism, [economic] pragmatism, the cult of money, selfish individualism, social rifts, crime, corruption, and moral decline” (Taylor, Goddess 48). Philip Taylor writes that “[e]ven in such a place as Ho Chi Minh City, there was a strong feeling that Vietnam would need to fight to preserve its traditions, national essence, and distinctive psychology against the depredations of global culture” (48). Thus, as the nation has adopted more capitalist-oriented economic policies, “the state has condoned [. . .] emphasis on tradition as a safeguard against [the perceived cultural ills] of globalization” (Luong 23). Cities appear to be the location of greatest diversity and national-cultural threat. As locations of cultural hybridity and cosmopolitanism, Taylor explains:

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it is not at the territorial borders but in the cities where the imagined nation encounters its greatest challenges. This is particularly true of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam’s commercial capital and center of technology, financial production, and support services. As such it has many of the characteristics of a global city, in which translocal economic forces have more weight than local policies in shaping urban economy, social structure, and cultural identity (Sassen 1991). [. . .] As the effects of International Monetary Fund- and World Bank-inspired reforms have taken the economic levers out of the hands of former societal leaders and shifted the center of gravity to the marketplace, there has been, if anything, a renewed emphasis on remembering past sacrifices, the value of the communal, the respect for old knowledge. (Taylor 53-55)

Taylor, Luong, and others note a resurgence of attention to certain forms of remembering, and the remaking of “traditional” practices and knowledges, as a result of Vietnam’s changing economic policies, social practices, and increased global exchange.

A combination of historical, political, and cultural conditions and perceptions, along with contemporary political/economic changes and social transformations, lend support to the popular belief that southern Vietnam, and Ho Chi Minh City in particular, is especially susceptible to becoming morally and culturally degenerate. These widespread popular sentiments about southern culture in Vietnam (and, increasingly, city culture in general) may help explain why the veterans’ performance group, encouraged by and under the auspices of the Women’s Union, emerged in Ho Chi Minh City in the early 1990s when radical changes in economic policy, and subsequent social reorganization, were raising fears about the nation’s socialist future. As Pelley asserts, “[t]he commemorative impulse flourishes in settings where struggles to refine the past are at the forefront of daily life” (192). During the post-Doi Moi era, especially in Ho Chi Minh City, the perceived need for Party-affirming forms of national remembering and history-telling is particularly acute.
Vietnamese Women as Popular Symbols of National Virtue and Moral Corruption

Vietnamese studies scholars Hue-Tam Ho Tai and Ashley Pettus, among others, have discussed the problematic characterization of women as popular cultural symbols of both traditional moral virtue and capitalist modernity’s moral corruption. Tai explains: “women can symbolize so many conflicting aspects of Vietnamese society and culture and, [. . .] can be made to represent both the power of memory and the fickleness of oblivion, both the debt that is owed to the revolutionary generation and the ingratitude of postwar youth” (Tai, Country 168). Tai gives a useful contextualization of women’s traditional cultural locations, as well as examples of contrasting popular portrayals of women in contemporary Vietnamese culture when she explains that:

[g]ender does not operate on its own but is inflected by age and kinship as well as class. This is especially true in Vietnam, whose language does not recognize the autonomy of the individual but instead enmeshes each and every speaking self in webs of familial and quasi-familial relationships. Images of women thus function in public discourse as a variety of roles, each a concatenation of attributes and associations. [. . .] the most often publicly invoked ones are those of daughter, wife, and mother. A woman must negotiate her everyday self among these and many more roles, but in public discourse she is usually portrayed as a young victim of patriarchal oppression or as an admiringly competent matron; as a devoted wife or jealous shrew; as a self-sacrificing mother or a domineering mother-in-law.” (168)

These contrasting representations of women in popular culture suggest and perform the confusion, social anxiety, and fraught views regarding the role of women in contemporary Vietnamese society. Pettus explains that “questions of female character, duty and behavior that have become central to the current dilemmas of national identity in Vietnam are rooted in earlier struggles for national independence and modernity, which established women’s
deep cultural responsibility to uphold the shifting ideals of the nation” (7). In times of social and economic transition, and tenuous ideological positioning, the task of securing and maintaining the cultural ideals of the nation is a weighty responsibility overflowing with ambivalent, mixed messages about what constitutes women’s proper behaviors and duties.

The figure of “the mother” is central to popular representations of women in Vietnam. As Tai states, “[g]iven the portrayal of the nation as family-writ-large in Vietnamese culture, it is not surprising that the discourse of the nation teems with images of mothers” (Country 169). She goes on to note that “despite the Confucian emphasis on the continuity of the male lineage, it is the image of the mother that represents the nostalgic days of childhood and the sense of connectedness with one’s personal past” in Vietnam (169). In their youth, during wartime, the performance group veterans embodied radical national-communist allegiance. Then and now, they describe themselves as women who, through communism, were liberated from the yokes of feudal and colonial patriarchy. Although they admit that social equity between men and women needs improvement in Vietnam, the women believe communist revolution brought them legal and governmentally recognized equal rights. They were

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10 The performance group women came of age at a time of great gender inequality within not only the colonial regimes but also Buddhist/Confucian-oriented folkways and social organization. Socialism offered them a valued place in the revolution, where they stood ostensibly as equals with their male counterparts. The women devoted their lives to revolution, motivated by a desire to overthrow external and corrupt powers that were adversely affecting their friends and families. Their convictions and cause gradually gained momentum and strength through the platforms of communist ideology. This ideology, and their performance of ardent devotion to it in the name of revolution, did not allow much space for inconsistencies or questioning.

11 In sacrificing the personal and individual to the greater nationalist, communist notion of the social during the French and American war periods, women also surrendered critical claims and footholds in their struggle for greater gender equality. The communists’ fight for national liberation caused discourses of gender to be swallowed up, rhetorically and materially, by discourses relating to class, anti-colonial/imperial struggle, and nationalism. By claiming gender equality as part of their fight for national salvation, the communists took over women’s liberation struggles, encompassing and subsuming these issues within their greater revolutionary cause.

While the Party’s claims of increasing or achieving gender equality by abolishing backwards, “feudal,” or colonial discrimination may have advanced women’s lives in some vital ways, it too often served, and continues to support, the naturalization of female subordination to biologically determined notions of sex and
daughters fighting for the fatherland, sisters laboring alongside their comrade brothers, and mothers with babes in one arm and a rifle slung over the other. Wartime propaganda posters, paintings, and sculptures in the nation’s women’s museums, war museums, and art museums are filled with images of mothers at war, commonly depicted with infants at their breasts and a gun in ready position.

The performance group veterans view themselves as part of the communists’ “Long Haired Warriors” brigade, which included mothers, wives, and daughters who fearlessly entered combat alongside men and were prepared to make any sacrifice necessary for “national liberation.” The veterans understand their national sacrifice and duty as located within a long tradition and history of Vietnamese women warriors. Today, as elder members of society, the veterans have become the nation’s deified matrons, nostalgically viewed as representing the pure ideals of the revolutionary era and, more broadly, the longstanding tradition of Vietnamese “national character.” In contrast to the nation’s young women, whose commercialism and consumerism is said to exemplify fickle, ahistorical self-promotion, the veterans are seen as living symbols of ideal patriotism, cultural purity, and traditional self-sacrifice. The veterans are mothers of the nation, and the living embodiments of ideal Vietnamese womanhood.

In the 1990s, as a result of the rapid economic growth and political changes taking place in Vietnam, what the government officially termed “‘[s]ocial evils’ such as prostitution, gambling and drug addiction were on the rise. Corruption was rampant, and ‘foreign cultural

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sexuality, proper “traditional” cultural behavior, and national-filial duty. Somewhat paradoxically, and perhaps in some cases insidiously, the Party’s claim on gender equality (as one of their primary issues) has the damaging effect of silencing current discussions and obscuring sites of gender inequality by claiming that women’s oppression is historical and has been solved through the achievement of communist postcolonial revolution. For further reading on the subject of gender equity and women’s movements see Pettus, Between Sacrifice and Desire, and Tai, Radicalism and the Origins of Vietnamese Revolution.
influences’ were blamed for polluting the values of the post-war generation” (Pettus 4). During this time of social and economic change, women were both excessively valorized for retaining virtuous, traditional family and national values and disproportionately blamed for the deterioration of social and cultural values. For example, “Heroic Mothers” who lost sons, daughters and husbands during the war years were praised for their selflessness and simplicity while young urban mothers were blamed for family disintegration and social downfall (4). During the 1990s, and still today in varied forms, “[o]n neighborhood loudspeakers, in community meetings and at state cultural celebrations, government officials called on women to fulfill their national responsibility as mothers and wives by improving their knowledge of hygiene, birth control, child nutrition, proper parenting and home economics” (5). On the one hand, women were required to become educated, modernize themselves and their families, and work outside the home, while on the other hand, they were being called on to remember their traditions and practice proper family obligations. Pettus continues to describe the dilemma, explaining that:

[a]t the same time, the Vietnamese print media employed popular forms of entertainment to emphasize women’s role as the defense of national character and traditions. State-owned newspapers and magazines, energized by the liberalized market, published glossy advertisements for foreign consumer products alongside harrowing tales of domestic crisis. The stories—both real and fictional—detailed the fates of those who put money and self-interest before family duty, who ‘aped the West’ and forgot the meaning of filial piety. Most targeted women as the primary offenders: mothers who neglected their children, wives who looked down on their husbands, daughters who disrespected their in-laws. By juxtaposing moralistic critique and economic enticement, the press conveyed a host of competing injunctions to middle-class female readers: enrich your family, but avoid excessive ambition; modernize your appearance, but remain modest; put your domestic duties first, but continue to advance your ‘scientific knowledge.’” (5)
Today in Vietnam, younger women are still receiving mixed messages about proper gendered
duty and behavior. Women are simultaneously derided for their cultural backwardness and
their embrace of hedonistic Western values and practices. In vague, ambivalent terminology,
the government requires young women to modernize their familial and professional lives
while maintaining and practicing proper traditional values. In Vietnam the contradictory
gender demands are so great that I have come to call the cultural expectations placed on
women “the female impossible.”

As elder members of society, today the performance group veterans face different
challenges than women of younger generations. While the veterans are praised and idealized
as national mother figures, stylized heroic depictions and the high expectations they carry are
both strengthening and stifling. Among other duties, the veterans must continue to embody
proper socialist values while helping to sculpt and implement the Party’s messages regarding
gender ideals and behaviors. As national role models, they must carry out their Party duties
while resisting becoming antiquated and obsolete. The veterans work hard against becoming
forgotten as valuable, vital members of society, as the younger generations turn their
expectant sights from the country’s ravaged past to its plentiful and awaiting future, and their
personal possibilities for upward mobility.

**Contextualizing the Emergence of the Performance Group**

While listening to the veterans’ stories and attending their rehearsals, I am aware that
I am hearing renditions of the past and present from a very particular community. Although
the performance group veterans experience a measure of social neglect, historical
essentialization, misrepresentation, and age- and gender-related discrimination, they have
fared better than many people in postwar Vietnam because their current lives and past
endeavors are legitimated and praised by the state. Many people in Vietnam have had to endure much greater social marginalization. In Vietnam, the differing perspectives, memories, and experiences are so numerous that every story one hears conjures dozens of shadow-stories that are somehow unheard, unmentioned, forgotten, or silenced. As Jacquelyn Hall states, “[t]urning memories into stories—whether humble life stories or pretentious master narratives—is also a potent form of forgetting. For every narrative depends on the suppression and repression of contrary, disruptive memories—other people’s memories of the same events, as well as the unacceptable ghosts of our own pasts” (440). For every story that is told, others remain untold. In Vietnam, the government’s claim on power and popular support is deeply entwined with its views on what constitutes history and whose memories may be uttered. Thus, as I listen to the women’s narratives and watch their performances, I am reminded of the existence of numerous other perspectives that remain unspoken, or silenced, in popular public discourse in Vietnam.

As I have suggested, the emergence of the performance group in the early 1990s, during the first years of economic change and increased global communication and exchange, seems no accident. “By the 1990s,” Philip Taylor explains, “the Vietnamese public sphere was given over to an urgently voiced and anxious preoccupation with cultural roots (nguon goc van hoa) and national identity (ban sac dan toc)” (47). Likewise, Pettus indicates that “[t]hroughout the 1990s, Vietnam’s communist-led government sought to associate the new requirements for economic development with a strengthening of national traditions” (Pettus 4). Citing the start of this shift in the previous decade, Christoph Giebel similarly explains the state’s increasing need for “traditional” Party-supporting commemorative practice in the mid- to late-1980s as a result of the decline of communist
governments worldwide. He claims that, for many during this time, “[t]he revolution had lost its sense of purpose, and the split between the trajectory it had prescribed for the country and the material-cultural tendencies of the people widened more and more,” so that “[a]mid the dramatic economic downturn of the mid 1980’s, rising social ills, widespread popular dissatisfaction with, or—worse yet—uninterest in, the revolutionary government, rampant corruption and loss of morale among its cadres, and the ominous decline of the global socialist camp,” the Vietnamese Communist Party had to find ways of revamping its image and holding on to its authority (98).12

Within this context, the emergence of the veterans’ group can be understood as part of the Party’s attempt to “localize” and bolster its power through the revitalization of its version of national traditions, memories, histories and cultural values (Giebel 98).13 Proper remembrance of the national past was, and still is, seen by many as vital to the continued legitimacy and power of the Communist Party. The war-era population is dwindling in number and turning over their government posts and powerful businesses to those who were young children during the American War. During this time of economic and social...
transformation, in the midst of the confusion and profusion of memory and memory practices, and with the country’s young, mostly postwar population bent on staying out of “politics” (i.e., avoiding government involvement) and practicing willed amnesia in favor of looking forward toward increased personal prosperity, it was deemed critical that the urban public properly remember its roots. In this period of political and historical tension and vulnerability, who better to remind the postwar public of its national past (especially in business-oriented Ho Chi Minh City), than the nation’s heroic southern veteran-mothers?

The Former Women Political Prisoner Performance Group

The all-female membership of the Former Women Political Prisoner’s Performance Group meets every Wednesday afternoon from three to five for rehearsal in the civic meeting room or banquet hall at the Southern Women’s Museum in Ho Chi Minh City. Co Nhut, the president and founder of the performance group, describes the origins of the group as both organic and officially encouraged. She explains that “officials” (perhaps in the Women’s Union) thought there was a need for a group that could publicly perform communist songs, “because it is very important for people in Vietnam to learn about tradition, about history.”

14 It is quite common to hear people in Vietnam proclaim that they are “not political.” In Vietnam, politics most commonly refers to the Party and thus all things relating to the government. In general, to be political either means actively supporting the Party’s views and governance or risking your personal and familial wellbeing by publicly expressing opposition. In Vietnam, to a large degree and particularly to those veterans who fought for the communists, the personal, the social, and the political (or rather, the Party’s version of the political) are deeply entwined. In the government’s view, there is no legitimate political space in Vietnam outside the Party’s scope. This claim and mandate, that every aspect of individual and social life be recognized as political (in terms of the Party’s notion of proper political-ideological alignment) may help to explain why it is a form of both protection and, sometimes, rebellion for an overriding number of young people of the postwar generations today to assert with certainty and conversational foreclosure, I am not political.

Unlike other groups, such as younger members of the postwar generations and Southerners whose families had affiliations with the Americans or French, the performance group women do not express problems with “being political” or sharing, and promoting, the Party’s ideological views. For the women veterans, their whole lives have been devoted to political struggles. (For insightful discussion of political opposition, socialist realism, and Party control in the arena of visual arts, see Taylor’s article, “Framing the National Spirit” in Tai’s Country of Memory. In particular, Taylor notes, near the end, how artists’ claims of making apolitical art is a form of “rebellion.” There is more interesting work to be done in this area of contemporary artistic production and politics in Vietnam.)
Co Nhut and other veterans in the performance group say that their membership grew by word of mouth. It began with a small handful of women who met each other while they were incarcerated during the American War. Later the group incorporated other friends, and friends of friends, some of whom had also been politically active and imprisoned during the First Indochina War with the French. Today the veterans’ group has grown to about thirty regularly active members whose ages range from the mid-fifties to mid-eighties.

All of the women either served the popular front movements in French colonial times as Viet Minh and/or during the southern Republic of Vietnam and American War period as organizers and guerilla fighters for the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (commonly referred to in the U.S. as the National Liberation Front, or NLF). The group is comprised of southern women. This means that all members of the group identify as southerners in that they, acting in accordance with the highly political Vietnamese traditional practices of family origin, trace their paternal lineages, as far back as transgenerational memory takes them, to homelands (*que huong*) in the south.

Another uniting, but not uniformly experienced characteristic within the group is that of being former “political prisoners” held by the French or by the southern Republic of Vietnam and the United States. Most of the women spent as many as six to nine years in and out of various prisons, while others were detained for shorter periods of weeks and months. Nearly all, if not all, the women experienced some degree of torture while imprisoned. Many of the women first met and/or spent time together while imprisoned in a number of sites throughout the south including the Chi Hoa and Thu Duc prisons in Ho Chi Minh City and the Con Son prisons of Con Dao. Some of them originally became friends in underground communist and/or nationalist organizations prior to prison and then found themselves
reunited as cellmates. Still others did not meet until after the war, through mutual friends, in
veterans’ associations, or as a consequence of becoming a member of the performance group.
Many of the women have other family members and/or husbands who also served as Viet
Minh and/or NLF members. Whatever the founding connections, most of the women joined
the group because of friendship linkages, shared histories, and pleasure in performance.

A large part of what gives this group additional fame and respect is that most of the
women who were imprisoned were held, for varying lengths of time, in the incarceration
facilities that comprise what are vernacularly referred to in Vietnam and elsewhere as the
“Con Dao prisons” located on the island of Con Son. Con Son (known by the name of Poulo
Condore during the colonial period) is part of Con Dao (“dao” translates as “archipelago”), a
group of rugged tropical islands located about 200 miles to the east of Ho Chi Minh City, off
of Vietnam’s southern coast. The Con Dao prison system is widely considered to be the
most infamously brutal and inhumane prison facility in use during the First and Second
Indochina Wars. The prisons were erected in 1861 by the French and were in use
throughout the colonial period for convicted criminals and anti-colonial political dissidents.
South Vietnam and the United States continued to use the prisons and erected more
incarceration complexes on the island to hold the ever-increasing number of captured
political prisoners during the war with North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front. The
Con Dao prisons are home to the notorious “tiger cages,” the media exposure of which (in
the late 1960s) caused international outbursts and accusations of flagrant human rights
violations. In the Con Dao prisons, and elsewhere, the veterans were subject to intense
torture and life-threatening deprivation of food and water.

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15 From this point forward, following the veterans’ usage as well as popular reference in Vietnam, I will refer to
the prisons on Con Son as the Con Dao prisons (e.g., the women say they were imprisoned on Con Dao, rather
than Con Son).
At Con Dao and other prison locations, the women—individually, and in large and small groups, depending on the form of imprisonment—performed patriotic songs, skits, and dances in order to pass the time and to keep their spirits hopeful. The performance group women describe themselves as particularly drawn to singing, dancing, and theater; they regularly volunteered in organizing and performing for others in prison. The songs, dances, and short skits performed by the women today, usually in and around Ho Chi Minh City for such events as secondary school assemblies, officer training programs, national holiday celebrations, or weekend public entertainment variety shows, are often the very same (or largely based on) songs, dances, and skits they once performed in prison.

Memory and Remembering in the Performance Group

The women gather each week to socialize and rehearse songs, skits, and dances for their official public performances. They also organize more organically around a number of civic volunteer activities including supporting and performing for Agent Orange benefit events, raising money to build houses for the poor, and founding schools and skills training programs for orphaned and disabled children. While Vietnam’s officially titled “Heroic Mothers” (older women who lost sons, daughters, and husbands who fought for the communists) tend to be seen more as living “museum pieces—objects of nostalgia and awe for a modernizing nation increasingly estranged from its own history,” the performance group women have managed to maintain a more active, respected, and recognized role in Ho Chi Minh City’s fast-paced urban environment (Pettus 4). In part, this is due to the fact that, in contrast to the “Heroic Mothers,” the veterans in the performance group are younger (on average); they have managed to organize themselves into a self-supporting and civically active community; and, perhaps most significantly, they are not economically destitute.
The veterans’ public performances are most often comprised of a number of widely known nationalist songs, which they accompany with stylized gestures and dances illuminating the song’s literal and symbolic meanings. Their public performances sometimes also involve short skits based on the lives of historical luminaries, usually martyred heroic figures from the French or American Wars. The women occasionally answer questions at the end of the performances, but they rarely discuss their own personal experiences in these public settings. I am not aware of them ever performing directly autobiographical accounts from their own pasts. Instead, they stick with familiar songs that audience members recall learning as children or as young adults during wartime, dances that aim to show literal meanings as well as please the eye with proper feminine elements of grace, and life stories of now-canonical historic revolutionary figures. Their performance creations (as well as the women themselves) appear as committed embodiments of socialist realism, poignant, proletarian and “positively” sentimental, “correct[ly] [. . .] represent[ing] the nation’s feelings” to properly “embody the values of Marxist-Leninist-style socialism” (Taylor, “Framing” 111). These “self-manifestation[s]” of “the national personality” necessitate the careful maintenance and materialization of “a retrospective illusion” of shared, stable origins that give validity and cohesion to the present as well as the destined future (Balibar 86).

The women and their performances embody national narratives, “national spirit,” “national character,” and “national essence” to an impressive degree (see Pelley 2002; Pettus 2003; Tai 2001; Taylor 2001). But to see them as just propagators of hegemony is to fix and miscontextualize them within much too stable, myopic notions of spatial-temporal location and to miss the more subtle, fraught realities and undercurrents evident within the practice of their daily lives.
At first glance, one cannot help but notice how the stories, songs, and gestures—as well as the women themselves, as surviving, heroic nationalized bodies—brilliantly perform consensus and historical consolidation through certain kinds of commemorative acts. Their work is a performative accomplishment. This being said, the politics of their practices should be critically engaged as well as appreciated. The women, their acts of memory and staged performance, should not simply be viewed as bodies twirled by the hands of state or as negative or damaging embodiments of state power. It seems equally inappropriate to perceive the women as universal role models, whose actions or beliefs are beyond critique, whether this view is propagated by the Vietnamese state or by apologists who continue to justify or refuse to recognize crimes and injustices committed (past and present) by the communist party/state.

I find it necessary to respect the skill with which the performance group women have perfected their staged enactments of socialist realism and carefully sculpted, strong and enduring, collective/personal accounts of the past. That their national history-driven staged public performances, as well as the women’s narratives, can endure both historically and, maybe especially, at present, in the wake of large ideological shifts and expansions, deserves some acknowledgement. Their performances and narratives survive, in large part, by virtue of the veterans’ technical, rhetorical, and artistic facility. The performance group women are figures of archival and performative achievement, but they are also deserving of recognition for their flexibility and openness to the changing conditions, needs, visions, and desires of present-day Vietnam. Indeed, their performances exceed the determinations of the state. They exemplify Balibar’s claim that:
every “people,” which is the product of a national process of ethnicization, is forced today to find its own means of going beyond exclusivism or identitarian ideology in the world of transnational communications and global relations of force. Or rather: every individual is compelled to find in the transformation of the imaginary of “his” or “her” people the means to leave it, in order to communicate with the individuals of other peoples with which he or she shares the same interests and, to some extent, the same future. (105)

Although the performance group women understand themselves within a very particular ideological and historical sociocultural framework, from my experience, they do not allow these affiliations to prohibit communication and collaboration with others located “outside” of their social and national communities. Homi Bhabha contends that “the origin of the nation’s visual presence is the effect of a narrative struggle” over matters of the nation (Bhabha recalling Bakhtin, Nation 295). The existence, project, and practices of the veterans’ performance group can certainly be understood in this light. However, Bhabha also asserts that people should not be understood as “simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic” (297). The performance group women are exemplary members of a patriotic body politic and they are also so much more.

Consequently, in this study, I am committed to respecting what Avery Gordon calls “complex personhood,” which “reminds us that even those who live in the most dire circumstances possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents” (4). It is worth quoting Gordon’s description of complex personhood at length as a frame for my approach to working with the veterans and better understanding their narratives and remembering performances. Granting others the “right to complex personhood” is necessary because:
complex personhood is the second dimension of the theoretical statement that life is complicated. Complex personhood means that all people (albeit in specific forms whose specificity is sometimes everything) remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others. Complex personhood means that people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves. Complex personhood means that even those called “Other” are never never that. Complex personhood means that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society’s problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward. [. . .] At very least, complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people’s lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning. (4-5)

While recognizing the importance of addressing the group’s formation and the significance of its social and pedagogical projects within larger political, sociocultural, and historical contexts and ideological frameworks, I am equally committed to honoring Gordon’s rights to complex personhood. Respecting the veterans’ right to complex personhood is critical for engaging in cross-cultural encounters and analyses that refuse, and theorize beyond, simple dichotomies and essentializing answers.

Socialist Realism: The Veterans’ Political-Aesthetic Performance Style

The veterans’ memory narratives are uniquely their own while at the same time displaying certain familiar styles, narrative themes, and even stock phrases found in written, state-approved histories and throughout Vietnamese popular culture in the form of the political posters dotting every city, nationally televised TV shows, diplomatic speeches, and everyday conversations. In Vietnam, the ideology of the governing Communist Party seeks to, and often does, permeate deeply into every realm of personal and social life. Thus, it is
not surprising that in many regards, as patriotic veterans loyal to the Party, the women’s narratives follow, elaborate on, and personalize the state’s version of official history.

Vietnam’s official historical narratives utilize nationalist and communist ideologically inspired aesthetic tropes of socialist realism. Originating in Russia as a Marxist-Leninist-oriented arts movement “for the people,” socialist realism sought to politicize aesthetics (Tai, *Country* 12). Vietnamese socialist realist artistic productions aspired to “inculcate socialist ideology” and “glorify work.” They were to be “nationalistic, scientific, popular and patriotic,” “adher[ing] to the maxim ‘socialist content, nationalist framework’” (Pelley 118). Socialist realism aims to give unambiguous social messages and is “marked by a [] positive, optimistic tone,” where “heroic characters take[] charge of their lives” in ways approved by

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16 Following Ho Chi Minh’s “denounce[ment] of the ‘bourgeois’ idea of art for art’s sake,” and proclamation “that culture could function meaningfully only if it served workers, peasants, and soldiers,” in Vietnam, socialist realism was utilized during wartime by various “cultural workers” (writers, visual artists, actors, musicians, etc.) who were employed and/or encouraged by the state to instill and promote patriotic allegiance and action through their artistic works (Pelley 121). In “the Constitution of 1946,” Pelley notes, it is “stated that writers would enjoy creative freedom; but their creative freedom would be realized under the party’s direction and within the framework of Marxist-Leninism and socialist realism” (120).

Although operating somewhat differently in postwar periods, the communist-nationalist politicized aesthetics of socialist realism is still in use in Vietnam. Today one can identify the presence of socialist realist influences in everyday cultural productions such as television programs, historical sites and museum displays, art exhibits, textbooks and novels, and social campaigns (e.g., town billboards demonstrating proper family behaviors, public health messages, and praise for the Party). Today, favor in the form of financial backing, career promotion, increased visibility, and sanction by the Ministry of Culture is often granted to artists whose work adheres to the current socialist realist, or otherwise nationally sanctioned, scripts. However, direct and indirect resistance to and rebellion against these kinds of cultural productions are becoming more visible in Vietnam. Socialist realist work is increasingly politely ignored, deemed irrelevant, or dismissed as kitsch.

See Pelley’s *Postcolonial Vietnam* and Tai’s *The Country of Memory* for discussions regarding the politics and aesthetics of socialist realism and the related notions of Vietnamese “national spirit” and “national character.” Refer to Pettus, *Between Sacrifice and Desire*, for insightful work on the particular relationships between nationalism and the practice of national identity as it relates to women and “the terms of permissible feminine identity in Vietnam” (Pettus 14).

17 Socialist realism’s motivating intentions are said to be the production of “art for the people,” “functional art that recognizes itself as a political tool in the service of social, public goods. Recognizing art as always within relations of power, and therefore politics, is necessary. But the ardent, intolerant aspects of socialist realism, as it is employed and enforced by the state, can be highly problematic. Benjamin insightfully warns of the dangers of “render[ing] politics aesthetic” and making war and violence “beautiful” and righteous (241). Making art work politically is not indexical to making politics aesthetic. Benjamin is correct in warning about the perils of fascism, and other lesser forms of governmental censorship and oppression, when formalized aesthetics are harnessed to artistic creation in the name of politics.
the communist leadership as promoting the highest ideals of the party and the state (Tai, “Duong” 89-90).

As Nora Taylor states, “the state [] advocates socialist realism as the ‘correct’ way to represent the nation’s feelings” and in Vietnam it “was equated with patriotism,” so that there was an “equation of art with nationalism” (111). Pelley explains:

[...] at the Communist Party’s Fourth National Congress, held in December 1976, it was declared that the Vietnamese had created three revolutions: in the relations of production, in science and technology, and in ideology and culture. Specifically, the cultural revolution had “contributed to the building of the new life and the modeling of the new type of people.” These people, of a “new type,” the new socialist Vietnamese, were devoted to the principle of collective mastery; they felt great zeal for labor; expressed their patriotism in a socialist way; and were committed to proletarian internationalism. The new culture of the new Vietnamese was “socialist in content and national in character.” It was the “crystallization” and “sublime expression” of what was best in the four-thousand-year tradition of the Vietnamese. This new culture fostered judicious ideas, wholesome sentiments, and fine customs; it opposed bourgeois ideology and had swept away colonialist and feudal cultures. More than in the past, the party would assume leadership in every cultural sphere; in publishing, cinema, and photography. Through the party’s guidance, these various media would make the party’s viewpoint clear. The party would also promote socialist literature (with a “marked national character”) to underscore the values of the new system and the new morality, develop national traditions, and describe outstanding collectives. (122)

During wartime and in early postwar periods, characteristics deemed bourgeois, pessimistic, uncertain, ironic, or critical of communism or the Vietnamese state were seen as counterrevolutionary, indulgent, or otherwise heretical and were disavowed. “With the party’s guidance, new [postcolonial Vietnamese] culture would [] criticize vestiges of the old society, such as modernism, formalism, schematism, and naturalism,” and “following the methods of socialist realism, new culture would expose the origins of [social] evil and foster confidence in socialism” (Pelley 122). Since the era of Doi Moi economic reforms,
censorship has loosened considerably, but the boundaries of permissible public speech and expression are still present in government policy as well as the minds and daily practices of Vietnamese people.

Socialist realist political-aesthetics are present in the performance group’s work in numerous ways. For example, in staged performance and narrative remembering the women continually mark two qualities that Peter Zinoman finds emblematic within the stylized genre of communist prison diaries: the “importance of revolutionary training and political commitment” and the “portray[al] of Communist prisoners as dauntless and heroic figures” (Zinoman 32). These two qualities are consistent with socialist realism’s mandate for expressing positive, socially correct, morally-imbued messages. The aestheticized politics and tropes of Vietnamese-style socialist realism provide the veterans with a narrative blueprint for understanding and storying their own lives and for motivating their current social contributions.

When telling their life narratives, singing and dancing in their staged performances, and engaging in casual conversation with me or their friends or family, the performance group women are participating in the “required stylistic convention[s] in contemporary Vietnam, where one has to draw from the reservoir of Communist Party-sanctioned political-ideological terminology,” narrative patterns, and cultural styles and symbols (Gibel 88).18

18 Zinoman makes important observations about the stylistic patterning found in written revolutionary prison memoirs that are also applicable to the citational composition and motivating intentions of the women’s oral narratives. Within the genre of written memoirs, “[t]he proliferation of [] narrative and linguistic repetitions implies that works within the subgenre should not be read—like the Autobiography of Malcolm X or even Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks—as acts of individual resistance to the coercive power of a total institution” (22). Rather, Zinoman, referencing Giebel’s assertions regarding the existence of state propagated revolutionary “master script[s]” (88), states that prison memoirs should be read as part of the larger, patterned body of national state-governed historical productions whose role it is to “trumpet the accomplishments of the party, provide shining examples of anti-imperialist heroism, and teach the younger generations the lessons of past struggles” (Giebel 88; Tran qtd. in Zinoman, 22). In part, the women’s oral narratives do participate in nationalist master scripts.
Using a shared lexicon to tell their personal/collective pasts, the women employ well-worn epithets and party slogans as well as borrowing the narrative structures of famous heroes and heroines from official Vietnamese history in order to tell the story of their own revolutionary coming-to-consciousness, prison survival, wartime sacrifices, and present social ethics and values. Their careful, individual adaptations and reiterations of nationalist scripts is an enactment of patriotic consensus and group solidarity, demonstrating how dynamic interactions between state-promoted nationalist ideologies, public formations of collective memory and commemoration, and individual acts of memory and self-narration are inextricable from one another.

**Public Performances: Re-Staging the Past at the Brass Drum Stage**

After attending the veterans’ rehearsals for about a month, I have my first chance to attend one of their public performances. I wait excitedly in my seat that night in early December 2004, waiting for the veterans to take the stage. By eight o’clock a large crowd has gathered at the Brass Drum outdoor performance space (*San Khau Ca Nhac, Trong Dong*) located in the city park on the busy corner of *Nguyen Du* (named after a famous Vietnamese poet) and *Cach Mang Thang Tam* (“October Revolution”) streets. I set up my audio recorder and wait for the lights to dim.

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19 Ben Wilkinson and Eli Mazur were the first to bring to my attention the tendency of male and female revolutionary veterans to pattern their life stories after heroic figures in official Vietnamese history. As Zinoman notes, “autobiographical memoirs were fashioned to shape a collective public memory rather than express an individual or private one” (21). In addition, the women commonly cite their lives in reference to the pantheon of revolutionary Vietnamese women, both contemporary and mythic. The women narrated their lives and revolutionary struggles as an extension of a larger, historical trajectory of female Vietnamese revolutionaries (Karnow 1983; Pelley 2002; Pettus 2003; Tai 2001; Turner 1998). The women say they inherit their revolutionary commitment and duty from their martyred female predecessors, most of whom were either executed or committed suicide rather than surrender.

20 The public park and performance space is located right across the street from my friend Trang Thu’s family home. Years before I ever visited Vietnam, I had heard stories about this park from chi Thu. During French
Tonight, the Brass Drum Stage welcomes a diverse crowd. Young couples, groups of teenagers, and whole families of grandparents, parents, and children all wait for the show to begin. The entry ticket costs the equivalent of one dollar, an affordable price for most middle-class city dwellers. People are dressed casually and eating snacks as they sit together in the rows of plastic seats. Some people without tickets gather along the side of the stage. The performance is a family-friendly variety show, with the veterans’ group as the third act. The mood in the outdoor stage space is festive. Everyone is eagerly anticipating the lengthy holiday season of Christmas, Western New Years, and Tet (Vietnamese Lunar New Year).

The cheery, slightly frenetic party atmosphere is initiated by a blinking, bespangled Christmas tree sitting on the stage, assisted by a large-screen TV blaring Tom & Jerry cartoons, flashing stage lights, and fuzzy loudspeakers booming patriotic Vietnamese anthems.\(^\text{21}\) The cartoons and national anthems are eardrum-piercing, so loud they are drowning out most of the rumbling and honking from the nearby street traffic. Against this backdrop, the announcers, a suave-looking suited man and an exquisitely outfitted young woman in a white lace and satin evening gown, take the stage in spotlights to introduce the show. The first act is a group of older men dressed in military outfits that resemble Boy Scout uniforms. In vibrato voices, they sing patriotic tunes to a polka-like beat. The crowd

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\(^{21}\) On the side of the stage, colorful lights from a plastic Christmas tree blink exuberantly. The Christmas tree seems oddly placed, I remember thinking, especially as a backdrop to the veterans’ songs of communist mobilization, sacrifice, and victory. However, the more time I spent in Vietnam the less surprised I was to see what at first appears to be adversative juxtapositions. People in Vietnam, especially in the south, are experts when it comes to ideological syncretism. Adaptation, modification, and incorporation have been necessary means of survival both during and since the war. As other people in Vietnam tell me when I comment on people’s adoption of all kinds of holidays: we have suffered terrible conditions for too long, so now Vietnamese people take every opportunity to celebrate! Having a Christmas tree on stage did not surprise or upset the veterans as they sang about fighting the American imperialists. If asked about it, the veterans might say—as co Lien, a veteran in the group, did when I asked about the Christmas tree in her house—“the children like it,” it is “beautiful and it adds cheeriness.”
The next act consists of two older men in flamboyant black, white, and red suits. They play nostalgic (but energetic) Kenny G.-style songs with a saxophone and harmonica.

I am not sure exactly what I was expecting, but it was not this! After these acts finish, the veterans take the stage. They enter, dressed in vibrantly colored ao dai, and begin singing a song about Ho Chi Minh. After the performance, I write:

[their voices are high and sharp like birds. I am immediately struck by a difference in their performance style. In practice, they are fluttery and light. They laugh and crack jokes, smiling and cajoling each other. Here, on stage, in the real performance they are stock-straight, without smiles. Fixed. Poised. Wooden. Seemingly humorless! But, I have seen them being just the opposite at every rehearsal! Are these the women I know? Their faces look familiar, but their stage presence could not be more different here than in rehearsal. [. . .] I know this is the place for precision and poise, but I like it better when they are having fun together, enjoying each other’s company.

The difference between their performance demeanor and the mood at rehearsal is stark. At the performance, the women seem nervous. The tone is serious. During rehearsal, they are at ease, so much so that it is sometimes hard to get everyone’s attention when a song is about to start.

Each Wednesday afternoon at the Southern Women’s Museum, the veterans set up folding chairs around a young man who comes to accompany their rehearsal on a piano synthesizer. There is a lot of socializing during and between songs as the women catch up on the news of the past week. The atmosphere is relaxed and welcoming. Light snacks of fruit, crackers, and candies are served midway through rehearsal. Glasses of water, poured by the eldest member of the group from a silver teapot, get passed around from hand to hand. The rehearsals are so free-form that, for the first few weeks, I could not even tell that co Nhut was
the leader of the group. People take turns being in charge of the meeting. The ebb and flow of practice is organic and unruffled, even when a public performance date is drawing near.

This easy mood is virtually absent from the staged performance I am watching. After the second song, some of the women leave the stage to change costumes. They return in black peasant dress, with black and white checkered scarves (commonly worn by laborers, especially during the war years) around their necks. This outfit is the emblem of the women NLF fighters. Their white powdered faces look even paler now. Their hair is fixed specially for the performance and all the women wear either petal pink or red lipstick. They look delicate and proper. But in rehearsal I have seen their sass and strength.

During the next two numbers, a few women in the group illuminate the song verses with synchronized, stylized gestures and choreographed dance. After the performance I write:

[i]n this song, there are about five primary dancers. The rest of the veterans stand in back and sing. [. . .] I see them sensing their mistakes, thinking too much about making it perfect. [. . .] Two dancers streak across the stage waving the Vietnamese flag and the flag of the southern resistance (red and blue with a bright yellow star). They begin forming a series of still images. The first stage picture depicts the women working in the fields. Next they paddle a boat. After that, they show a scene of struggle. They put their arms up and brace themselves against an exterior threat. The next freeze shows suffering. A woman lies on the floor, another crouches over her in a gesture of care and sadness. A third woman stands, holding her hand above the fallen woman as if she is ready to strike again. Another woman crosses her arms and takes the wide stance of a soldier or police. The women gradually move through the images, stopping for a moment on each scene. The next enactment shows suffering in prison. Their poses and facial expressions show struggle and then triumph. Three Vietnamese flags are held at the center. The women put their fists in the air—not aggressively, but not softly.
By the final song, the women look more relaxed. They have changed back into their colorful
*ao dai*. Their nerves eased as the performance progressed, but they are still far more reserved
on stage than in rehearsal. I catch a few women smiling and shooting playful looks at friends
as they take their bows. Seeing this show as an audience member, rather than accompanying
them behind the scenes at rehearsal, causes me to realize that the veterans’ public
performances are serious matters.
Figure 2 – The veterans perform at the Brass Drum Stage (December 2004)
Dramatizing National Character on the Public Stage: Seven Serious Matters

As the living emblems of traditional womanly virtue and pure national values, the veterans take their duty to perform ideal “national character” with seriousness and grace. The term “national character” (*tinh dan toc*) was “first used by Ho Chi Minh around the time of the August Revolution in 1945 to define the goals of the cultural policies established by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam” (Taylor, “Framing” 113). As Nora Taylor explains:

Ho Chi Minh had wanted art and literature to express the spirit of the Vietnamese people. He used the expression *dan toc*, meaning “nationality,” “nation,” or “national,” to describe the people of Vietnam and the phrase *tinh dan toc* and *van hoa dan toc* to describe the “national character” and the “national culture” of the Vietnamese people. The term was again used in the context of literature to define that which best expressed the qualities that the prevalent political discourse desired to associate with the nation or “Vietnameseness.” In the visual arts, it was coined by the Communist Party in a pamphlet submitted to the second Arts Association congress in 1962, which stated that art must reflect the essence of both the past and present struggles of the people against imperialism and feudalism. (113-114)

The veterans embody “national character” with masterful, seemingly effortless, skill. As I attended more of the veterans’ public performances, some notable patterns, styles, and ideological consistencies came into focus. Although I am directly referring to their public, staged performances, these observations are also useful in understanding, interpreting, and contextualizing the veterans’ individual narratives and performances of remembering during interviews. While not a comprehensive list, the following are seven important, interconnected points to keep in mind regarding the veterans and their public shows:
1. The veterans’ performances are official political events. Their performances always occur as part of the celebration of national holidays and/or commemorations of state significance. For example, while I was in Vietnam, the women performed for celebrations of national holidays such as “Reunification Day” (Ngay Thong Nhat), the Indochinese Communist Party founding day (Dong Duong Cong San Dang), and the anniversary commemorating the start of the People’s Army of Vietnam (Quan Doi Nhan Dan Vietnam). They perform for the general public at citywide entertainment venues and national monuments, but also at such places as military officer training schools and fire halls for select audiences comprised of Party organization members and governmental civic service groups.

2. The shows are powerful, in part, because of the veterans’ embodied doubleness: the women re-perform the history that they themselves lived through. They re-signify themselves. By symbolically re-performing their own lives on stage, the veterans’ performances offer audiences the ideal blend of eyewitness authority, sacrificial patriotism, national history, military necessity, and womanly/motherly virtuousness capable of stirring emotions even in crowds of young people who are more interested in watching MTV Asia than studying history. Because the veterans are who they are, and perform the heroic national past that they lived through, younger generations know it would be disgraceful to ignore or disrespect them. Without demanding it, the veterans compel respect.
3. The veterans take their public shows seriously. Rehearsal is their time to socialize and practice, but on stage there is a more important job at hand. Public performances are the continuation of the national service they began during wartime. Their subject matter is, though upbeat, in large part about recalling histories of wartime oppression, violence, suffering, and death. The veterans say that part of the reason they perform in public is to honor those who sacrificed and died fighting for “national salvation” and “reunification.” Through compelling re-performances of the national past, the women work to inspire an interconnected mix of national, social, and filial devotion in the audience. The veterans feel a real sense of duty. The next generations must know these histories as a matter of national allegiance and social ethics.

4. The performances are not personalized but they are exceedingly personal. Although the women do not retell their own personal stories in their staged performances they are always re-expressing something of their own pasts in the songs, dances, and skits. The style is formulaic, the stories are familiar, the politics are predetermined, but because these characteristic songs and dances are embodied by the veterans and infused with their memories, the performances convey something true and meaningful about their experience of the past through and beyond the performances’ well-known tropes. The performances’ stylized elements (e.g., gestures, political orientations, stories, songs, etc.) become the vehicle for communicating something more, something that co Dinh describes as an “awareness” of the past that engenders “awareness of [the younger generations’] responsibility” to
the nation and to society. The veterans’ sense of duty and care shines through every citational gesture and replayed note.

5. The veterans’ present-day performances (following their wartime performances in prison), are in the “socialist realist” political-aesthetic style. The stories they tell are canonical histories, without ethical or political ambiguity, and with clear social messages. For example, there will never be any troubling nuances or questions raised about North Vietnam’s military policy or the south’s conscript army. The communist cause is always righteous; those serving the southern government are always “puppets.” The messages are clear. Although the women know, from their own familial experiences, about the political ambiguities of war, when representing the party and nation on the public stage they deliver only clear and proper messages.

6. Consequently, their performances are demonstrational and instructional. The veterans want the audience to know these stories are histories. Audience members should be moved by the reality of the histories they are retelling. The women’s bodies and voices restage a past that they lived through. Everyone in the audience (save small children) knows who these women are; they understand the significance of seeing the women perform these patriotic songs and dances. The veterans’ bodies mark the reality of the history while conveying it. In so doing, they are the perfect motherly messengers to instruct the audience—emotionally and associatively rather

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22 There are some interesting resonances, and extreme dissonances, between the veterans’ performance politics and style and Brecht’s ideas about “[t]heater for [i]nstruction,” teaching, and “demonstration” (Brecht 69-77, 121-129). In the future, I would like to explore these relationships in more detail.
than through direct orders—what it means to be a proper, upstanding Vietnamese citizen.

7. Just knowing about the past is not enough. This is why the veterans perform for the public. Every schoolchild memorizes facts about nationally important historical events. It is the veterans’ special duty to materialize the state’s official history through their own patriotic bodies. The veterans are given the responsibility of stirring the crowd’s emotions and helping citizens recognize, through the performances, how and why the past is meaningful and necessary for Vietnam’s present and future development. The veterans retell the past to praise the nation and its heroes, to warn against the oppression of external domination, and to help guide the people’s moral compass as they “continue to develop their country.”

The veterans’ stage performances demonstrate, in concentrated form, the deep national duty and responsibility each veteran also feels when recounting their individual pasts in more intimate settings. Even the veterans’ “personal” narratives are intensely, and intentionally, social or collective in orientation. The social/collective nature of their personal accounts is an enactment of their communist-centered politics. Many times, while listening to life stories told by different veterans, I found myself struck by 1) the patterned similarities in the narrative arc of their personal stories (e.g., many women describe the loss of a family member as the origin of their political/communist consciousness); 2) the common repetition of the same wartime stories (e.g., I heard very similar renditions of a particular prison hunger strike, and its accompanying stories and interpretations, from nearly every veteran I spoke
with); and 3) the frequent employment of certain culturally pervasive stock phrases and terms
(e.g., “American imperialists,” “Vietnam’s history of fighting against foreign invaders,” and
“Vietnam’s long tradition of female warriors”). As much as I heard personal accounts of the
past, I often felt I was listening to a particular, politically oriented form of deliberately “non-
personal personal narratives” or perhaps “non-individualist personal narratives.”

Ethnographic Research Methods and Parameters of Study

This ethnographic and oral history-centered dissertation project is interdisciplinary,
drawing centrally on methods, methodology, and theory from performance studies, cultural
studies, and memory studies, as well as from anthropology and ethnography, history and oral
history, postcolonial studies, women’s studies, and Vietnamese studies. The study is
qualitative in design and intention. While this research is historically grounded, and uses oral
history methods and methodologies, this dissertation is not intended to be a traditional history
of the Vietnamese-American War, the veterans’ performance group, or the four specific
women whose lives, memories, and viewpoints are centrally discussed. Rather, this is a
cultural study of the performative dynamics of remembering, and the performance-centered
politics of memory, among the performance group women as centrally illuminated by four
members. The study is by no means conclusive on the subject of memory and performance,
or memory and performance among veterans in Vietnam. However, this study does seek to
contribute valuable, provisional knowledge about how these women understand and perform
(as a life practice) a hauntological and prospective, socially-oriented politics of remembering.
Drawing on what I learn from the veterans and the Lang Hoa Binh children, this dissertation
addresses: 1) lingering transgenerational affects of violence as they are embodied by
communities and individuals adversely affected by the American War; 2) living links
between memory practices and social responsibility; and 3) implications for how we, as individuals and groups, might work to improve the living conditions and lessen the hardships of those who unjustly suffer.

For this study, I interviewed approximately twenty Vietnamese women (70+ recorded hours) who are either members of the veterans’ performance group or doctors and nurses at the Lang Hoa Binh orphanage-hospital. In addition to interviewing the performance group women, I attended their weekly meetings, rehearsals, and public performances. I also visited their homes, hosted them at my apartment, and accompanied them to historic sites, including the War Remnants Museum, the Southern Women’s Museum, and the Con Dao prisons (including the “tiger cage” prison cells and Hang Duong cemetery).

I volunteered at the orphanage-hospital twice a week where I conducted taped interviews with the doctors, nurses, and other staff, and worked directly with the kids. I assisted nurses with the children’s daily needs (feeding, bathing, diaper-changing, playing), learned about Agent Orange-related disabilities and related, current political debates, attended public awareness events and charity benefits, and accompanied the kids on their annual fieldtrip to a Buddhist-Confucian theme park. In addition to interviews, I kept paper and electronic field journals, collected cultural artifacts (CDs, videos, pamphlets), maintained a photographic record, visited relevant historic sites throughout Vietnam, conducted ancillary interviews with other Vietnamese women (college students, young mothers, women married to expatriates, CEOs of major Vietnamese companies, young professionals, wage laborers, and shopkeepers), and studied language and culture at the Vietnam National University (where I gained sufficient competency to conduct interviews with a translator and built a strong personal and professional network).
Guiding Methodologies and Analytic Frameworks

I will be employing theoretical, critical, and interpretive perspectives from a number of disciplines within the dissertation. Although other theories and questions will be engaged and developed in the body of the dissertation, what follows is a list of eight central theoretical frameworks, most of them performance-centered and interdisciplinary, that I take to be foundational in guiding my research, thinking, and writing:

1. Performance Interventions: The Performance Paradigm

Numerous influences, insights, directives, and ethical principles of Dwight Conquergood’s foundational work within the field of performance studies and performance ethnography can be felt throughout this work. I aim to participate in what Conquergood terms the “performance paradigm,” or “performance-sensitive” and “performance-centered research” that “privileges particular, participatory, dynamic, intimate, precarious, embodied experience grounded in historical process, contingency, and ideology” (“Rethinking” 187). Conquergood writes that, “as conceptual lens,” performance studies and the performance paradigm focus on the “creative, playful, provisional, [and] imaginative,” “tak[ing] as both its subject matter and method the experiencing body situated in time, place and history [. . .] insist[ing] on face-to-face encounters” where “the ethnographer must be a co-performer in order to understand those embodied meanings” (187). Consequently, this “active, participatory,” research method/methodology and theoretical analysis “privileges the body as

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23 Madison highlights the importance of Grossberg’s notion of “spatial territorialisation” (Bringing 1997) in considering the locations and narratives of others. “Places and spaces, of people, practices, and commodities, describes this political landscape [of ‘spatial territorialisation’]. It is in this sense that discourse is always placed, because people are always anchored or invested in specific sites. Hence, it matters how and where practices and people are placed, since the place determines from and to where one can speak (or act)” (Grossberg qtd. in Madison, Critical Ethnography 177).
a site of knowing,” understanding ethnography to be an “intensely sensuous,” radically empirical (not empiricist) “embodied practice” (180).

In this work I strive toward meaningful, “open and ongoing,” “dialogical performance” through various forms of conversation and re-presentation, “struggling to bring together different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs so that they can [be in] conversation with one another,” in the pursuit of “bring[ing] self and other together so that they can question, debate, challenge one another” and learn more about each other in the process (Conquergood, “Moral Act” 9). A performance paradigm seeks to evoke and initiate “meaningful action” by way of “insist[ing] on immediacy, involvement, and intimacy as modes of understanding (Conquergood, “Beyond” 26). “Shift[ing] emphasis from product to process” the performance paradigm calls for “commitment to embodiment, experiential understanding, participatory ways of knowing, sensuous engagement,” understanding ethnographic and oral history-based performance work to be full of “intimate encounter[s]” (Conquergood, “Between” 222). Following Conquergood, through openness to “multi-centeredness, multi-perspectives, [and] a plurality of voices,” this work seeks to advocate and assist in making space for “more voices to join the human dialogue” (“Between” 225, “Beyond” 11).

2. Performing Remembering

Remembering is “[c]haracterized by belatedness, secondariness, and displacement” and exists as embodied activities “occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future” (Bal xii). Following this evocation of remembering, I aim to: 1) locate my performance orientation in ethnographic and oral history-based method and methodology; 2) approach various forms of bodily
performances and performative sites as spaces of sensuously excessive embodied remembering; and 3) address the intervening, transformative potentials of performance and its performers to “break[] and remak[e]” and emerge into new possibility (Conquergood citing Bhabha, “Beyond” 32). I consequently turn in particular to the work of D. Soyini Madison and Della Pollock. I seek to attend to Madison’s performative politics of the “critical, intimate, and felt” (Pollock elaborating Madison’s ethic, Remembering 8). Madison’s characterization of “the politics of the near” as a “very particular kind” of ethnographic, “political investment” keeps me attuned to both the people I listened to in Vietnam and the way and intention with which I carry, communicate, and re-perform their stories and lives into different locations (“My Desire” 149).

Following Pollock, I understand oral history performance to be a “promissory act” (Remembering 2). A promise articulated in the commitment of “the body remembering, the bodies remembered, and the bodies listening in order to remember [. . .] will be redeemed in some kind of change—the small changes that come in repetition with different listeners; the large changes that might result from entering the memories of a whole body politic [. . .] into the human record of daily living [. . .] into the ongoing record of human understanding” (2). In this project, I work the small, promissory edges of historical, transcultural, intergenerational, and international damage in the hope of offering forward and giving back some form of reparation through witnessing and recognition. Understanding “history itself as a[n] [often] spectacular, performative rite” “made in performance,” I intend to follow Pollock’s directive to “understand how performance makes history [and memory] go” and, sometimes, “go away” (Exceptional 1).
Performing memory, or remembering, is “no more and so much more than an ordinary conversation” (Pollock, Remembering 3). In this project, I seek to attune myself to the potential of performance to be a space of “embodied knowing” in which the excesses of the performing body overflow the “subject living in and through the active, fickle, sometimes grotesque but always historical life of its material form—the body as creative agency, the body as the coursing sign of subjective life, the body as purveyor of carnival pleasures and the means of practical power” (Pollock recalling Conquergood, Remembering 3; Exceptional 8). Throughout this work, I will engage with the body in and of performance, and with particular regard to oral history performance, I will explore liminal zones “between recollection and anticipation of historical change,” and the “representation real,” as it occurs and emerges within narratives and performances of remembering in Vietnam (Remembering 7).

3. Telling and Translation

Issues of telling and translation permeate all dimensions of this research. Attending to them all is far beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, I want to point to one practical and one theoretical issue of translation present throughout the dissertation: 1) I needed translation assistance in order to understand the veterans’ stories and 2) I realized that despite difficulties, barriers, and sometimes mistakes, some stories must be retold, translated into different social worlds with “fidelity” and “freedom” (Benjamin 78). Thus, the conversations this work relies on were largely translated encounters (culturally, generationally, and linguistically). Additionally, my work with the Lang Hoa Binh children in particular focuses problems and necessities of telling and translation in the process of cross-culturally communicating something of the lives of abject, subaltern subjects.
To carry out research and conversation with the veterans, I worked with Nhina, a twenty-six year-old friend, and cultural and linguistic translator.\textsuperscript{24} I sought out Nhina’s translation assistance due to the limitations of my Vietnamese language skills. However, it quickly became evident that the benefits of working with Nhina extend beyond literalist understandings of translation. Nhina significantly enriches my understanding of the women’s narratives and gives critical depth to the project by providing direct translation, interpretation, and commentary during the interviews and invaluable insight on cultural-political subtexts afterwards in informal conversations. She locates and explains oblique and indirect meanings that otherwise would have been unrecognizable. Perhaps most importantly, Nhina joins the conversations and helps make this endeavor a practice of intergenerational remembering and communication. The women speak to me, but also directly to Nhina, demonstrating their sense of pedagogical responsibility and urgency to speak to her, a young Vietnamese woman of the postwar generation. The veterans want their stories to be translated into new terrains of meaning within Vietnam and beyond.

In terms of the Lang Hoa Binh children, some stories must be told despite differences in power and possible translation error. Gayatri Spivak states that subaltern speakability is, in part, “about agency” and “institutionally validated action.” The subaltern might be able to speak and be heard if their voices can be “validated by dominant forms of knowledge and politics” (Ela Dutt qtd. in Spivak, “Forward” xx). I do not quote the children directly, but heeding Linda Alcoff’s call to “interrogate the bearing of our location and context of what we are saying [. . .] explicit[ly] [. . .] analyz[ing] the probable or actual effects of the words

\textsuperscript{24} Nhina is not her given Vietnamese name. Used by family members and friends, Nhina is a Russian nickname, given to her when she spent time with her family in Moscow during the 1990s while her father was working on his doctorate degree.
on the discursive or material context,” forms of truth regarding the Lang Hoa Binh kids’ lives can, and in fact must, be spoken and retold within larger publics (25, 26).

Broadly speaking, Walter Benjamin’s theories guide issues of translation throughout the dissertation. Benjamin evokes translation not as identical copy, but as “the echo of the original” whose reformulation requires ethical fidelity and creative freedom (76). The translator, he says, must “lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s mode of signification, [. . .] making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments” (78). “A real translation is transparent”; it does not obfuscate or “cover the original, does not block its light” (79). The translator should be “powerfully affected,” “expand[ed] and deepen[ed]” by the “foreign tongue” (81). I proceed with fidelity and freedom, retelling the veterans’ and the kids’ stories into new contexts.

4. Gender Performance

From feminist and gender studies’ perspectives, Joan Scott and Judith Butler call for recognition and theorization of the politically charged social constructedness of experiences and identities. Throughout this research I heed Scott’s directive that instead of “appeal[ing] to experience as uncontestable evidence and as originary point of explanation,” experience must be critically engaged through “questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted [. . .] [and] about how one’s vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history” (“Experience” 25). In an effort to learn more about the ways knowledge, norms, beliefs, and practices of gender and memory are received and (re)produced by women in Vietnam, I will “attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences” so that experience is “not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) that grounds what is
known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced” (26).

I employ Butler’s theorization of gender, sex, and sexuality as culturally situated, socially and individually constituted through reiterative acts, the active process of performativity, to illumine the ways in which politics of gender and sex are at play within the women’s narratives, within their performances, and within their greater cultural contexts in Vietnam. For Butler, performativity “must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (Bodies 2), meaning that gender as reiterative, performative “construction ‘compels’ our belief in its necessity and naturalness,” making “gender [] thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions—and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them” (140). Employing Butler’s theory, with recognition of its own cultural particularity and location, assists my exploration and consideration of “proper” feminine sex and gender performance in Vietnam.

5. Performativity, Performance, and Possibility

In terms of gender and other performativities, Elin Diamond makes a critical observation about performance and performativity as being “a doing and a thing done” (emphasis added, 1). She restates: “When performativity materializes as performance in that risky and dangerous negotiation between a doing (a reiteration of norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretations), between someone’s body and the conventions of embodiment, we have access to cultural meanings and critique” (Diamond 5).
Diamond’s distinction is a crucial step in locating possibility within Butler’s configuration of performativity as the production of material effects through “stylized repetition of acts [. . .] which are internally discontinuous” but give the “appearance of substance” (Butler qtd. in Diamond, 4). This explication also gives practical method to Bhabha’s performativity of national narrativity and mimicry as “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, Location 86).

In locating the space between reiterations, between the doing and the done, Diamond illuminates where “signifying (meaning-ful) acts” through conscious modes of interruption and alteration “may enable new subject positions and new perspectives to emerge” for “as soon as performativity comes to rest on a performance, questions of embodiment, of social relations, of ideological interpellations, of emotional and political effects, all become discussable” (6, 5).

As “narrative in the field of production [] is always vulnerable to variation and reinvention,” so too the space between repetitions can be a place of instability and conscious alteration so that the next performance may be renewed within the “dynamic ground of [the] possible real” (Pollock, Telling 69). The conscious reperformance of performativity can act as a way to recognize social constructions, a kind of “unmasking—not revealing the hidden truth as much as the mask” of reiterated norms “that hides [the mask]” (193). This is similar to Brecht’s theorization and use of the “alienation effect”—“alienating the familiar”

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25 This kind of work with/within performativity requires “playfulness,” imagination, and a willing attitude to “inhabit [other] ‘worlds’ [and selves] and travel across them” (Lugones 634). Working between the doing and the thing done can be a place for enacting the dialogic, “interrogative field” of the “performance of possibilities” (Madison, “Performance” 227). It is a location of “breaking and remaking” (Conquergood, “Beyond” 32). These spaces between performances (performance of possibilities, Madison) and within performances (possible real, Pollock) can become locations where “unjust systems and processes are identified and interrogated,” and where radical interventions might unexpectedly emerge and/or be consciously staged and performed (Madison, “Performance” 280). Though I recognize the “performance of possibilities” (Madison) and the “possible real” (Pollock) as unfixed categories/descriptions, I use them here to mark a difference, and interconnection, between consciously constructed performances (“performance of possibilities”), and unplanned, transformation-in-the-moment performances (“possible real”). The two are often inseparable.
via multiple techniques of distancing—used in epic theater to prohibit the “spectator’s ability to be carried along, identify himself, feel empathy” toward the subject matter in the play and toward societal norms and injustices (Brecht 25, 192). Brecht wants the public to feel outraged, adopting a “critical attitude” (190). In this way, Brecht is also working with performativity or “the attitudes which people adopt toward one another, wherever they are socio-historically significant” in the hope of inspiring people to “intervene in the process themselves” by showing “human behavior [. . .] as alterable” (Brecht 86).

6. Dialogue and Answerability

Mikhail Bakhtin writes that one can never fully overcome the boundaries of the body or the “excess of [one’s] seeing” and perceiving the world from within one’s own subjectivity (Art 24). Therefore one cannot and should not claim to “know” another person’s experience or feeling, their pain nor their happiness. Nonetheless people, as co-terminus subjects/subjectivities, need to engage in a kind of “sympathetic understanding” (102). Bakhtin describes this form of co-constituting subjectivity as “absolutely incremental, excessive, productive, and enriching,” not an attempt at becoming other or simply self-“mirroring,” but “the transposition of another’s experience to an entirely different axiological plane, into an entirely new category of valuation and forming” wherein “the other’s suffering as co-experienced by me is in principle different [. . .] from the other’s suffering as he experiences it for himself and from my own suffering as I experience it in myself” (102).

26 Brecht provides theatrical techniques that can be utilized by performance studies practitioners. For further discussion of epic theater techniques relating to the “alienation effect,” see Willet’s translation of Brecht on Theater (dramatic and epic theater: 37-8, 71, 121-2, 125, 139; spectator alienation and action: 6, 23, 39, 44, 60, 86, 202; critique of empathy: 25, 58, 192; ethics: 71, 75, 195).

27 Bakhtin’s politics of subject recognition is founded on acknowledging the difference between/within human experiences in a conscious effort not to overtake or subsume the other through claims of “sameness” or
Despite its impossibility, *sensing the other* is a necessity for Bakhtin as a task of “translating myself from inner language into the language of outward expressedness and of weaving all of myself totally into the [. . .] fabric of life as a human being among other human beings” (*Art* 31). I take up his ethical mandate of intersubjectivity by embodying, performing, and writing with Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia, recognizing and embodying the polyvocality and double-voicing always already present within discourse, and attending to the notion that “at any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions—social, historical, meteorological, physiological—that will insure that a word uttered in that place at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions” (*Dialogic* 428). In the spirit of Bakhtin, this dissertation will embody and perform hybridity in form and content, in the hope of both calling to and answering with multiple voices, not in pursuit of closure or certainty, but in order to be a part of active, inventive, and political “living dialogue” (280).

7. **Differentiating Trauma, Absence, and Loss**

The conditions and effects of traumatic events, on sociocultural and individual levels, present special problems, questions, and issues concerning ethical remembering, representation, witnessing, and working-through. While I will use some theories from the complete “understanding.” The principle of communicating human experience despite, within, and through difference is a vital, necessary space for Bakhtin’s call for “the individual [to] become answerable through and through” (*Art* 2). I seek to join Bakhtin’s effort toward engaging in ethical human dialogue and the response, or answerability, it calls for while heeding his cautions regarding the slippery dangers of possession and overshadowing of others’ subjectivities.

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28 It is to the wholeness and particularities of life, a co-constituted world of multiple subjects/subjectivities, that Bakhtin feels he must be answerable. He wishes “to answer with my own life what I have experienced and understood [. . .] so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life” (*Art* 2). In other words, for life to be meaningful, one must engage in making meaning with and through others. “Sympathetic understanding” through dialogue (polyphony, laughter, and the carnivalesque as centered within and amongst bodies) becomes a way for Bakhtin to become answerable.
Western psychoanalytic tradition to talk about the veterans’ experiences and memories of violence, I employ these ideas and terms associatively rather than according to their strict disciplinary definitions. Trauma is, in Cathy Caruth’s formulation, a form of recurrent memory of a “shocking and unexpected occurrence of an accident” that at the time of its first occurrence “is not precisely grasped” (Unclaimed 6). Here one must ask, “is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it” (7)? Caruth contends trauma is contingent on both: the confrontation with death and the ambivalence of survival. Trauma, in some ways, is a result of the shock, disbelief, and guilt at surviving an accident, for “far from telling of an escape from reality—the escape from a death, or from its referential force,” the “story of trauma,” “attests to its endless impact on life” (7). A critical question arising from theorizations of trauma is: “What does it mean to survive?” or “What does it mean for consciousness to survive?” (60-1)?

29 Starting with the relationship between trauma and the individual, Caruth notes that “the Greek trauma, or ‘wound,’ originally refer[s] to an injury inflicted on the body” (Unclaimed 3). However, to Freud “trauma is understood [primarily] as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind,” which “repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his [sic] very will” (2). As a “wound that cries,” in “belated address,” and “seems so much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche,” “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it is precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4).

30 Caruth articulates a primary paradox by expressing that the “notion of trauma has confronted us not only with a simple pathology but also with a fundamental enigma concerning the psyche’s relation to reality [. . .] trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimensions of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (Unclaimed 91-92). Consequently, as bolstered by depictions of American Vietnam war veterans, a central archetype of trauma within Western culture is “the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him [. . .] suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares” (11).

31 Another constituent component of trauma, as it is conceived in Western psychoanalytic traditions, is that it exists as “the collapse of [ ] understanding” so that the experience of the accidental/traumatizing event, and its successive returns, resists narration (Caruth, Trauma 4). Trauma’s resistance to “mak[ing] sense” through narration causes Bal to call it “(non)memory,” or that “tragically solitary” “reenactment” which “has no social component” and is not yet “addressed to anybody” (Bal x). “Ordinary memory,” contrastingly, “fundamentally serves a social function: it comes about in a cultural context whose frame evokes and enables memory” (x).
In terms of differentiating absence, loss, and forms of social trauma from sociohistorical perspectives, the work of Dominik LaCapra is particularly relevant. Starting his discussion of trauma at the social level, LaCapra believes “psychoanalysis is misunderstood as merely a psychology of the individual,” for “certain psychoanalytic concepts [. . .] [such as working-through] are crucial in the attempt to elucidate the relation between cultures that come into contact as well as between the present [. . .] and the past” (Representing 9). Within social forms of trauma, LaCapra makes an ethical distinction between “historical trauma” and “structural trauma” (“Trauma” 699-700). “Historical traumas” are past moments and events that happen to specific individuals where “its representation [and] the distinction among victims, perpetrators, and bystanders is crucial.” Related, yet critically different, “structural trauma” is sociocultural damage emanating from historical atrocity wherein “everyone is subject” to its damages, but in different ways (723)\(^\text{32}\).

Within this delineation between social forms of trauma, LaCapra marks another ethical divide between absence and loss, noting that “losses are specific and involve particular events, such as the death of loved ones on a personal level or, on a broader scale, the losses brought about by apartheid or by the Holocaust [. . .] including both the lives and the cultures of affected groups” so that “it is misleading to situate loss on a transhistorical level,” rather it is particularly placed as historical moments (700-1). “Absence,” can operate Traumatic (non)memory needs “healing integration,” into narrative and social structures and can therefore “be overcome only in an interaction with others” (x). “To enter memory,” Bal states, “the traumatic event of the past needs to be made ‘narratable,’” that is, the traumatized person needs a “second person to act as confirming witness to a painfully elusive past” so that the traumatic “memory [] is not confined to the individual psyche” (x). As with the psychoanalytic terminology of “working-through,” Bal’s formulation for overcoming trauma states that “a second person is needed for the first person to come into his- or herself in the present,” an external witness is necessary for the survivor to be “able to bear the past” (xi).

\(^{32}\) LaCapra repeatedly offers warnings regarding the potentially harmful relationship between empathy and victimhood (699). He also cites his use of “victim” as “not a psychological category,” but rather as, “in variable ways, a social, political, and ethical category” (723). However, he reminds us that “not everyone traumatized by events is a victim” (723).
“on a transhistorical level,” as it “is not an event and does not imply tenses (past, present, or future),” but is often expressed or experienced as a yearning for something someone never had (700-1). There are real material dangers at stake in combining and conflating loss and absence, LaCapra contends; it is critical to “recognize that one cannot lose what one never had” (emphasis added, 701). While I do not adopt his exact terminology, I heed LaCapra’s ethical distinctions.

8. Performing Witnessing “Beyond” Recognition and Knowing

Kelly Oliver takes psychoanalytic discussions beyond individualist implications toward a social ethics and politics of witnessing. Boldly, resolutely, she insists that, “without

33 I did not directly experience losses from the brutalities of war in Vietnam. However, as LaCapra suggests, those born after violent historical events may be a part of the larger social “structural trauma” that continues to affect individuals and societies long after a particular event. LaCapra makes these distinctions because he believes that “the historical past is a scene of losses that may be narrated as well as of specific possibilities that may conceivably be received, reconfigured, and transformed in the present or future” in productive ways by individuals who directly experienced historical trauma as well as by “secondary witnesses.” (LaCapra 699). He continues by saying that “[a]cknowledging and affirming—or working through—absence as absence requires the recognition of both the dubious nature of ultimate solutions and the necessary anxiety that cannot be eliminated from the self or projected onto others. It also opens up empowering possibilities in the necessarily limited, nontotalizing, and nonredemptive elaboration of institutions and practices in the creation of a more desirable, perhaps significantly different—but not perfect or totally unified—life in the here and now” (707).

More than agreeing with LaCapra’s specific terminology, what is most important is the marking of these kinds of differences between first-hand experiences and “secondary witnessing” in an attempt to make “crucial distinctions” between then and now” in order to counter dangerous, unethical appropriations of historical trauma (“Trauma” 699). The affirmation of absence as absence rather than loss or lack” as well as noting the difference between historical and structural social trauma, “opens up different possibilities and requires different modes of coming to terms with problems [ . . . ] allow[ing] for [ ] better determination of historical losses or lacks that do not entail obliteration,” or obfuscation, “of the past” (706).

34 LaCapra gives a powerful example of the differences between “absence” and “loss,” and the potential dangers and violence that can ensue with such conflations, when he notes that “paradise lost” should really be recognized as a case of “paradise absent” (“Trauma” 706). By noting differences between “absence” and “loss,” “historical losses or lacks can be dealt with in ways that may significantly improve conditions—indeed effect basic structural transformation—without promising secular salvation or a sociopolitical return to a putatively lost (or lacking) unit or community” (706). By “converting absence to loss,” on the other hand, whether purposefully or unknowingly, “one assumes that there was (or at least could be) some original unity, wholeness, security, or identity which others might have ruined, polluted, or contaminated and thus made “us’ lose” (707). This formulation may legitimize violence and/or apathy, encouraging people to “get rid of or eliminate those others” in the hope of achieving various supposed “apocalyptic future[s] or sublimely blank utopia[s] that, through a kind of creation ex nihilo, will bring total renewal, salvation, or redemption” (707, 706).
an addressee, without a witness, I cannot exist” (88). I will rely on Oliver’s work on the individual and social implications of witnessing to assist my understanding of the interviews and other performance work conducted in Vietnam, in terms of the necessarily covalent, co-constituting relationships between speaking and listening subjects. “Without an external witness,” Oliver contends, “we cannot develop or sustain the internal witness necessary for the ability to interpret and represent our experience, which is necessary for subjectivity and more essentially for both individual and social transformation” (88). This enunciation has overwhelming implications for damaged relationships between individuals, communities, nations, and states. What is needed is the embodied act, the processual project, and commitment toward what Oliver calls “the response-ability in subjectivity” (139). The vitality and urgency of Oliver’s directive requires that witnessing be taken to heart, taken into heart and action.

Oliver’s insights concerning the “beyond” of witnessing, recognizing, and “testifying to both something that you have seen with your own eyes and something that you cannot see” and will never see, will be imbricated throughout this project (86). Questioning the limits and dominance of visuality and knowing, Oliver points out that it is “the blinking of the eyes”—the blink, the blank, the loss, the rupture—that “prevents us from seeing what is happening at every instant.” She says that “only a vigilance in investigating our blindness [. . .] keeps us aware of our response-ability” as witness (142). It might be the “beyond” knowing and the “blink” of missed moments and lapses that make us better able to “see” and to know beyond visuality, so that we are essentially gaining knowledge through the sensation of losing it. Countering the “deluge of representation” wherein subjects become “silenced by sight” means reckoning with the “blind spots laced through the visual field” in order that we
might perform witnessing “beyond recognition” (Pollock, Exceptional 9,8; Phelan 1; Oliver 8). “Opening up to the ‘not all!’” and partiality “of vision requires patience with blanks, with blindness” and the “humility” of not knowing it all (Phelan 18). The ethical witnessing of “victims of oppression,” Oliver contends, is not primarily centered in “visibility and recognition, but [. . .] witnessing to horrors beyond recognition” (Oliver 8).

Acknowledgement and exploration of loss, failure, absence, and that which otherwise resides and recedes beyond one’s knowing potentially enables “the infinite task of encountering,” and recognition toward “something beyond recognition” which “is at the center of subjectivity” (90). Thinking with Oliver, I will attempt to move beyond remembering as “repetition of trauma” toward ethical witnessing, “elaboration and interpretation” (92). The beyond knowing in witnessing others does not delineate a line to leave uncrossed, but rather is a point of departure for another kind of politics of embodied witnessing. Witnessing the beyond through performance means opening to the “dynamics of [the] blind field[s]” beyond certainty, into performances of active, ethical speculation and inquiry: listening, speaking, and imagining with other subjects (Barthes 57). Performance studies takes “bearing” witness to entail performing witness to “what is beyond knowledge and recognition,” so that stories and lives may continue to live, move, and mean in the world (Oliver 18).

**First Rehearsal with the Performance Group Women**

I remember pausing for a few minutes before entering the veterans’ rehearsal room for the first time. The sound of the veterans’ voices, energetically singing to the polka-like beat of a piano synthesizer, drifted into and echoed around the cement hallway. Waves of nervousness and excitement rippled through my body. Sweat streaked my back and had also
accumulated on my brow during my hurried walk to the Southern Women’s Museum. Was I presentable? Would I seem too disheveled? With a bag of heavy audio recorder equipment and notebooks slung over one shoulder, and a bouquet of purple flowers filling my other arm, I rested a minute, catching my breath and calming my nerves before entering the room. Rehearsal had already started. I did not want to interrupt them by walking in during a song. I did not know anyone in the group, but someone named co Lien had been alerted that I would be coming. At least I hoped she had gotten the message. What if my rudimentary Vietnamese was not sufficient to explain who I am and why I wanted to attend their rehearsals? What if they didn’t want me to be here? The song’s final chord came to a vigorous, high-pitched close.

I knocked. An old woman with a hunched back and gray hair pulled back in a loose bun opened the door and beckoned me to enter. A group of about twenty-five older women were gathered in a semi-circle around a young man seated in front of a keyboard. Women were sitting and standing, looking over sheet music, and talking together in small clusters. A woman standing near the piano was trying to get everyone’s attention but was having difficulty. Several women talking at the back of the room, closest to the door, looked over at me with surprise and interest. I smiled and nodded. Suddenly four women were standing around me while a fifth woman put her arm around my shoulder and led me into the center of the room toward a chair. Someone took my heavy bag, another handed me a glass of water, while still another woman generously waved her paper fan in my direction. They must have thought I looked pretty tired out from the afternoon sun!

Several women began speaking at once, to me and to each other. They tried speaking to me in French, Vietnamese, and Russian. Everything was happening very quickly. It was
difficult to understand what anyone was saying. I greeted the women with proper speech and a respectful nod of my head, while telling them my name. I mentioned co Lien, and several women called for her across the room. I had created quite a commotion; the rehearsal had been brought to a standstill, but there was no turning back now. I introduced myself to co Lien and explained that I had heard about their group from Professor Phuong. The ladies encircled me and asked all sorts of questions about where I was from, my age, my family, if I was married, how long I had been in Vietnam, and if I studied Vietnamese history. I did the best I could to understand and answer. Some women could not hear the conversation, so I was asked to go to the middle of the room and address the group. Now I was even more nervous. In my field notes I wrote, “I spoke nearly all of the Vietnamese I could muster under the somewhat nerve-wracking circumstances. Luckily the women’s welcoming manner put me at ease.”

They asked why I had come to the rehearsal. I told them I wanted to learn about Vietnamese women’s history, and about the lives of women like them who fought against the French and Americans. I told them I studied performance, culture, and history at a university in the United States. I am here, I said, because I am interested in learning about Vietnamese culture, and women’s history, and asked if I could come to their rehearsals each week and also talk with them about their lives. I am sure my intentions did not come across as clearly as I have just recounted here, but luckily something of substance was conveyed. The women granted me permission to attend their rehearsals. They seemed genuinely interested in talking about their lives. I thanked them for letting me come and handed out flowers to each woman. On that first day, I was instantly struck by their exuberant energy and relaxed friendliness. They were gathered to rehearse for an upcoming performance but the group’s
spontaneous, light-hearted socializing seemed just as important. Their lively comradery seemed to propel their impassioned singing.

To get the rehearsal back on track, the voice teacher gathered everyone around the keyboard and moved to the next song, “Gratitude for Ho Chi Minh” (“Nho On Ho Chi Minh”). Several women brought me into the group and handed me some sheet music, prompting me to sing along. “The song has all the marks of a patriotic anthem,” I write later in my journal. “Repetitious. Catchy. Salutary. I like it.” I try my best to join in, still feeling excited, a little nervous, and a bit overwhelmed, due in good part to my inability to process linguistically all that was happening. As I stumble along, the women belt out the refrain with determination: “Ho Chi Minh gave his life for the people’s struggle.” Most women are singing, but others are still talking in small groups. Their conversations can be heard through the singing. Their laughter glides through the musical rests. A cell phone rings loudly, and a woman scurries over and answers. No one bats an eye. Amidst the other vignettes taking place in the room, several veterans are patiently trying to teach me the song’s verses. “Ho Chi Minh makes his life an example by sacrificing himself to give people world peace.” They hum the verses slowly so I can follow along.

Whenever I hear this particular song, or watch the women perform it, I think about meeting them this first humid, expectant day at the Women’s Museum. I remember crossing the city park (cemetery) thinking about bones buried deep in the nation’s soil, wandering around the museum in search of the women whose voices echoed in the cinderblock stairwell, and suddenly finding myself encircled by a gathering of spry, older ladies, the magnitude of whose life stories I was just beginning to glimpse and imagine. Most of all, I remember feeling tremendously heartened, and relieved, by the immediate kindness and
generosity I received upon first meeting these lively, elegant, unassuming women. Even though I clearly did not belong in their group, and had, in effect, invited myself to their rehearsal, they made me feel welcome.

The tall, thin woman on my left had fine skin, intense eyes, and short, jet-black hair. Something about her looks and walk instantly reminded me of my Auntie Carole. She was a little shy, but still persistent in her desire to talk. She told me her name was co Dinh. She introduced her friend, co Xuan. Co Xuan is a bit shorter than co Dinh with a bright, expressive face and rolling laugh. They patiently talked with me that first day, despite my difficulty in understanding everything they were trying to express. In the coming weeks, co Dinh and co Xuan introduced me to other women in the group, and by the end of the month, they explicitly stated that they would like to help me with my project. Little did I realize then just how much I would come to rely on co Dinh and co Xuan’s generous dedication and insight.

At the end of the first rehearsal, I asked the group if I could bring a friend next time, a young student who could translate between English and Vietnamese, so that I could understand our conversations more deeply. Within a few weeks, Nhina, a former student of Professor Phuong’s at Vietnam National University, and soon to be my invaluable collaborator and close friend, joined me at the veterans’ weekly rehearsals. Nhina agreed to collaborate because she was interested in learning about the veterans’ pasts, as well as in practicing her skills as a translator, earning a little extra money, and learning how to conduct qualitative oral history work. As a young, adventurous, open-minded, thoughtful, and socially engaged woman born after the war, Nhina ended up being the perfect person to work with on this project.
Shortly after Nhina and I began attending the veterans’ rehearsals on a regular basis, the veterans started bringing in pictures and newspaper clippings, telling me and Nhina bits of stories between songs and during short breaks. They described being tracked by police, receiving their prison sentences, losing friends and family members, and their own close brushes with death. After a little over a month of attending rehearsals with the veterans, co Dinh and co Xuan set up my first series of scheduled interviews. What was planned as a couple hours of afternoon conversation became two consecutive six-hour days of back-to-back interviews in which Nhina and I talked with six or seven different women. This was just the beginning. As I listened, I realized how little I knew about their lives, and how much I desired to learn from and to get to know these remarkable women.

In my field notes, recounting those first interviews, I write about speaking with co Son, a striking woman with silver gray hair, and co Thanh, also an older lady in the group, with energetic eyes and endless patriotic devotion. Co Son told a particularly elusive and haunting story. I was never sure if it was an imagined vision, or something that really happened. Either way, upon hearing the story, the image she described has stuck with me. After my conversation with co Son and co Thanh I wrote:

When co Son was talking about prison, and almost being beaten to death, she described seeing the image of a woman. She said she could see or imagine a woman lying down in the road. Dead or near dead. Just lying in the road. As she spoke, I found myself imagining a young Vietnamese woman dressed in traditional white ao dai [Vietnamese national dress for women], her hair long and dark, lying in the busy street in front of the French-styled, yellow and white People’s Committee building in the midst of downtown. The woman is there. In a flowing white ao dai. Almost floating. Dead but alive. [. . .] Co Son said that rather than choosing to live a quiet, more comfortable, non-political life like one of her “beautiful friends,” she felt compelled to fight against the injustice that she was witnessing all around her. She could not get the image of the dead woman out of her mind. She
saw the dead woman lying in the road. This image, she said, motivated her to join the resistance. And this image sustained her when she suffered brutalities in prison. As she spoke, her eyes deepened. She gracefully leaned in closer to me and Nhina. She looked straight at us—almost into us—as she spoke. Serious. Calm. Sad. Strong. But something in her look also seemed to be gazing through us, toward something far away.

As co Son spoke, I glanced over at co Thanh, sitting in a small plastic chair. She was taking deep, rhythmic breaths. She carefully set her wrists on her knees. Fingers touching in a soft point. The shape of a lotus bud. Eyes closed. Back straight. She breathed in and out. Deeply. Making a soft sound with each slow exhale. She is tired, I think, from talking so long. She is concentrating. Calming herself. Gathering her energies. I feel tired too. Tired from just hearing the small partial pieces of story I was able to glean from listening to these women. Tremendous suffering. For years and years. How did they keep gathering and re-gathering their strength during wartime? How did they sustain themselves? How did they survive? I need to hear more.

I often think about the anonymous “dead woman in the street.” I think of her as I ride down the crowded Ho Chi Minh City boulevards of District One, on the back of strangers’ motorbikes, squinting in the sun and breathing in gulps of exhaust. I remember the image, and co Son’s calm, serious face, as I write at my desk. Walking down sidewalks here in the U.S., daydreaming on my way to school, I recall the veterans and the not-yet-dead woman in the street, thinking of Vietnam.

I wanted to hear more in order to better understand what the women experienced and felt, how they survived and maintained their belief in communist victory through years of imprisonment and torture, and what they think now about their past and about Vietnam’s present and future. And so the primary questions of this dissertation are: How do their memories and past experiences motivate their participation in the performance group? How does the performance group help the women co-create, remake, and sustain their particular community of memory while also passing their histories on to others? In what ways do the veterans’ pasts actively live within them and guide their present lives, beliefs, and social
actions? What of value can be learned from the way these women, hauntologically and prospectively, live with and perform remembering?

Chapter Outlines

Over the course of the year, I spoke at some length with about half of the women in the performance group, both informally and in planned, taped interviews. Although I focus here on a selection of stories from just a few women, in unique and shared ways, all of the veterans inform my remembering and representation. I would like to think that all of them are somehow present in these pages. Four women’s stories, self and social theories, and remembering performances comprise the heart of this dissertation: those of co Nhut, co Kim Dung, co Xuan, and co Dinh.35 They are the women with whom I spent the most time and developed the closest, most intimate friendships. Although the dissertation focuses on their lives, narratives, and remembering performances, these women would want readers to understand their lives as part of a greater, shared history of pervasive suffering, struggle, successful triumphs, and extreme losses, all the result of (more than) a lifetime’s worth of brutal warfare in Vietnam. As is common cultural practice among many Vietnamese people when talking about the wars, the veterans repeatedly emphasized that the war impacted their lives in deeply personal ways, but that their stories are just a few amidst myriad others. Like many people with whom I spoke, co Dinh and co Xuan are compelled to recall those who perished or “suffered more than I did,” often reminding listeners that though “my life has been full of hardships, I am lucky to survive. There are many others who suffered much

35 These are the veterans’ given first names. Most of the other people referenced in the dissertation are given pseudonyms to protect privacy. The veterans granted me permission to use their first names in the dissertation.
more.” Co Dinh articulates a common sentiment of those who lived through the war when she calls her remembrance of surviving torture on Con Dao “just a small story.”

The veterans see their lives, and want others to understand their pasts, as part of a larger history of pervasive hardship, existing within while also reaching beyond each individual life, gesturing toward whole generations of families, communities, and politically diverse populations of survivors on all sides of the wars who suffered, and who may still suffer, from the effects of war’s social violence. Many of the women, including the four whose lives are addressed here, also commonly made reference to people who have suffered, or who are currently struggling, within locations of war or social upheaval beyond the borders of Vietnam. Citing similarities, but without reducing these diverse experiences to being “the same” as their own, the performance group women often made comparisons between U.S. involvement in Vietnam and contemporary American military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan, specifically marking the plight of civilians caught in the crossfire and prisoners held in supra-legal prisons such as Guantanamo Bay. Storying their pasts in relation to others’ current resistance connects the women’s lives and memories to other individuals, sociocultural groups, and greater geopolitical struggles. In particular, narratively linking their pasts to present acts of warfare portrays a continuing U.S. legacy of presumptuous policies and belligerent actions toward other people and nations, marking the extent to which it has not learned from the so-called “lessons of Vietnam.” The veterans’ contemporary narrative connections re-presence their pasts, locating their histories within ongoing social debates as one means of pointedly criticizing global hegemonic power.

This study addresses larger cultural, political, and historical formations and issues, but it does so in highly specific, personal ways. The few stories recounted here are offered as
part of a far larger picture. These narratives are in many ways singular and specific, while they also remember, perform, and claim certain forms of community and connection through shared struggles, beliefs, traditions, histories, cultures, powers, losses, and aspirations for social transformation. In their particularity, the veterans’ stories, commentary, and remembering performances can help broaden and deepen our understanding of significant historical moments and/or eras, as well as address the past and continuing impacts of these histories on sociocultural dynamics and individual lives. For example, co Dinh’s memory of her brother’s brutal death and the everyday violence of rural village life during the Diem regime gives me, as an American born after the war, specific ways of understanding how she and other young girls came to identify with the communist front and feel that they had “nothing to lose” by entering the battlefield. Co Dinh’s stories of loss, hardship, struggle, and survival in prison also provide historical context for understanding the veterans’ current social views and civic dedication to those living through hardships in Vietnam today.

The dissertation is comprised of three core chapters and a substantial conclusion. The three core chapters retell, and critically theorize, selected memory-narratives told to me by co Nhut, co Kim Dung, co Xuan, and co Dinh. In accordance with proper, respectful Vietnamese linguistic practice, I refer to the veterans with familial modifiers, calling them “co,” which means “auntie,” followed by their first names. Centrally engaging theoretical frameworks and questions from performance studies, cultural studies, and memory studies, I explore the dynamics of performativity and performance at play in the women’s enactments of what I come to call “prospective remembering.” Stemming from the veterans’ early childhood commitments as communist revolutionaries, prospective remembering is an ethical life-practice of bearing and witnessing to the past, and of performing remembering into
meaningful social action in the present and future. The veterans’ prospective remembering is intensely and intimately historical. In their various performances of remembering, the veterans revivify their pasts and are in turn revived by the lifeblood of their living memories. As a matter of daily practice, the veterans also regularly correspond with ghosts. Their engagement with spectral ancestors and comrades connects, propels, and ethically imbues the women’s social actions. The veterans’ remembering is prospective and processual, at least in part, because it is so deeply hauntological.

Throughout the dissertation, personal and collective recollections of torture are entwined with the veterans’ ethics of spectral, prospective remembering. In chapter I, I emphasize the way in which this connection manifests in performing the state, especially in terms of proper national-cultural practices, or “traditions,” of femininity. I address co Nhut’s memories of performing patriotism and solidarity in prison, beginning with her description and explanation of what she calls the Vietnamese “tradition of optimism.” This chapter engages the creative powers of performing rebellion under conditions of physical imprisonment and torture, and the veterans’ pedagogical, self and collective narrative-practice of locating themselves within the nation’s mythic pantheon of patriotic, warrior heroines. In chapter I, I also explore how an “inheritance of memory” is pressed upon Nhina as a stand-in for other young women of her generation. Co Nhut’s memory performances are, among other things, instructions on how to properly practice and participate in national traditions (and transformations) of Vietnamese womanhood.

Chapter II recounts Kim Dung’s epic life-narrative, the execution of a secret “mission” against French troops in Saigon that propels her into schoolchild history textbooks and revolutionary fame. Co Kim Dung gives a detailed narrative of preparing for and
carrying out her radical, performative, identity masquerade bombing mission, her subsequent trial and years of imprisonment, and her unexpected escape from death. Here I discuss the veterans’ pleasurable and necessary revolutionary practice of identity subversion and multiplicity; co Kim Dung’s performative, self-sustaining familial devotion in prison; and the performance group women’s deep sense of kinship with the legendary female martyr Vo Thi Sau. This chapter centrally explores the veterans’ ambivalent remembrance of engaging in wartime violence and the deeply performative dimensions of anti-colonial/imperial insurgency in Vietnam. I also attend to the contractual significance of co Kim Dung’s most prized material possession, a silver bracelet made by her father and slipped to her through a small prison window after the announcement of her death sentence. She attributes her ability to survive imprisonment, and her deep present-day commitments to civic pedagogy, to the filial strength and responsibilities the bracelet continues to both give and require.

Chapter III is centrally about torture or, rather, about remembering torture with co Dinh and ethically witnessing her psychic traumas and bodily wounds “beyond recognition” (Oliver 2001). Here I critically encounter and relay conversations I had with co Dinh and co Xuan about: 1) the Vietnamese women’s “tradition of pain-taking” and its fundamental challenges to traditional academic assessments of torture, 2) their haunting return to the island prisons of Con Dao as veteran-tourists, 3) their practice of ethical relations and correspondence with the wandering ghosts of war, 4) alternative forms of mourning and responses to trauma, and 5) my resulting sense of witnessing as a process of unlearning. Co Dinh and co Xuan articulate pain-taking as a natural-national characteristic that one must bear and practice. At first I find myself wondering if the tradition of pain-taking is a problematic, disciplinary gender-regime. But upon listening to the women, I come to
understand it as a practice of sustenance and empowerment for the veterans. As a powerful, gendered performativity linking spirits of the past with the women’s present survival, pain-taking is a productive, historical practice of self- and community-making. Co Dinh and co Xuan’s practice of pain-taking as a means of survival, and their assertions as to its constituting powers, make a compelling corrective to Elaine Scarry’s claims of torture as fundamentally a self-, community-, and world-unmaking form of suffering.

Beginning with co Nhut’s commentary about her Agent Orange activism, the conclusion puts forward the idea of “prospective remembering” to describe the politics and practice of the veterans’ remembering performances and continuing civic commitments. Rather than an act of retro-spection, prospective remembering is a form of memory performance that propels, even compels, the past into the present and future. As a culturally contextual, embodied activity involving others’ lives (those currently alive, those not yet living, and the ghosts of those who have died), prospective remembering is an endeavor of memory and history-making dependent on both individual and collective action. Critically for co Nhut and the other women, prospective remembering carries an ethical mandate: retelling the past must be oriented toward imagining and enacting more equitable social relations. I understand prospective remembering as an active awareness of radical social interdependence, of recognizing and acting on the belief that the lives and memories of others—whether they seem similar to our own or appear culturally, geography, or temporality remote—are vital to the sustenance of our own. In other words, to paraphrase Derrida, inequities and injustices happening back then, or over there to them, translate and should disturb, disrupt, and undermine the comforts of my life and our lives here and now (Derrida, Specters xvi).
In this light, the conclusion then moves to explicate some critical, transgenerational implications of historical violence, turning to the veterans’ direct and indirect connections with Vietnam’s postwar generations, who still bear the material effects of the past’s enduring brutality. The children suffering from Agent Orange-related disabilities at the Lang Hoa Binh orphanage-hospital in Ho Chi Minh City (re)embody the effects of Vietnam’s legacies of wartime violence. The kids’ very existence as the inheritors of war’s continuing damage, their inadequate living conditions, their misuse, objectification, and politicization by those in Vietnam and the U.S., and their extreme social marginality, calls for transnational response to transgenerational social injustice. Offering subtle, remarkable examples of meaningful, everyday performance intervention, the Lang Hoa Binh kids practice what the veterans also believe, perform, and teach: that in order to live more justly with others, we must practice a performative politics of memory that is always hauntological and prospective in its intentions, visions, and actions.
CHAPTER I
Co Nhut: The Spirit of Optimism, Performing Survival, and Re-Membering the Pantheon of Heroic Women Ancestors

Hospitality Toward Ghosts and the Living

It is March 27, 2005. Nhina and I wait at the gate in front of co Nhut’s house. We are greeted by shrieks and laughter as her three grandchildren peer out at us through the metal bars. Co Nhut’s daughter quietly opens the gate. We take off our shoes in the entryway and are ushered into the living room. Tea and freshly baked banana cake have been placed on the coffee table. It is another hot, muggy day in Ho Chi Minh City. Two whirring electric fans are brought over to the wooden benches where we are invited to sit. The breeze begins to cool the perspiration on our brows and the tea quenches our wind-parched lips, washing away the street dust Nhina and I inhaled on the motorbike ride to co Nhut’s house. As I fumble with the audio recorder and microphone, co Nhut’s nine-year-old grandchild, Lien, comes over to us and introduces herself in clear, shy English. Co Nhut appears from the kitchen at the back of the house, smiling and nodding encouragingly to Lien as she walks over to meet us.36

Co Nhut lives along a narrow, residential street in a typical four- or five-story cement multi-generation family home with a heavy iron locked gate encircling the door. As is

36 Despite spending her entire young adult life fighting against the United States, co Nhut wants her granddaughter to learn English. As many of my other Vietnamese friends have also commented, the push toward English fluency in Vietnam is not in conflict with their country’s current politics or past efforts against American imperialism. It does not signal a kind of covert cultural conquest of Vietnam by the United States. The desire for English language skills is pragmatic. People like co Nhut want younger generations of Vietnamese to have the best possible future opportunities in what they see as an increasingly globally connected, predominantly English-speaking world.
traditional in Vietnam, she shares her home with her son and his family. Co Nhut’s adopted
daughter, and grandchildren, visit nearly every day. Like many other women in the
performance group, co Nhut’s husband died several decades before our conversation, during
the war. The majority of the performance group women’s husbands either died during the
American War or shortly thereafter, during the socially-strained and economically depressed
decade following the war.

A photograph of co Nhut’s husband rests on the family’s centrally situated ancestral
altar. The altar appears old. It is decorated with detailed carvings and inlaid mother-of-pearl
mai flower blossoms and phoenix birds. From his high perch atop the altar, co Nhut’s
husband gazes down, across the living room where we are all gathered. His picture is
flanked by freshly tended offerings of sweet oranges, yellow chrysanthemums, and red-
stemmed joss sticks, resolutely held in place by uncooked rice in blue and white porcelain
bowls. The altar is the sturdy and steadfast gravitational center and heart of the home around
which the family’s activity circulates. Co Nhut’s home, like many others I have visited in
Vietnam, performs—in embodied gesture and material offerings—gracious hospitality to the
living and dead. The living room, in most traditionally-styled Vietnamese homes, is designed
for everyday intergenerational familial exchange, honoring and corresponding with ancestral
spirits, and welcoming friends and strangers. Co Nhut’s living room is such a space of
spectral and living correspondence. Sitting beneath co Nhut’s family altar, with her
grandchildren playing with toys on the floor beside our feet, seems a fitting place to engage
in remembering the past.

Beside the altar sits an old television tuned to one of the Vietnamese national
broadcast stations. Sounds of the television news program combine with the motorbike street
traffic outside, the whirring fans, and the children’s laughter as they play with bright plastic cars on the cracked linoleum floor. Ho Chi Minh City is loud, even when you are indoors on relatively calm streets. I move the microphone toward Nhina and co Nhut so their voices will be audible. Replaying the audiotape in my room in the U.S., now over a year later, the tape begins with the overpowering sound of a taxi backing up in the street outside co Nhut’s living room. This muffled mix of sounds, within which one must exert real effort to hear and be heard, instantly floods me with memories of the city’s unrelenting, exhausting, and exhilarating energy. During the interview and again now as I listen to the tape, my ears strain to pick up the first few minutes of our conversation. As the taxi roars off, co Nhut’s voice emerges and brings with it a clear image of her poised presence.

**Remembering Beyond Binarisms**

Co Nhut has bright, quick eyes, an easy smile, and complete bodily and emotional composure. She is the president of the women’s performance group, a war veteran and former political prisoner, teacher of women’s studies, director of skills-training cooperatives for disabled and orphaned children, Agent Orange advocate, a mother, and a grandmother. She spent her young adult life carrying out secretive missions, training for combat and special operations in the southern jungles, organizing communist youth leagues, and staging anti-government student protests until she was captured by police, incarcerated, and tortured for her political activities. In total, co Nhut was imprisoned for six years and eight months, over a year of which was spent in the “tiger cages” of Con Dao. She was tortured on numerous occasions. As she sits now, with straight back and softened, sturdy features, co Nhut embodies a graceful, confident defiance of those in the past who attempted to break her body and her convictions. With her generous spirit, modest but proper dress and household,
even temperament, thoughtful speech, unflinching willingness to support and sacrifice for the nation in times of war, and continuing devotion to current social concerns, co Nhut is the picture of ideal patriotic Vietnamese womanhood. She radiates a secure and subtle power.

Feeling that power moved me to ask two kinds of questions. First, co Nhut’s representations of herself reflect conventionally conservative images of women. She embodies self-sacrificing, self-effacing, obediently traditionalist icons of femininity whether she is remembering the nation’s mythologized heroines, her own revolutionary past, or describing ideal womanhood in the present. On the other hand, the icons of femininity she illuminates are powerful warrior-heroes, enduring survivors of extreme hardship, and the sturdiest pillars of community—all of which are essential to the veterans’ guiding revolutionary impulse and their past and continuing commitments to society and nation.

Within what sometimes felt like a confounding confluence of conservatism and radicalism, I found myself asking: are co Nhut’s and the other veterans’ performances of self and world regressive or in any way progressive? Or, as I suspect, do their actions, values, and memory performances require thinking beyond either/or dichotomies of liberation and oppression? If so, how do I respectfully and accurately recognize the different kinds of constraints, powers, and emergent possibilities within the veterans’ gender performances?

The theoretical and material move I want to make “beyond” binarisms within postcolonial contexts draws, in part, on Homi Bhabha’s evocation of the “art of the present” (Location 1). This practiced art is where “[t]he ‘beyond’ [as] neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past” articulates a continual activity of performative “transit” in the practice of (re)making interlocking worlds of self and society (1-2).37 Secondly, these initial

37 “Performative” here and elsewhere refers to Diamond, Pollock, and Madison’s reading of Austin and Butler’s foundational theorizations of performativity and the performative rather than Bhabha’s characterization as
questions prompt me to ask: what do performance and performativity have to do with co Nhut’s complex formulations, presentations, and representations of self and world? How do her performances produce and suggest the forces and possibilities of the “beyond”? How can co Nhut’s performances (including the way she tells her stories, the narratives themselves, and her self-theorizing) help me see beyond binaries of regressive or progressive femininity and nationalism, so that I can better understand the powerful complexities of personal and sociocultural identities and meaning-making as they are embodied and enacted through the veterans’ lives?

In this chapter, I reflect on listening to and talking with co Nhut in her home about Vietnamese women in the contexts of the country’s recent history of revolutionary, civil, and anti-colonial war; the national pantheon of mythic female warrior ancestors; and the force of generations on performances of remembering and forgetting, embodied here in co Nhut’s instructional narratives to Nhina and in loving exchanges between grandmother and grandchild. Sometimes the impenetrability of co Nhut’s normative performances of gender, culture, and nation left me feeling frustrated and confused. In these moments, I reminded myself that, among the women, as much as it seems co Nhut is the most bound to conventional gendering, she is the veteran with the most social power and influence. She is held in high regard in large part because she so carefully and skillfully manages her gender and cultural performances. The degree to which she was willing to efface herself, to sacrifice, or defer to the state was sometimes disturbing. However it is important to recognize that co Nhut has learned how to successfully operate within governmentally sanctioned hierarchies and sociocultural practices. Performing within dominant social

expressed in Nation and Narration. For a helpful reading of Bhabha’s sense of the performative, see Pollock’s description in “Making History” (Exceptional).
norms, co Nhut shows the potential to empower herself, stretch, and perhaps remake proper national-cultural practices, and teach others to do the same.

With commitment to active, embodied listening, I attend to co Nhut’s oral narrative performances which are, themselves, always intersecting with other levels and layers of gendered performance—of survival under torture, home and hospitality, proper femininity, social responsibility, and nationalist commitment—to constitute, revise, and fortify her own identity as well as the veterans’ shared sense of Vietnamese womanhood. With the above questions and approach in mind, I follow co Nhut on these tentative grounds: that there is an alternative form of gendered agency that emerges from the matrices of these performances and the transforming performativities of national commitment and femininity that she recalls and rehearses. I come to understand co Nhut and the other performance group women’s pedagogies of responsible subjectivity in the light of Jacques Derrida’s ethics of hauntology, or what I call a performance-centered hauntological consciousness. The excessive, spectral “beyondness” of co Nhut’s memory performances is the space in which inventive performativities rehearse familiar histories. She does not police or maintain an unalterable script, but rather crafts “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (Bhabha, Location 2). Instead of reifying meanings through exacting repetitions, co Nhut’s memory performances (of sameness and alteration) open up possibilities for new interpretations of self and society to emerge and to be re-made again by successive generations of Vietnamese women.

Consequently, the following conversations with co Nhut, given with and on behalf of the performance group women, offer views of gender, history, and remembering performance
in Vietnam that are familiar but also critically different from those commonly presented by the state, Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese intellectuals, and popular culture. In the following chapter, I articulate Kelly Oliver’s sense of the “beyond” as an ethical recognition of incomplete knowing, with Bhabha’s space of “beyondness” in identity- and meaning-making, in order to underscore the utopian aspect of the veterans’ beliefs about themselves, their pasts, and their communities. Oliver and Bhabha also echo a central tenet within the women’s life-philosophy: that of survival, a “living-on [sur-vie],” with and through the Vietnamese tradition of practicing optimism (Derrida, Specters xx).

Rather than judging the women as regressive or progressive cultural figures (and in this sense fixing them with claims of full understanding, contra Oliver, Trinh, and others), I proceed with commitment to respecting Gordon’s complex personhood. Taking the veterans’ practices as my model, I strive to perform recognition of the voids, absences, and fullness of the “beyond,” with openness toward unfamiliar terrains of being, thinking, and doing. I aim to follow co Nhut, over and through easy binaries, into the “beyond” of being and remembering, which—as the veterans well know—is an adaptive survival skill of living-on that seeks to enable rather than close possibilities for discovery and transformation.

**Optimism: “Without a Doubt”**

“I had a strong belief that Vietnam would sooner or later win the war,” co Nhut states. This sense of “strong belief” and enduring optimism flows through the veterans’ narratives. I cannot recall a time when doubt regarding the outcome of the war was ever explicitly spoken. Co Nhut highlights Vietnamese women’s steadfast optimism as a national-natural characteristic. Vietnamese women, she says, “could always find, inspiration in those things that seems bitter, seems very dark, seems oppressive.” “Optimism,” co Nhut explains and
Nhina vigorously concurs, “is one of our traditional features.” As coNhut explains through/with Nhina:

Co Nhut/Nhina: Without a doubt
You can feel it from
Every Vietnamese:
Optimism.

Rivka: How is that [optimism] a tradition?

Co Nhut/Nhina: In the period of,
    Preventing our country from enemies
    And,
    Constructing our country,
    We are supposed to face,
    Lots of hardships.
    And difficulties.
    Always.
    I mean,
    Always.

[...]
Do you remember that
In history we have
A long time,
[Fighting] with [the] Chinese,
And then the French,
And then America.
I mean it is,
Nonstop.

“Optimism [. . .] always, I mean always.” In this passage co Nhut stresses the persistence and necessity of optimism throughout Vietnamese history. “Always.” “A long time.” “Nonstop.” “All of the time.” Co Nhut inspires Nhina to echo and emphatically repeat that optimism is central to Vietnamese identity and being. Now, as in the past and for the future, optimism carries the Vietnamese people, and is carried by them, throughout time. Optimism is so intrinsic to the national narrative that it “lose[s] [its] origins in the myths of time [] only [to] fully realize [its] horizons in the mind’s eye” (Bhabha, *Nation* 1). Optimism, called on as a fundamental and primal quality of “every Vietnamese,” is taught—remade, marked, felt, and transferred from one body to another—through performances of re-narrating the myths of national origins. Together evoking a collective, national “we,” co Nhut, through Nhina, describes optimism as critical to the Vietnamese people’s shared, continual struggle for survival. The nation’s survival, and the individual’s, is dependent on the presence and successful performance of optimism.

“You can feel it from every Vietnamese,” co Nhut asserts. Here, “every Vietnamese” hails the continuum of history. *All* Vietnamese who have ever, are ever, or will ever live possess this “traditional feature”: from the Trung Sisters who dared to confront the powerful Chinese invaders, to the prisoners on Con Dao who “without a doubt” believed in a communist victory, to the disabled Agent Orange-afflicted orphaned children in the Tu Du Hospital. In Nhina’s translation, one feels it “from,” rather than “in” Vietnamese people, as an expression, a performed practice, that moves from an emanating inner core to an outward,
palpable sensation; beyond the porous skin of the singular body into the permeable social body.

Co Nhut’s/Nhina’s phrase at once expresses the presence of optimism as an individual possession (a birthright) and as a shared national expression of a collectively practiced *will to survival*. Bringing the collective and individual practice of optimism into the present, co Nhut and Nhina indicate that “we have to make ourselves ready, all of the time,” then and now:

Co Nhut/Nhina:  And we have to make ourselves
                    Ready,
                    All of the time.

                    In such a situation,
                    Of oppression,
                    From outside,
                    From invaders,
                    If you just look at life as,
                    As a gloomy day,
                    You just keep yourself
                    In pessimism,
                    You cannot survive and
                    Get your country promoted.
                    You need hope,
                    And belief,
                    To get your country to survive.
                    […]
Individuals are expected to find things
For themselves,
To maintain their hope.

Armed with hope, co Nhut and Nhina are “ready all of the time.” As their ancestors did before them, co Nhut, Nhina, and all other Vietnamese people have a responsibility to find optimism “for themselves,” but their collective, inherited tradition will instruct them in how to perform it. Optimism is both individual and social. As a stylized, repeated practice it is a traditional performativity. It gathers and gains its present power from the continuing, condensed force of its longstanding, narratively-conveyed, performative history. Likewise, as will be discussed in more depth in the following section, the traditional performativity of optimism relies on individual acts of performance in order to survive through time and adapt to new and changing conditions.

Optimism, in co Nhut’s characterization and Nhina’s interpretation, is characterized less as an affective choice than an inherited trait, a “traditional feature,” a natural-national quality of being Vietnamese. However, they also describe optimism as something that must be activated, cultivated, primed, and made ready for use in the expectation that Vietnamese people have faced, and will continue to face, “lots of hardships. And difficulties. Always, I mean always.” Nhina, in her loyal translation/interpretation of co Nhut’s utterances, uses the word “supposed.” “We are supposed to face lots of hardships.” Hardship is described as almost a necessary condition for the existence of the Vietnamese nation. It has only existed within hardship; it may only be able to perform its requisite “traditional characteristic” of optimistic survival under circumstances of duress. Against the Chinese, the French, the Americans, the national narratives of Vietnamese history prove that “we have to make
ourselves ready, all of the time” for the inevitability of defending the nation, surviving oppression, and, at the very least, collectively and individually facing forthcoming hardships.

Although the country is not currently at war, or under the direct yoke of colonialism, co Nhut makes it clear that optimism is still needed to continue “constructing our country.” Social difficulties and challenges change, but do not disappear, with postcolonial and postwar peace. In co Nhut’s view, Vietnamese people must be aware that they are still contractually responsible participants in the conscious practice of “mak[ing],” ready[ing],” “promoting,” and “constructing our country.” Co Nhut looks at Nhina as she speaks. Optimism, as a performed instruction from co Nhut to Nhina, is still needed in order to address contemporary social problems and hardships, “to make ourselves ready,” to “get your country promoted [. . .] to get your country to survive.” In agreement with the state’s national origin narratives, for co Nhut and the performance group women, optimism is described as an innate cultural quality and a compulsory, obligatory practice, a requisite in performances of national devotion and “Vietnameseness.” In co Nhut’s characterization, optimism exists as a traditional feature and a national practice; it is something that simultaneously is already there but yet must also always be performed. “Nhina,” co Nhut silently directs, “translate these words and learn them by heart so that you may practice optimism in your own life and, when needed, for the nation.”

**Performing Performativity: Re-Citing National Narratives**

Co Nhut’s condensed summary of Vietnamese history follows the official state narrative of “Vietnamese fighting against foreign aggressors,” which Patricia Pelley calls “the cyclical reenactment of the original drama” (60). Narrating Vietnamese history as a series of repetitious or “cyclical” self-preservational battles “against foreign aggressors” both
engages in and describes forms of nationalist performativity. Painting state and national history as, in part, a cyclical reenactment of resistance against outside foes (e.g., the Chinese, Mongols, French, Japanese, Americans, Chinese again, etc.) promotes the view that “exemplary moments from the past were [and may continue to be] periodically restaged” from time immemorial into an indefinite future (Pelley 10). “I mean it is, nonstop” Nhina translates, so “we have to make ourselves ready, all the time.” The imagery of restaging and reenacting history was employed by communist leaders during wartime to inspire individuals’ commitment and sense of inherited duty toward “defending,” or consolidating, the nation. During the mid-twentieth century, “when official historians spoke of the ‘tradition of unity against foreign aggression,’ they did so prescriptively: the Vietnamese should have been united when they were, in fact, cataclysmically divided” (13).

Drawing on the performative powers of tradition when constructing the state’s postcolonial history, “official historians sometimes presented the Vietnamese past as transcendent and essential,” innate and natural (Pelley 10). They “tended to dwell on what they regarded as the distinctly Vietnamese tradition of resistance to foreign aggression” presumably, in good part, because it served the current needs of waging anti-colonial and imperial war (10). In the state’s national narrative, the trope of tradition assumes, and obligates, the practice of repetition as sameness. Historical destiny, filial/national duty, and innate cultural qualities, commands and compels those fighting in the American War to performatively “resist foreign aggressors” just like “we” did before. The cyclical logic, and in this case filial/national duty, of repetition flattens contradiction and complexity. Lay down your sickle. Take up your guns. Fulfill your destiny. The heroic, mythic past must be performed again.
Not surprisingly, this mythologized national narrative of traditional resistance is problematic and flawed in many respects. Tai critically notes the tendency of Vietnam’s official history to position warfare as defensive, something “forced” upon the nation. She explains this national narrative “conveniently ignores the many episodes in which the Vietnamese have acquired territory by annihilating, displacing, or assimilating whole populations such as the people of Champa in what is now central Vietnam in the fifteenth century, and the Khmers in the Mekong Delta since the eighteenth century,” while also “obfuscating the numerous times when Vietnamese fought against Vietnamese rather than foreigners” (Country 172). Interestingly, while co Nhut’s narrative invokes the uniqueness of the state’s national unity, it also overtly expresses the need of all constituents to participate actively in “constructing our country.” Pragmatically, the state needs to perform its authorizing claims both to justify and mobilize defensive military actions and, unabashedly, to call on its patriots to proactively, self-consciously, participate in nation-building.

The ancient tradition of expelling foreign invaders is more deliberately constructed, contextual, and adaptive than the narrative’s transcendent claims. As Patricia Pelley’s extensive archival research on Vietnamese postcolonial history-construction shows, leading communist revolutionaries’ “[c]onflicting attitudes toward the popular as opposed to elite culture were resolved,” by the state’s official historians, “in part, by appeal[s] to national character, national spirit, and national essence” (11). Drawing on familiar folklore, Confucian beliefs and practices, earlier pre-Marxist nationalisms, and shared struggles under colonial rule, “[c]rystallizations such as the ‘tradition of resistance against foreign aggression,’ the ‘indomitable spirit of the Vietnamese,’ the ‘fighting spirit of the Vietnamese,’ and (later) the ‘peace-loving spirit of the Vietnamese’ allowed internal
divisions to recede,” helping to create the idea of “a homogeneous national culture that served the interests of the [socialist] state” (11).

In her description of collective national traditions/qualities, co Nhut draws on pasts reimagined by the Party to describe and to direct proper participation in the forging of Vietnam’s socialist society. Within this narrative and others, co Nhut perfectly performs and integrates what Pelley calls the “twin pieties of postcolonial times—the tradition of resistance and the tradition of unity—[which first] came to life” as the postcolonial, communist historians of the mid-twentieth century “transformed historical events and historical figures into mythical ones [. . .] ritualized military encounters so that each one represented the model of expulsion of foreign aggressors from the sacred land of Vietnam” (144). In her narrative performance, co Nhut achieves the perfect integration of Pelley’s twin pieties of traditional resistance and unity through her trope of optimism as both an inherent national trait and an inherited, obligatory national practice. As will be addressed subsequently in more detail, she also skillfully performs these narratives, and the traditions they practice and convey, forward, beyond their military and postcolonial inception, into relevance within the lives of postwar generations.

Mythologizing of the past in terms of national unity and collective resistance, narratively manufactured, practiced, and proved the innate existence of Vietnamese “national spirit,” “national culture,” “national essence,” “national character,” and the like. By consciously remaking history, the revolutions’ architects promoted socialism as a beacon of equity, a cure for cultural impurities, a return to true Vietnamese values, and as the governing system most akin to the traditional, natural-national characteristics of the Vietnamese people. Although the Party’s version of history, and national-natural Vietnamese characteristics, are
part of people’s common sense knowledge throughout the country, “Vietnameseness,” is about “praxis rather than [] ontology,” and is constituted through “‘doing’ rather than ‘being’” (Taylor, “Surface” 966).

Co Nhut and the performance group women understand the necessity of practicing, not just knowing about, tradition. They also realize the importance of teaching tradition and adapting it to fit within changing conditions and contexts. In her pedagogy of narrative remembering co Nhut revives, remakes, bequeaths, and interactively teaches powerful performativities of Vietnameseness to Nhina. Nhina’s position as cultural and linguistic translator makes the perfect staging ground for engaging co Nhut’s performance-oriented pedagogy. To translate, Nhina must actively listen to co Nhut’s narratives, re-embody her words and sentiments, and interpretively translate and (re)perform co Nhut’s sentiments through her own voice and body, simultaneously making it meaningful both for me and for herself. If optimism is an enduring Vietnamese tradition it must travel and translate across time, contexts, communities, and individuals. In this performance of national performativity, Nhina and co Nhut demonstrate the constancy (powers of citation/sameness) and elasticity (powers of alteration) that give the trope and practice of tradition its lasting strength. In order to address these powers within co Nhut’s narratives, it is first necessary to explicate the dynamic relationship between/within performance and performativity.

**Performativity Meets Performance: Powers of Citation and Alteration**

In conveying and transacting the past into the present, co Nhut and the other veterans skillfully employ performativity and performance. In her Vietnamese optimism narrative and in other performances of remembering, co Nhut performs national performativities. During wartime, she and other fighters performed the performativity of Vietnam’s founding drama:
(re)enacting the expulsion of foreign invaders. Now, with me and Nhina, she performs the historical/traditional performativity of proper “national character” through the embodied recitation of codified national narratives. Each performance of remembering enacted by the veterans somehow participates (often deliberately) in national performativities. But this does not necessarily mean that each performance is “the same” as the next, that performances are automatically (consciously or unconsciously) complicit with hegemonic power and oppressive norms, or that performativities are themselves unchanging histories/traditions of repetitive performance.

People perform performativity whenever they consciously or unconsciously practice and participate in tradition. Performativity, following Butler, is the process and enactment of a *stylized repetition of acts* that constitutes material and psychic realities. Accordingly, performance is each citational, embodied act upon which performativity depends. Each performance *is always a doing and a thing done*, and “if it is intelligible as such, embeds features of previous performances: gender conventions, racial histories, aesthetic traditions—political and cultural pressures that are consciously and unconsciously acknowledged” (Diamond 1). In this light, performativity is an historical, and therefore potentially hauntological, practice. The ghosts of past performances and performers haunt each individual performance of performativity. With each constituting performance, performativity gathers and condenses pasts and performs them into the present.

But is performativity the result and practice of pure repetition? What do we mean by repetition? Is repetition indexical? Can it be a “perfect copy” or does repetition always already involve some forms of alteration? We tend to think of repetition as a pure copy, but because of changing temporalities and contextual conditions, even if it looks the same it must
involve some difference, some small changes, even if performativity’s historical force lies in covering over and assimilating modifications. Peggy Phelan writes that each “[p]erformance occurs over a time which will not be repeated,” which means “[i]t can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as ‘different’” (146). Performance is like a Derridian revenant. *It always begins anew by coming back.* As Margrit Shildrick asserts, “[n]ot only does reiteration always signal a shift, but it opens up the potential for more radical transformations [. . .] openness to new forms of being and to new relational economies” (117). However counterintuitive, it might be said that repetition is a condition for making and marking distinction.

For Butler, if change can be found at all, it is in failure. She notes, “[t]he possibilities of [] transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction” (141). While it is critical to identify the potential productivities of failure, Butler does little to suggest the possibilities for deliberately making critical change, let alone agency in moving beyond or breaking compulsory hegemonic norms. In contrast, Diamond, Pollock, Phelan, Shildrick, and others assert that each performance, as the building block of performativity, possesses possibility for decisively making and processually discovering critical differences amidst performativities. Performance, as a *doing* and a *thing done*, is that which reifies, alters, and sometimes even breaks and/or remakes performativities. What’s more, performance’s ability to appear the same, even when it is doing something different, can be a critical (sometimes subversive) transformational power at work within performativities. Performativity’s assimilating powers, and semblance of sameness, can be leveraged (individually and
collectively) by agent-actors. Again, contrary to expectation, repetition or citation might be a necessary condition for change.

Countering Butler’s theorizations of performativity as overwhelmingly entrenched power that essentially dances the dancer, Diamond asserts “[t]o study performance is not to focus on completed forms, but to become aware of performance itself as a contested space, where meanings and desires are generated, occluded, and of course multiply interpreted” (4). Performance repeats and recites without being purely indexical. Therefore, even when it does not appear so, performativities can be rehearsing change even while they gather, condense, and (re)produce a seemingly conservative, consistent history of the “natural” and the “real.” Through intended alteration or unexpected “mistakes,” performance creates and activates possibilities that can make critical differences individually and socially.

The distinction between the doing and the thing done in performance is essential for unhinging performativity’s seductive, but often disheartening and disabling, (appearance of) determinism. As Diamond clarifies, “[w]hen performativity materializes as performance in that risky and dangerous negotiation between doing (a reiteration of norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretation), between someone’s body and the conventions of embodiment, we have access to cultural meanings and critique” and the opportunity to mark and make decisive changes (5). As will be addressed in the following section and throughout the chapter, the practices and meanings bound up in co Nhut’s performance of the national past, and the entwined Vietnamese tradition of optimism, enables critical engagement with larger social paradigms of culture, memory, and history. In other words, co Nhut’s and the other veterans’ performances of performativity may be enacting ideal patriotism, Vietnamese womanhood, and national character while they are also engaged
in shifting, altering, and remaking these norms in seemingly small, yet critical ways. The veterans’ practice of performativity identifies norms and traditions and makes them accessible to change. In addition, the veterans’ status as revered heroines may put them under pressure to perform state ideals but it also means they are well situated to make and legitimate changes in traditional/national performativities.

Pollock invokes Diamond’s distinction between the *doing* and the *thing done* as the *dynamic ground of the possible real*, finding in the tension between performance and performativity the potential and the founding condition for each retelling to co-create new realities and meanings (*Telling* 1999). As Pollock claims, when “narrative is the field of production,” when narrative is becoming itself though being performed, “it is always vulnerable to variation and reinvention” (69). In Pollock’s discussion of performance and oral history, this potential for alteration and change is a necessarily sociocultural, intersubjective, highly contingent activity (*Remembering* 2005). In their lived experiences, self-theorizing, and various forms of remembering, the veterans use the historical power of performativity and the transformational possibility of performance. For the women, performativity generates the lasting-power of life-sustaining tradition while performance may intervene to make decisive (subtle or extreme) alterations and critical change.38

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38 De Certeau’s explication of memory is also applicable to the memory-based practice of tradition when he says “[i]ts mobilization is inseparable from [] alteration [. . .] it derives its interventionary force from its very capacity to be altered” (*Practice* 86). At the same time, individual acts of performance often derive much of their cultural and affective power by drawing on familiar, shared knowledge and traditions, even if remaking or breaking them. Trinh expresses the embodied tradition of storytelling, and stories themselves, as reliant on the seemingly oppositional tensions of “guardianship and transmission,” a dynamic process of transfer between and across bodies and selves which she describes as acts of “creation” (149).
The Veterans Perform Tradition with Transformation

During wartime the veterans relied on performance and performativity as means of generating life-sustaining continuity and adaptive alteration. They narrate their past and present as a result of participating in the strengthening and adaptive forces of shared tradition. In Vietnamese national narratives, as in other places, tradition is often narratively hailed and performed in the conservative sense of performativity, as a replication that seeks and attains continuity over time and across place. When co Nhut calls optimism a “traditional feature” (and so calls on optimism to perform as a “traditional feature”) the citation can serve to solidify and prove the inherent, historical cohesion, validity, and sharedness of the national while also promoting the recapitulation of these normative beliefs and practices. In this view, co Nhut’s repetition of the national narrative script can be seen as a conservative performativity, a reiteration and reproduction of hegemonic state power.

However, like the other veterans, co Nhut’s performance of proper patriotism and national devotion is not fanatical. Co Nhut’s and the veterans’ practice of tradition is contextually pragmatic and flexible. The Vietnamese tradition of optimism is open to reinvention and change. In fact, as co Nhut describes it, optimism must be “found,” transformed, and performed by each individual. “Individuals are expected to find things for themselves,” she says, in order “to maintain their hope.” The traditional practice of optimism is both shared and particularized. It is a performativity that is meant to be adaptable and serviceable within different contexts. The veterans engage citation and alteration in order to move knowledge, practice, and meaning gained from prior times and experience into vitality within the shifting, unfixed contexts of the present. They refurbish and recycle traditions in order that their powers may be utilized in the present and future. For the women veterans,
remaking tradition is a way of corresponding with ghosts, a way of living historically that is political and contextual, *not dated.*

Skillful alteration through seamless adaptation within and across contrasting contexts is precisely what gives performative traditions the look and feel of exact replication and pure continuity. For example, when the veterans started smuggling weapons and messages for the anti-colonialist Viet Minh or NLF they appeared to go about their business as usual. They wore their same peasant clothes of black cotton *ao ba ba* shirt and trousers. They balanced their vegetables over their shoulders with a bamboo pole and two woven baskets. They appeared to proceed *as always.* So no one suspected that these demure, shy twelve-year-old girls were carrying secret messages rolled into the waistbands of their pants or ammunitions in their hollowed-out turnips or bamboo poles. The routinized, mundane practices of the everyday were used to mask the arts of guerilla warfare. There was sameness, with critical difference, in these repetitions of daily life. Masked, unseen traditions of “preventing our country from enemies” were disguised and embedded in mundane everyday rituals. To adapt a phrase from Homi Bhabha, it was difference hidden within everyday performativities and plain sight, *“almost the same, but not quite”* (Location 122).

Claims on “traditional” features, feelings, stories, histories, practices, beliefs and behaviors permeate Vietnam. But what is most striking about these various cultural enactments is the creativity and flexibility with which the old is refurbished into something serviceable for/within the present. This is as apparent within the material aspects of everyday life as it is within the social and individual psychological realms of identity, memory, and history. The mechanic on the street where I lived, whose business is run from under a tarp on his claimed piece of public sidewalk, has a pile of old, recycled bike parts
from which to mend his customers’ motorbikes (*xe may*). If he does not have the exact screw you need, he will make one of the parts he has do the job. In terms of affective and ideological adaptability, when asked how Vietnam reconciles its shift from the communist command economy to a more capitalist-style market economy, a friend replied: *when you have to cross a river, you must choose a boat, but when you get to the land on the other side, why would you continue to carry the boat?* He was implying that Vietnam had chosen to utilize a particular ideology through which to carry out its anti-colonial struggle, but when this model no longer serves the needs of the people, they will adapt. Changing conditions may require different beliefs, practices, and ways of organizing society.

Yes, co Nhut’s retelling of official state history can be seen, in part, as a repetition compulsion, a reiteration and reification of canonical, national norms. But co Nhut is doing more than just repeating the state’s hegemony. The power and momentum of repetition—understood as sameness and alteration—is a central dynamic within the potential transformative powers of performance. By translating the *twin pieties* of patriotic resistance and unity into/through the trope of traditional optimism, co Nhut renders this national history, attribute, and affect relevant within the lives of postwar generations. In the past, optimism was needed for militaristic, revolutionary purposes. Today young people need optimism to seek out and make better futures for their families and their society.

Thinking of optimism as a Vietnamese characteristic is part of popularly held sentiment and common-sense knowledge. As William Duiker’s extensive research on the life of Ho Chi Minh suggests, “incurable optimism” has long been one of the revered leader’s centrally-defining characteristics (*Ho* 130). Duiker writes that a former student of Ho’s recalled:
When students appeared discouraged at the petty corruption of Vietnamese mandarins and the general ignorance and lethargy of the village population, he [Ho] replied, ‘It’s just these obstacles and social depravity that makes the revolution necessary. A revolutionary must above all be optimistic and believe in the final victory.’ [. . .] To many of his colleagues, it was Quoc’s [Ho’s] personal demeanor, his image of goodness and simplicity, his unfailing optimism, his seriousness and devotion to the cause, that were best remembered after his death. Nguyen Ai Quoc’s [Ho’s] revolutionary ethics became the hallmark of his influence on his party and, for many, served as a distinguishing characteristic of Vietnamese communism. (130-136)

Duiker himself seems impressed by Ho’s optimistic view of humanity, viewing it as a genuine characteristic and not just a rhetorical creation. He writes:

[Ho Chi Minh] had an optimistic side to his character and seemed determined to believe the best about his fellow human beings, even about his adversaries. This attitude was not limited to his compatriots, or even to fellow Asians, but extended to Europeans as well. During a brief trip to Germany, Switzerland, and Italy [. . .] he remarked to a friend that ‘all are human beings. Everywhere we meet good and bad people, honest and crooked people. If we are good people, we will meet good people everywhere.’ (61)

It seems likely that co Nhut and the performance group women deliberately, self-consciously practice Ho Chi Minh’s exemplary optimism. During wartime and in postwar times, when co Nhut practices optimism she revives, continues, and passes on a tradition that is both emblematic of Ho’s filial-national mythic spirit and a distinguishing characteristic of Vietnamese communism. The tradition of optimism carries and revives an ancestry of hallowed ghosts who in turn inspire subsequent generations of Vietnamese.

Following in the spirit of Ho Chi Minh and other illustrious ancestors, in her narrative to me and Nhina, co Nhut articulates optimism as a tradition of making possibility. The activity of optimism, as the determined practice of possibility, is markedly different from a
personal or internalized faith. Where faith seems to imply one’s personally-held certainty about an as-yet unrealized but predetermined future, co Nhut describes optimism as a social and individual practice of openness, inventiveness, and active searching—an undying, actively practiced belief in the possibility for making better futures. Optimism is the proper patriotic practiced willingness to experiment, adapt, and find a way to actualize social change.

To help me understand this “traditional feature,” co Nhut activates the tradition by remembering, retelling, and remaking it with Nhina. Through their (re)performance, co Nhut’s utterance and Nhina’s translational echo, I palpably “feel” optimism emanating “from” both of them. Listening, translating, and performing the tradition of optimism with co Nhut, Nhina re-cites, re-members, and re-news her sense of herself and her shared cultural belonging. Nhina inherits the shared cultural tradition of optimism from co Nhut while at the same time she knows it is a tradition that she must actively shape, cultivate, and make her own.

Co Nhut shows and tells me and Nhina what is important. Moreover, co Nhut is also showing Nhina how to remember, how to live and practice the Vietnamese tradition of optimism. Co Nhut expresses tradition as the consolidation of national/cultural values across time. Optimism. Survival. Overcoming oppression. Defending the nation. “Constructing our country.” As such co Nhut’s performance of the tradition of optimism demonstrates that (re)enacting this tradition is central to the continual, necessary practice of “mak[ing] [and remaking] ourselves.” Co Nhut’s historical evocation of optimism shows, “the emergence of community envisaged as a project—at once a vision and a construction—that takes you ‘beyond’ yourself in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction, to the political
conditions of the present” (Bhabha, Location 4). Co Nhut conjures and activates the affective force of performative traditions within and beyond herself, in order to continue the project of re-visioning and re-constructing her self and her shared society.

Translating, repeating, and rehearsing Co Nhut’s words, and through them the spirit of Uncle Ho and the ideals of Vietnamese communism, Nhina is inheriting the tradition of optimism as an embodied practice of possibility. Nhina shares in “mak[ing] ourselves” and “constructing our country” by participating in the evocation of a shared past, present, and future through Co Nhut’s vision but also in her own terms. This last point is critical. Co Nhut’s narrative makes it clear. The optimism needed “to get your country to survive” necessitates and initiates not a blind faith or a passive acceptance of optimism, but rather a self-conscious, self-reliant, socially ethical constructive project where “individuals are expected to find things for themselves, to maintain their hope”—their hope in the prospect of remembering and remaking themselves, their cultures, their nation, and their communities. Co Nhut’s subsequent narrative builds on this politics of collective affect and action.

Finding Optimism & Irony in a Can of Fish Sauce

With a lifetime spent fulfilling the expectation and national obligation to do and “find things for themselves,” Co Nhut and the other women veterans have become highly skilled at turning seemingly miniscule incidents into seeds of hope and empowerment. Being industrious with what little they had during wartime meant the difference between death and survival for themselves, for their families and communities, for the communist state, and for the “reunification” of Vietnam. The women do not just speak their optimism; it is a pragmatic practice that they live each day. Then and now, the women understand the value, and potential powers, of small, individual undertakings as the necessary foundation of
collective action. For the performance group veterans, their optimism is an everyday practice, not a conned attitude. As such, it has become part of an active tradition renewed time and again in allegorical performances. In this story, for instance, co Nhut not only hails the timeless value of optimism but re-imagines and re-installs it in the irony of everyday living in a war zone:

Co Nhut/Nhina: It [wartime conditions] is very,

Very bitter,

Like,

Once a village was in fire,

And an old woman,

She found out that,

That a can of fish sauce was found,

It was saved,

And the woman said,

“Oh thank goodness, they

Put fire to all things,

All things are in fire,

Damaged,

But luckily we still have

That can of fish sauce.”

In this story, co Nhut combines human loss, humor, and pragmatism, and the extremes of Vietnamese women’s determination and dedication, to demonstrate the paradox of resilience and to recall optimism even in the most devastating circumstances. Through the performance of this story, co Nhut teaches Nhina how to find optimism even in the most dire of
circumstances and why activating the tradition is necessary for self and social survival. Even when you have lost virtually everything, co Nhut instructs, you must call on and perform the Vietnamese tradition of optimism in order to find (ironic) hope in the smallest, most unlikely places. This is how Vietnam has survived against great odds—through resourceful optimism, by making possibilities where none readily exist. This story conveys what co Nhut will later tell me and Nhina explicitly: never underestimate the radical, transformational power of small things.

This story is about a singular, anonymous individual, but it conveys critical qualities regarding Vietnamese women more generally. Unyielding optimism. Resourcefulness. Strength in times of adversity. The “old woman,” (ba, or “grandmother”) is or could be everywoman. She is old but she still has the strength, will, and wisdom to survive. As the story expresses, even if everything is stripped from her, the Vietnamese woman can not only survive, she perseveres with a spirit that buoys her family, community, and nation. Beginning with a condensed, transgenerational history of the Vietnamese tradition of optimism, and then focusing women’s particular duties within this specific story, co Nhut narrates Nhina’s cultural-ancestral lineage and shows her what kinds of attitudes and actions are expected now and in the future. In the process of translation Nhina first listens to co Nhut’s directives and then (re)embodies them in and through her own voice, repeating them into remembering and potentially into future practice.

The narrative is metaphorical, yet grounded in concrete and familiar lifeworld references. It also draws on the mythic qualities of Vietnamese women’s natural, “national spirit.” By weaving the mythic with the common, everyday stories like these can be wielded as powerful social directives. While this story expresses women’s immeasurable strength
under adverse circumstances, it also mandates that women fulfill hefty responsibilities and expectations. Ashley Pettus asserts, “[w]omen, both as symbols and disciplined national subjects, have provided the cultural terrain on which the government and the wider public have sought to define what should constitute ‘our national traditions’” in times of war, during postwar national consolidation, and now “in the face of global capitalist integration” (6).

The story is ambivalent—conservative and adaptive, communally and individually re-created. Surely a woman cannot stand amid the ashes of her village and express real thanks for a can of fish sauce. How is this story meant to instruct younger Vietnamese women about their female responsibilities in today’s Vietnam? Does the fish sauce story, and do the veterans’ other wartime narratives, help liberate women by incorporating them into a lineage of strong, fearless citizen-heroines? And/or do these stories assist in harnessing women with impossible social expectations and obligations to both family and nation-state?

Gendering Nationalism and Revolutionary Commitment

One could argue that the veterans came of age during, and were instrumental in creating, a period of unprecedented liberation for women in Vietnam. Co Nhut tells this story through the lens of women’s wartime pursuit of increased social empowerment. She would not want it to perform or participate in gender oppression. Indeed, most of the women I spoke with described their revolutionary commitment in part in terms of a struggle for sexual equality. They expressed pride at having been part of the communist effort to liberate women from the misogynist shackles of feudal, colonial, and capitalist oppressions. Many describe the communist victory as necessarily indicating the achievement of women’s equality. Although co Nhut views the struggle for women’s rights as deeply embedded within her revolutionary efforts, she is also acutely aware that despite the Party’s
revolutionary success and the great improvements a socialist state provides for women, the problem of gender inequality in Vietnam is not yet solved. However, for co Nhut and the other veterans with whom I spoke, the problem of equality is not due to inadequacies in pervasive, Party-supported ideological constructions of femininity, but rather has more to do with public practice.

As political organizers and/or guerilla fighters in the south during great social strife and upheaval, the veterans lived through a time when gender roles, and nearly all aspects of society and culture, were disrupted. During the revolutionary period against the French and while participating in the “War for National Liberation,” female gender norms became, by necessity, more pliable than they were before—and perhaps after—concerted nationalist mobilizations.39 If you are participating in secret missions, hiding out in the cities or jungles without a permanent residence, unmarried or separated from your husband and family, or in prison, many sociocultural norms, including traditional roles of female domesticity and duty, cannot hold. This is not to say that female duties or values were cancelled out, as this was certainly not the case, but rather that women’s roles proved more elastic and the rhetorics and practices of Vietnamese womanhood took on different formations to serve the changing needs of a tumultuous time.

When the country no longer found itself in war, similarly to what took place in the U.S. after World War II, Vietnam refocused the role of women more solidly around domestic duties. During the 1990s, while at peace and amidst the great shifts occurring in Vietnam’s economic policies, the state “canoniz[ed] [] an earlier patriotic code of heroic female

39 Speaking of the gendered dynamics of postwar social reorganization in Vietnam, Tai states that “[w]ith the return of peace, social order is restored as well, and all those who fought are expected to resume their prewar lives” so that when “[t]he equation of home and homeland is attenuated, [] women’s managerial skills are once again [primarily] confined to their domestic spheres” as a matter of national duty (Country 176).
selflessness—in which mothers ‘sacrificed’ children and young girls forfeited marriage prospects for the greater good of the nation” in order to “encourage[] women to commit themselves single-mindedly to the betterment of their households” as their central, natural, contemporary duty to the nation-state (Pettus 5).

A commonly cited proverb employed by the communists as a contemporary hail to battle steadfastly claims: “When war strikes close to home, even the women must fight” (Giac den nha, dan ba, cung danh) (Tai, Radicalism 88). The veterans would often ask me if I knew this phrase. I also remember seeing it emblazoned on a bright red poster at the Southern Women’s Museum, behind a socialist realist pure white statue of a mother in guerilla-peasant dress with a baby in her arms, a child at her side, and a rifle slung across her back. For the performance group women, like so many others in Vietnam, this phrase carries the transgenerational mandate and responsibility of Vietnamese women during times of war.

Co Nhut is one among many southern women of her generation who valiantly rose to the call of defending the “fatherland” against the forces of “American imperialism,” in the war of “national salvation.” Vietnamese historical narratives describe women as integral to the nation’s continual struggle for existence. Hue-Tam Ho Tai writes, “Vietnamese cultural expectations regarding women’s proper place and responsibilities were so varied and mutually contradictory as to allow women to assume military duties while holding them to unchanged standards of feminine decorum” (Country 176). Vietnamese communists employed gendered metaphors to rally support, symbolically feminizing the land and nation to that of “the figure of a helpless young girl,” while at the same time young girls were encouraged and obligated to carry a gun into battle (Tai, Country 177). With these conflicting images and gender messages, Tai explains that “[f]ighting women thus lived
under enormous strains” regarding how to properly embody virtuous, graceful, gentle femininity while enmeshed within the daily struggles of violent warfare (176)

Most of the veterans began working for southern anti-colonial nationalist groups when they were between eleven and fourteen years old. The women overwhelmingly attribute a direct experience of violence inflicted on family members and/or friends, and their recognition of the racist and oppressive injustice of these acts, as the founding premise of their call to revolutionary action. In Co Nhut’s case, she explains, “I have worked for the communists since I was about eleven years old. I lived with my mother because I liked to be close to her as much as possible [. . .] I hated the enemies, and witnessed the aggressors set fire to many houses, killing many innocent civilians. I knew the victims were all honest, kind-hearted, innocent citizens.” Co Nhut started working as a message courier for the Viet Minh at age eleven. At age thirty, she was arrested by the southern Republic of Vietnam (RVN) police for her anti-government activities as a member of the National Front for the Liberation of the South (also colloquially referred to in English as the National Liberation Front or the NLF), the organization that became the primary communist nationalist movement in southern Vietnam. While in prison, Co Nhut continued to organize, protest, and support the revolutionary movement to which her life was fully committed.

Touring, Imagining, and Remembering the Con Dao Prisons

In May of 2005, after working with the veterans for over seven months, I had the chance to visit the Con Dao Prisons where Co Nhut and many other women from the performance group were once held captive. Now over a hundred years old, the French-era Con Dao prisons are rapidly deteriorating under the sun’s bleaching rays and the pounding tropical rains. It is a hot May afternoon and I am walking through one of the Con Dao prison
blocks with approximately fifty communist front veterans and their families on a Saigontourist package tour. All of us are wearing matching sunhats with the state-owned tour company’s name splashed across them in bright blue lettering, posing for pictures in front of the rooms and cells where the veterans were once jailed. For some of my companions, this is the first time back on the island since their release over thirty years ago. The mood is upbeat and relaxed. After the morning’s somber wreath-laying ceremony at the war martyr cemetery for those who died on Con Dao, the veterans have taken up a lighter, touristic attitude for their visit to the prisons. The veterans, now gray-haired and mostly in their sixties and seventies, calmly, undauntedly walk beneath broad green sun-lit leaves, through the prison courtyard, and into their former cells. Although they appear unfazed, I feel jarred and unsteady as I try to reconcile the great contrast between the prison’s sickening past and its current banal appearance.

At this site I am privileged to witness what I would call at least four simultaneous, enfolding performances: 1) the ritual transmission of history across generations, that frankly, surprises with its element of exuberance, 2) the co-memoration of survival and torture through the embodiment of re-inhabiting this space, 3) the perversities and pleasures of tourism per se, and 4) the re-vival through immediate translation of the veterans’ “sacrificed” comrades, including the calling forth and tending of the spirit of Vo Thi Sau, a central heroine of the Vietnamese ancestral pantheon (particularly celebrated and remembered by southern women). Rather than a tearful or traumatic performance of commemoration, the mood at the prison is cheerful and inquisitive. The older men and women show their children, grandchildren, and the young members of the national Communist Party youth

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40 Saigontourist is one of the largest state-owned tourist companies in Vietnam. It serves Vietnamese travelers as well as foreigners. Saigontourist organizes standardized “reunion tours” for Vietnamese veterans to Con Dao. The tours are virtually the same for each group.
group around the prisons, telling them about their harrowing escapes and the monotonies of daily prison life. The absence of visible sorrow may seem surprising, but this upbeat mood is “characteristic of people from this wartime generation,” a Vietnamese friend notes as I remark on the veterans’ lightheartedness. It is not that the veterans do not remember the great suffering they and others experienced. They undoubtedly do. But outwardly expressing too much emotion, in this particular context, could be seen as self-indulgent, ineffectual, and even disrespectful to the dead. The commemorative ceremony at the cemetery monument that took place earlier in the morning was the proper location for expressing their sorrow together. Knowing the proper time to show emotion, as well as the correct measure of expressing reverent sentiments, is critical to Vietnamese performances of grief and protest. Moreover, being in the prisons now, as returning veterans and vacationers, seems to bring them a renewed sense of solidarity, national pride, and excitement.

Watching the veterans explore the prisons, I am reminded of how often I have heard Vietnamese of all ages, and diverse historical and socio-political alignments, assert some version of the claim that Vietnamese people do not wish to live in the past. Or, in slight variation, Vietnamese people cannot afford to dwell in the past. We have no choice but to move on. The common variations on this theme seem to stand in for, through revealing and obscuring, a whole spectrum of different relationships toward Vietnam’s fraught history. As a concise performance of ambivalence, these phrases can be used to cover wounds that will never fully heal, protect younger generations from the sorrows of the past, and/or suggest a real sense of hopefulness for Vietnam’s present and future, while expressing the overriding urgency and practical need for people not to dwell in the past but instead to move forward in facing the country’s current, more pressing, issues and daily conditions.
As young revolutionaries, the veterans’ spry bodies were bound in shackles, pressed into cages, and violently tortured. They were hung by their arms and legs, forced to drink soapy water, beaten, and shocked with electricity. The list of practiced tortures encompasses all one can imagine, and continues well beyond the conceivable. Walking through the courtyard, I think of the black and white pictures taken of the prisoners during the war, now hanging in the country’s museums. In one frame, piles of women, their hands bound, lie atop one another in a pool of shiny, onyx blood. In another shot, faces peer out from between the cell bars, their eyes staring at and through the camera. Their mouths are open, attempting to breathe. Whenever I see prison pictures from this era, I scan the photographs for familiar faces.

The breeze blowing through the prison bars sounds like soft murmuring voices. Although the day outside is bright and clear, the corners of the large cells are in darkness. One can almost see bodies huddled in the shadows. Looking down into the “tiger cage” cells, I remember co Nhut’s descriptions of what took place in the prison. Armed guards are walking the observation pathway above the “tiger cages,” pelting the prisoners with crumbling white lime powder. The powder falls like toxic snow in the humid air, affixes to the prisoners’ sweating bodies, and melts into their skin. Co Nhut explained that the lime sears eyes and flesh, leaving red, welted burns. There is no way to relieve the stinging. There is no escape. Water only makes it worse.

As we walk through the small “tiger cage” confinement cells, an older woman veteran I met on the overnight boat ride to the island loops her arm into mine and begins telling a story about an American named Don Luce. She says he was given a secret map of the “tiger cages” and that he helped tell the world about what was happening in the prisons. Historian
and social justice activist Don Luce visited Con Dao in 1970 with a delegation of U.S. congressmen to investigate rumors of war crimes. He recalls, “Frank Walton, the U.S. prison advisor, described Con Son as being like ‘a Boy Scout Recreational Camp [. . .] the largest prison in the Free World’” (“Tiger Cages” 10). However, when Luce arrived at the Con Dao prisons, using the secret map slipped to him by a former prisoner, the delegation diverted from their tour plan and witnessed a different reality. Luce recounts:

[t]he faces of the prisoners in the cages below are still etched indelibly in my mind: the man with three fingers cut off; the man (soon to die) from Quang Tri province whose skull was split open; and the Buddhist monk from Hue who spoke intensely about the repression of Buddhists. I remember clearly the terrible stench from diarrhea and the open sores where shackles cut into the prisoners’ ankles. ‘Donnez-moi de l’eau’ (Give me water), they begged. (10)

Walking into a small, stark concrete cell I remember some of the women in the performance group saying their eyesight has never fully recovered from the lime powder and beatings. Looking up at the bars, I think of co Nhut. Thirty years old. Eyes fierce. Her body filled with conviction.

The Prison-School

When confined together in the large cement rooms or when lucky enough to breathe some fresh air in the prison’s courtyard, the women would teach each other reading, writing, math, and other subjects sometimes using small pieces of pencil lead or by drawing on the dirt floors. Using the prison as a “school” for revolution, the women were participating in an established tradition practiced and popularized by nationalist anti-colonial activists and inspired, in part, by French revolutionary prison literature and older Vietnamese traditions.
(Zinoman 2001). As Peter Zinoman’s research on Vietnamese revolutionary prison memoirs suggests, the practice and narrative theme of “struggling to ‘transform the imperialist prison into a revolutionary school’ (bien nha tu de quoc thanh truong cach mang)” is pervasive in state officiated biographical literatures of wartime heroes (22). Colonial-era revolutionary writing and prison biographies propagated by the northern communist government during the American war, including Ho Chi Minh’s widely read prison diary, were used to provide examples of revolutionary role models, spread ideological messages, and consolidate a unified historical vision of the proper nationalist, patriotic past. State-published memoirs in Vietnam were, and still are, a deliberate attempt by the Party to create and “shape a collective public memory rather than to express an individual private one” (21).

During the American War it was said that in French times, the Con Dao prisons were “nicknamed the ‘University of Ho Chi Minh’ because so many of its ‘graduates’ changed from a strong anti-communist position when they entered to joining the Viet Minh [anti-colonial nationalist movement] upon their release” (Chagnon and Luce 122). Following in the tradition, co Nhut explains, “[i]f we happen to get a small piece of pencil, we hid it in our bodies or in our clothes, and we [would] secretly break it into pieces,” to share with the others. Co Nhut stresses the social as well as revolutionary value of using, “not wasting,” the

41 Zinoman’s careful textual analysis and historical research shows that “[t]he Communists’ attempt to link incarceration and education originated with the writings of [the famous prison poem anthologist] Huynh Thuc Khang’s [1930’s] generation. On Con Dao in 1908, Phan Chau Trinh advised Khang to try to turn the prison into a ‘natural school’ (truong hoc thien nhien), a comment that anticipated a common trope within communist prison writing that linked incarceration and political education” (28). As Zinoman’s work also shows, “images of confinement” and radical scholarly contemplation are present within the “older Vietnamese literary tradition[s]” predating the twentieth-century nationalist movement as well as in the “wealth of prison narratives found in nineteenth-century French romantic literature” that were widely read and known by French educated anti-colonial revolutionaries (29).

42 It is important to note that publishing houses in Vietnam were, and still are, state-run and state-censored. Some examples of contemporary revolutionary memoirs include: Pham Xuan An: a General of the Secret Service, Nhat ky: Nguyen Ngoc Tan, and Muoi nga duong doi. These books and many others can be found in local, state-operated bookstores across the country. Sometimes the books are labeled as “autobiography” (e.g., Ho Chi Minh’s famous official memoir), but who the author or authors may be is often unclear.
time in prison to teach each other basic subjects as well as the revolutionary doctrine of Ho Chi Minh and the premises (and promises) of Marxist-Leninism. Co Nhut’s contemporary memory-performances of imprisonment extend the socialist pedagogical goals of the prison-school ideal.

**Prison Performances: Improvising to Survive**

Co Nhut and the other performance group women often say “one day in prison is considered a thousand days outside.” In order to live through harsh treatment meant to wither inmates’ bodies and spirits, the women found ways of making their lives meaningful. To make their days and years in prison bearable and useful the women would sing patriotic songs, create dances, tell stories, write and recite poetry, and perform skits together. Nearly all of these activities were communist-inflected and understood as part of their prison-school edification project. When asked, co Nhut gives three reasons why the women created performances in prison: to “make us feel happier,” for “energy [as] a source of energy to maintain, and next, to forget about days and time.” For co Nhut and the other performance group women, their performances were certainly more than entertainment. Prison performances were a necessary part of individual and group survival. Putting on performances was, and still is, a way for the women to enact the tradition of optimism as a possibility-making practice.

Performance acted as a potent force of resistance. As co Nhut stated later in our conversation, performance offered various ways to make “protest against the enemy.” Here, it is important not to reduce performance to simply a *means* or *vehicle* for resistance; rather the women’s prison performances were themselves the resistance, the in-the-moment activity and energy that generated strength, inspiring and seeding further acts of defiance in response
to their inhumane treatment. Co Nhut explains that the women’s prison performances served to entertain, sustain, and uplift, in large part, because they were understood as intentional enactments of political struggle. The performances were self-conscious acts of resistance with communist nationalist pedagogical messages aimed at themselves, other inmates, and potentially sympathetic guards. To a great extent, what made the prison performances “a source of energy” is that they were self-conscious, didactic forms of individual and collective ideological resistance made into outright material defiance.

Although now within vastly different contexts and without the wartime imperative to protest against the enemy, in many ways the women in the performance group continue their performances, weekly meetings, and rehearsals today for similar pedagogical and life-sustaining reasons. They make and perform public performances now in order to 1) educate the younger postwar generations about important sacrifices made in the past (including, but not exclusively, the women’s own contributions), 2) inspire the public’s sense of national obligation to follow their predecessors in serving the nation’s needs in times of war and peace, 3) instill and remake communism’s social ideals and practices as the country reinvents itself as a socialist state with an increasingly capitalist economy, and 4) deeply interlinked with the first three intentions, the veterans revitalize their revolutionary histories in order to maintain their small, ever-dwindling community. The women often comment that performing their patriotic songs and dances, especially when in front of audiences, stirs deep feelings about the past and helps them to remember friends who are no longer living.

**Con Dao Commemorations in Smoke and Statues**

Back in the Con Dao prisons, I walk with co Hoa, the only woman from the performance group on this trip to the islands. We pause periodically to take pictures with her
husband and extended family (her daughter, son in law, and their two children). The group slowly proceeds down a stone pathway in the glaring midday sun into a large, dark room. This cell once held between thirty to forty women prisoners at one time. It is room eight, the cell where co Xuan and co Dinh first met each other. I step over the threshold into the dim, damp room. The only spot of light comes from a small, barred opening at the top of the steeply angled ceiling. This is the room where some of the women’s performances took place.

The center of the room holds a makeshift altar with a bouquet of white tuber roses and an urn holding hundreds of smoldering incense sticks. The hot air is made thicker and pungent with the scented smoke and the fifty or more people who are packing tightly into the room. The veterans begin adding their joss sticks to the urn, bowing their faces in respect, as they would toward their own ancestral shrines. Ringlets of smoke rise quickly and then linger, floating above our heads.

In addition to the incense haze, another more overt form of state sponsored commemoration makes the room, and the informal touristic and memorial activities taking place in it, feel somewhat surreal. Ringed around the dark room sit thirty or so cement mannequins (interestingly, all male) depicting the veterans when they were prisoners on Con Dao. With slightly varied postures and anguished expressions painted on their concrete faces, legs held in recreated shackles, and emaciated bodies, the mannequins stare back at the veterans as they walk about the room. This demonstrational scenery feels odd, even uncomfortably comedic, yet it is not an unexpected find at this historic site. There are many staged, life-size yet not at all life-like, dioramas of wartime atrocities in the same socialist realist style in other historical locations and museums throughout Vietnam (notably at the My
Lai massacre memorial site and the War Remnants Museum). The veterans, not startled or unsettled by their depictions, snap pictures in front of the mannequins with their families.

If the altar with incense and flower offerings serve Vietnamese cultural practices and beliefs related to ancestral devotion and the spirit-world of the dead over bolstering State values, the cement mannequins, as not-so-subtle state iconography, reveal the Party’s stake in directing visitor’s understandings of, and interactions with, this historically significant location. The origin of the altar space is unknown. While the altar and the practices it incites cannot be easily separated from State concerns and powers, the mannequins are much more overt in their political determination of this commemorative space.

The “model” prisoners secure and clarify the historical meanings presented at this national memorial. The prison mannequins, along with the pictures, dioramas, and explanations at other locations deemed historically significant in Vietnam, speak to the state’s preoccupation with controlling public memory and correlating it with official history. The stone prisoners are unequivocal representations of the official history of Con Dao. As is the practice and intent of most official historical sites in Vietnam, the prison statues reduce the complicated politics of the wartime struggles to a clear, simple binary of oppressed vs. oppressor, good vs. evil. The more certain and declarative the messages are at these historic sites, the more they seem simultaneously to perform the State’s insecurities regarding alternative readings of the past.

**Staging Collective Resistance on Con Dao**

When locked in these large prison rooms with dozens of inmates, such as the one now ringed with mannequins, the women used the space and limited resources to create even more elaborate performances. As co Nhut describes in a written answer:
In order not to waste time, we learned to sing songs, compose poems, and embroider. We taught each other. Performances played an essential and important role in prison. The performances were the spiritual values that helped us overcome hardships and the widespread use of torture. Performances were also considered as the “glue” to bring people together, cementing our relationships. As a result, everyone joined in the performances. Each person had her own tasks: performers, costumes, or spectators who were expected to offer comments on how to make a certain performance much better next time. I found great happiness and pleasure participating in the prison performances.

Co Nhut describes the group’s engagement in the creation of prison performances as a way of making the glue, cementing the women’s friendships to one another.

In addition to making closeness and happiness, the stories (the narrative content) and the embodied act (the representational form and action) of the prison performances connected the women to their national, historical lineage of female warriors and defenders of the nation. The women’s prison performances engaged contemporary stories and historical narratives in order to draw connections between past struggles for national autonomy and their own revolutionary endeavors. Co Nhut vividly remembers performances about the warrior Trung sisters’ valiant resistance against the Chinese in A.D. 40, the life stories of contemporary female, anti-colonial, revolutionary heroines Vo Thi Sau and Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, an anti-capitalist adaptation of a Tet lunar new year folktale, and a play they called “Nixon’s Headache” which imagined the women’s own possible impact on the daily life and thoughts of the U.S. president.43

43 During the war and afterward, “cultural workers” (painters, writers, photographers, actors, musicians, etc.) were organized into national organizations and local troupes. Among other things, cultural workers created art to entertain and uplift the fighters, embody and spread postcolonial history, and educate the populace about Ho Chi Minh’s philosophy and theories of Marxist-Leninism. In the South, National Liberation Front theater troops were formed to “remind[] [Vietnamese people of] their colonial past, with its foreign domination and exploitation” by retelling the stories of nationalist martyrs and historic heroes in a way that properly combined the Party’s “brand of socialism with traditional Vietnamese nationalism” (Mangold and Penycate 145). While
Co Nhut describes the goal of Nixon’s Headache as one of “encourage[ing] other inmates [that] we still have courage enough to fight against [the] American government,” and “to maintain belief about Vietnamese strength” in the face of the goliath-like power of the United States. Enacting the performances, the women generated the dual force of making community by binding themselves to each other while simultaneously installing themselves, as a group, within the teleological trajectory of Vietnamese nationalist, communist history. More specifically, the women wove themselves into the national-filial pantheon of women heroines, recognizing themselves as participants in the tradition of female self-sacrifice in the country’s historical, ongoing/cyclical struggle to defend the nation against foreign aggressors.

Co Nhut states, “everyone joined in the performances,” so that the women were both the performers and audience to their own stories. Lacking an outside audience in prison, the women had to be the witnesses to their own suffering and strength. The women’s enactments, those in prison and those currently performed by the veteran’s group, share marked similarities with a form of ritual Barbara Myerhoff calls “definitional ceremonies” (32). Definitional ceremonies are performances in which a group “develop[s] their collective identity, their interpretation of the world, themselves, and their values” and wherein “the group’s shared and unquestionable truths, [are] made unquestionable by being performed” (32). As ritualized definitional ceremonies the prison performances acted as ways for the women collectively to make order and meaning out of their lives at a time when their material environment, as well as their physical and sociocultural wellbeing, was ravaged by the war’s destructive chaos. The performances enabled them to “‘see’ themselves,” claim

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in prison, co Nhut and the other women veterans would perform some of these canonical patriotic plays. For the story of one cultural worker from Cu Chi, and an overview of wartime guerilla performances, see Mangold and Penycate’s “Pham Sang—The Story of an Entertainer” in The Tunnels of Cu Chi (144-157).
themselves, and “appear in the world” as subjects even as their bodies were objectified and battered through torture (32).

Myerhoff observes, “[a]udiences, listeners, witnesses are essential for self-awareness, even when a person [or group] is his or her own mirror, at once the subject and object, speaker and listener in the same story” (222). (Re)embodying and making survival and rebellion, the prison performances were group-incorporating acts by which the women reflexively showed themselves to themselves. Through the performances, and in conversation afterward, the women commented on and critiqued their material circumstances, their artistic creations, their social struggles, and themselves. In making performances together they reiterated and remade themselves as individuals and, moreover, as a vital patriotic community.

The group prison performances acted as a primary way for the women to historicize themselves. In these performances the women generated solidarity in their national liberation struggle and remembered themselves in relation to (we are like), and into (we are a part of), the Vietnamese pantheon of national, or nationalized, women heroines. In this case, reiteration entailed making a place for themselves in the deeply embedded, yet also precarious and provisional, communist-nationalist version of the nation’s mythic origins and revolutionary rebirth. It is important to remember that the women’s prison performances were occurring at a time when, despite their recalled certainty of the communist victory, the war was not over and the Party’s version of state history had not yet become a pervasive and concretized presence in southern Vietnam. The veterans’ prison performances were prospective enactments of optimism regarding their survival and the future communist victory in Vietnam.
Today, in the postwar and post-Doi Moi era, the performances mounted by the veterans’ group continue to serve, in similar and different ways, as historicizing practices and as definitional ceremonies. As the women age and living conditions in Vietnam change, the veterans’ performances are differently invested with the desire and need to reaffirm collective values and make continuity amidst the great socioeconomic changes occurring in Vietnam. With the Party’s praise, they position themselves within the national heroic pantheon, with perfected modesty and deferential grace, while also engaging in the more vulnerable pursuit of carving out meaningful space for themselves amidst the fast-paced urban landscape of Ho Chi Minh City and in relation to the country’s rapidly altering vision(s) of itself. The veterans’ present-day performances participate in the confusion and profusion of/over memory. Their struggles over history are valiant, creative, powerful, and poignant in a time in which citizens’ attempts to forget the wartime years, the government, and outdated interpretations and applications of socialism, are as prevalent and determined a force as the State’s efforts to consolidate, uphold, and enforce their proper version of the nation’s past, present, and future.

**Solitary Confinement: Performing Defiance**

Co Nhu’s recollections shift from descriptions of group performances to an example of a solitary performance. When locked in small cages with two or three other cellmates, or when in solitary confinement, the women would take turns making up a song or story, making sure to speak loud enough through the ceiling bars so the women in the other cages could hear. “From this room to that room, there is nothing above, just bars. We couldn’t see each other but we could hear” explains co Nhu. While in a solitary confinement cellblock,
co Nhut describes the way unplanned, improvised, individual performance enabled her to practice resistance even as her body was overcome by violence. In a note to me she writes:

I still remember one day when I was handcuffed, my whole body was unbearably painful. I was surprised to hear a voice singing from the next prison room. One of my fellow prisoners was singing as follows: “Don’t let them run away. Don’t let them run away. They won’t have a single way out.” [. . .] I asked her to teach me [the song]. I sang the song while being handcuffed. I felt so excited, and remembered a poem by Uncle Ho: “Though we are physically imprisoned, our spirits are set free.” I believed that my comrades would win the fight.

As co Nhut’s self-description expresses, this small, spontaneous performance gives her a way to enact agency—claiming survival, success, and subjectivity—under conditions of excessive physical and psychological duress. Stripped of control over her body’s mobility she uses all she has, her voice, to reclaim and protect herself.

Uncle Ho’s poem reminds her that although the body may be overpowered, her spirit can still remain out of the oppressor’s reach. In the song, power dynamics are reversed, imaginatively gesturing toward a future time when co Nhut’s self-possession is restored through her compatriot’s successful achievement of communist victory. Although the song and the poem verses are just words, just an imaginary, co Nhut’s unfettered,undaunted voice becomes proof of torture’s failure to overtake the freedom of a willful spirit. This is revolt, a radical performance of self reclamation.

Co Nhut’s narrative tells how performing the song in prison enabled her to exceed the assumed limits of her isolated, restrained body. Though in solitary confinement, through teaching and reciting the song the women connect, and in so doing, defy imprisonment’s primary aim of discipline and control by dis-arming, dis-connecting, and disallowing
prisoners’ transgressive beliefs and actions. Singing the song, together and individually, challenges the extent of torture’s power to silence, separate, immobilize, and control. One performance enlivens another. Song and poem pass through bars and walls, as sound on airwaves, generating energy and connecting prisoners, as each performances is given, carried, elaborated, and embedded in one body and then another.

The story shows the song being shared generously, without fear of running out, for the women know that doing performance makes more. Performance is not dependent on an economy of scarcity, but rather an economy of regeneration. It must be given to others if it is to survive. Co Nhut’s story is simultaneously describing the generative power of performance in prison while practicing it with me and Nhina. As the veterans’ know from their revolutionary wartime practices, generously “socializing” performance can make it all the more powerful. In this light, performance can be understood to embodying the ideals of a socialist economy: it can be freely exchanged without price, it can belong to everyone and no one, it is historical and must be materialized, sharing it produces more, its potential transformational power grows in and through its proliferation, it can be collective while it also relies on personal investment. Co Nhut’s prison performances, and their narratively performed remembrance, are self-consciously recognized as vital enactments of communist praxis.

Co Nhut’s story also bears a structural mark of socialist sentiment. Although the story is about co Nhut’s personal experience, it is used to testify to the strength, sacrifice, belief, and eventual success of her compatriots. Co Nhut makes sure to efface focus on herself, gesturing toward the shared nature of the revolutionary effort. She says, “I felt so excited, and remembered a poem by Uncle Ho: ‘Though we are physically imprisoned, our
spirits are set free.’ I believed that my comrades would win the fight.” In this passage, she deftly moves the focus from “I” to “Uncle Ho,” to “we” and then to her “comrades’” future victory, shifting from the personal to the mythic to the current social and then the prospective social. Performed for the edification of me and Nhina, this story describes and demonstrates the practice of optimism as a necessary survival skill, proper devotion to the nation, the virtue of self-deference, and the strength of the social.

Retelling this small story instructs me and Nhina on the power of performance and the interdependence between the social and the individual, while also reminding co Nhut of her own successful survival. Like the old women who found optimism in a can of fish sauce, co Nhut found and practiced powerful optimism through something as unexpected and ephemeral as a song. Remembering her past re-empowers co Nhut’s present actions. Recalling this story and others bolsters co Nhut’s present-day struggles to maintain her generation’s historical legacies and social values, sustain the performance group community, and continue civic work aimed at alleviating postwar inequities and suffering. Co Nhut’s story shows how performance can be used as a defiant, creative, borrowed, and inventive tool for generating alternatives and making counter realities.

Co Nhut’s story of survival and conviction under dire conditions, bolstered by its aptly incorporated verse of Uncle Ho’s prison poetry, exemplifies a familiar thematic of “spiritual resistance despite physical confinement” within “scholar-gentry prison verse” (Zinoman 28). The story replays, and personalizes, familiar patriotic themes within the political-aesthetic style of socialist realism. However, co Nhut’s and the other veterans’ narrative remembering cannot be relegated to the realm of just propaganda or otherwise dismissed as unimaginative, unoriginal, or uncritical. Repetition is an easily overlooked,
misunderstood, and oft criticized aspect of performance, and modern life more broadly. Repetition as performativity plays a pivotal role in concentrating and translating the cultural and historical knowledge garnered from multiple bodies and numerous sites in the past into present contexts. As previously discussed, repetition carries, translates, and concretizes knowledge and experience across time and through space. In addition, produced through dynamic processes of citation, repetition enacts the potential for neither living in the past nor living without it. More than anything else, co Nhut teaches me, and more specifically Nhina, the historical, performative practice of generating possibility and optimistically availing contemporary conditions of change, transformation, and reinvention.

Co Nhut and the performance group women demonstrate and activate the power of performing what has already been said and done before. But in their reiterations, they are also doing and saying what has never been done before quite like this. They use the social power of performativity and the adaptive, inventive powers of performance. The women’s revolutionary experiences have taught them how to borrow from the past in order to (re)envision and (re)make new social realities. The women practice a performative politics of memory that is historical and hauntological but not bound within the past. The veterans’ remembering is produced in and through the present and is prospective in its social intention. They remember and teach their history to postwar generations in order to infuse the present and future with a politics of hauntological memory, in the prospect of creating possibilities for more just, less oppressive and violent, social realities.

Teaching Tradition in Postwar Vietnam: Women’s History and National Duty

Over the course of our conversations, I came to recognize co Nhut’s expert skill as a teacher of Vietnamese culture and history. On the public stage, in class, and in everyday
exchanges co Nhut deftly, passionately enacts a personalized, Party-supporting, “performance pedagogy.” As an esteemed member of the revolutionary generation, she is honored and obliged to teach the younger generations about their national history and their responsibilities to society. Co Nhut embraces her patriotic duty. Throughout her life she has sought out opportunities to participate in the edification of the Vietnamese public. One of the ways she currently fulfills her national-social duties is by teaching a Vietnamese women’s history course as part of a women’s leadership training program at Ho Chi Minh City’s Open University. Co Nhut also teaches history and social duty in her role as director of a skills training program for disabled and orphaned children, through her civic activities with the veterans’ performance group, as a national and international advocate for people with Agent Orange-related disabilities, and in everyday exchanges with friends, strangers, and family members. Co Nhut is a powerful teacher of cultural-national tradition, history, and social duty in large part because she so fully embodies the values and ideals about which she speaks.

By calling co Nhut’s teaching style a performance pedagogy, I mean to highlight the various ways she skillfully utilizes techniques of embodiment and practice to convey history, tradition, and a sense of inherited social responsibility from one generation to the next. Co Nhut teaches history and proper cultural-national behavior by simultaneously telling and showing. She teaches correct cultural-national practice by performing it: describing, demonstrating, and living her social, nationally-devoted values. For example, co Nhut teaches the female students in her Vietnamese women’s history class to behave as if they are the children of the nation’s mythic ancestor heroines. Her own generation’s revolutionary patriotism during the First and Second Indochina Wars acts as a prime example of how to
receive and fulfill the shared national-cultural duties bequeathed to subsequent generations by their ancestors. By telling stories about her and her comrades’ wartime struggles, and through her own unceasing performance of exemplary Vietnamese womanhood, co Nhut teaches her students the honor of receiving these histories and the national-filial duties (to those in the past, present, and future) bound up in practicing their traditions. Co Nhut teaches her students by showing them how to carry cultural-national memory forward through traditional rituals, national ceremony, and in the everyday minutia of how they live their daily lives.

I describe co Nhut as enacting a national, Party-supporting, but also personally-inflected performance pedagogy because she teaches the State’s version of history with and through the authority and specificity of her own personal experiences. I do not mean that co Nhut tells individual, or individualist, “personal narratives.” She doesn’t. Co Nhut makes national histories more powerful by telling non-personal, personal narratives. That is, the stories she tells may be her remembrances, but they are always socially contextualized. The stylization of her non-personal, personal narratives foregrounds, and ethically marks, their cultural construction. Co Nhut’s and the other veterans’ social-national orientation is not artificial. It is the result of deeply embedded Vietnamese, postcolonial, communist praxis embodied and rehearsed over a lifetime. In the following conversations, co Nhut, Nhina, and I discuss teaching proper femininity, cultural-national tradition, and social responsibility. Following Nhina’s insightful suggestion, we all perform as if co Nhut were our Vietnamese women’s history teacher. In this self-conscious, playful doubling, the performances of history co Nhut teaches in her classroom (by showing and telling) are echoed in the interview.
Inheriting Pride and Responsibility as the “great children” of National Heroines

In some ways the Vietnamese women’s history classes that co Nhut teaches can be seen as operating hegemonically, participating in the reification of the state’s historical narratives and interpellating citizens as loyal, properly gendered, national subjects. In other ways, and from co Nhut’s perspective, teaching women about the historical role of national heroines, sexual equality in the home and workplace, women’s legal rights, familial responsibilities, and proper devotion to the country is a way to help women empower themselves and understand their duties to family and nation. Neither of these views is fully satisfactory. Reducing Vietnamese women’s history and co Nhut’s classes to state propaganda, and the veterans’ gender performances to false consciousness, further evacuates power and agency from Vietnamese women. However, disregarding problematic aspects of proper gender performance and women’s history in Vietnam is also potentially unhelpful and/or damaging. Thus, following co Nhut’s stated desire to improve the status and treatment of women in Vietnam, I listen to the following narratives with the intention of examining some of the remarkable and problematic aspects of Vietnamese women’s history while also focusing on the performance-centered, potentially empowering dynamics of co Nhut’s teaching.

The program co Nhut directs was first described to me as a series of “women’s studies” or “women’s culture” classes. However, it should not be assumed that these fields in Vietnam share a similar disciplinary history with those in the United States. As Wendy Duong indicates, “[d]iscussing feminism” in Vietnam “can be an intellectually dangerous, sensitive, and imprecise task” in that “[t]he conceptual linguistic structure of the Vietnamese culture contains no framework for feminism as a doctrine [. . .]. There is no word for
'feminism’ or ‘feminist’ in the Vietnamese language” (194). More practical and skills-based than theoretical, co Nhut’s program helps promote women’s participation in government and in state-run organizations, companies, and governmental offices.

The class co Nhut teaches is created primarily for and comprised of women students, although there are often some men in the program. Co Nhut is quick to add that more men should take these classes. She feels men must also be better educated about women’s issues and rights if equality is to improve. Graduates of the women’s leadership program primarily go on to work in the southern region’s state-run organizations or, if already working in these positions, they come to the class as part of their continuing professional development training. Co Nhut teaches the “history of women’s movements” in Vietnam as well as technical skills for women in human resource management positions. In co Nhut’s description, “the goal is to help women, be aware of their duties, as a mother, as a wife in a family, as well as in the greater society.” Upon hearing this explanation, I had reservations about whether I would agree that these classes help to socially empower women. While meaning to help, are these courses moreover serving to police gender roles and bind women with duties to family and nation?

Vietnam has a rich tradition of great heroines and political leaders whose lives and stories are widely cherished, showered with public praise, and studied dutifully by every schoolchild. However, for all the talk of women’s liberation, Vietnam has yet to have a full-fledged women’s movement that is not subsumed within nationalist or state agendas.44 Too often discourses surrounding women’s needs, social conditions, and rights fall into overwhelmingly biologically-determined readings of sex and womanhood. In colonial times,

44 See Tai (Radicalism), Pettus (Between), Turner (Even), Quinn-Judge (“Women”) for more on women’s participation in revolutionary activities and how they struggled with the question of what to do about women’s rights.
during the early stages of communist revolution, “[d]espite all their arguments to show women why it was not only their patriotic duty but also in their interest to become involved in revolutionary work,” Marxist nationalists including Ho Chi Minh “never truly addressed the question of whether women would be better off if they subsumed their fight for sexual equality to the fight for national independence” (Tai, Radicalism 212). Even in the early twentieth-century as women from wealthy families gained more access to education and began to organize around issues of sexual equality, “women knew too well: that the oppression of women started at home,” within contemporary and longstanding Vietnamese cultural traditions, and was not simply a feudal relic nor a colonial or capitalist import that could easily be washed away with talk of liberation or equality (212).

Starting with broad questions to see where co Nhut takes them, I begin by asking “[s]o, what should I know about women’s history and women’s movements in Vietnam?” Nhina reshapes and improves my question by proposing it as a performance-centered imaginary scene. Nhina suggests that co Nhut speak to me as if I were one of the students in her class. By reformulating the question, Nhina helps us address what I should know about Vietnamese women’s history in a formal sense, but also interpretively, how I should understand that history if I were a Vietnamese woman. This approach also positions co Nhut in the explicit role as our teacher. Energetically, to me and co Nhut, Nhina suggests, “[a]h, maybe do you want to say, what if you are her student?” She continues:

Nhina: Yah, suppose you are her student?

Co Nhut/Nhina: You are expected to come to learn about Female traditions.
I mean the tradition,
Of fighting against invaders.
[
And she would like you to develop a lot of
Pride in,
[Being] the great children of some
Heroine
Of history.

“You”—I-co Nhut-Nhina-Vietnamese women, are the “great children” of warrior-heroines. I quickly realize there are no comparable myths in my own historical imaginary. I do not understand myself as the descendant of any warrior-heroines, familial, national, cultural, and/or mythic.

What would it be like growing up feeling the force of these ancestors within my own life? Nhina nods her head in recognition of these familiar stories as co Nhut speaks of Vietnam’s heroines. Does Nhina feel the filial connection co Nhut describes? How does she think of the Trung Sisters and the heroic women of the colonial and American War periods? If younger generations of Vietnamese women are to understand themselves as descendants of great heroines, this social imaginary must be mobilized through various forms of performance pedagogy. Her class teaches women to understand themselves, or remember themselves into direct filial-national relation to ancient and recent pasts. She teaches her students to think of themselves historically, to understand themselves as part of a Vietnam’s heritage of national, historical agents.

In this short response, the “tradition” of “fighting against invaders” resurfaces again, this time more directly oriented around women, linking the nation’s ancestral heroines to
contemporary women through tropes of filial-national duty. With the invocation of filial relationships, co Nhut marks individuals’ responsibility and duty to the nation. Tai explains, traditionally “Confucian social theory conceived of the country as a family writ large,” so that “filial piety and family harmony were the twin bases of social and political stability” (*Radicalism* 15). Reframed notions of Confucian filial piety and harmony, as duties to family and country, continues as a strong force in Vietnamese society, having been utilized and reshaped by the communists from its “feudal” Sino-Vietnamese origins into their own, acceptable formulation of nationalism. Giving more background as to the powerful cultural meanings bound up in the evocation of filial relationships Philip Taylor states:

[i]n Vietnamese thinking, children are indebted to their parents. The birth of a child is more than a natural or biological event. It is the opening transition in a life-long relationship of reciprocity, during which one must display the proper gratitude and fully discharge oneself to his or her existential debt. This debt is often felt most directly to one’s mother, who went through the pain of childbirth. One contracts further debts by being nurtured, principally by one’s mother. Into adulthood one must return the debt to one’s parents (*tra no*); and when the parents are aged and infirm, the relationship is reversed and one must nurture his parents and, after their death, continue to feed and house their spirits. (99)

Taylor’s description highlights the contractual debt owed to parents and ancestors, and within this relationship, the particular significance of women. It is also important to note how, through Confucian traditions, individuals understand themselves as socially, transgenerationally enmeshed and interdependent. All of these aspects of filial piety are found in co Nhut’s pedagogy.

Following the Vietnamese communist practice of entwining and extending the filial duty people feel toward their own ancestors with that of the nation’s lineage of communist-
nationalized patriots, the students in co Nhut’s class are positioned as “the great children” of heroines. Co Nhut’s class utilizes a performance-centered pedagogy where students are expected to behave as if they are the children of ancient and recent national heroines. Understanding oneself as the child of national heroines brings honor and compels duty. Students are reminded that the filial devotion owed to their families is akin to the debt owed to their nation’s ancestors, and by affiliation, the state. As Vietnamese citizens, they are the “children” of the nation-state, and must therefore demonstrate proper fidelity and thanks for sacrifices made in the past. Co Nhut’s classroom pedagogy is performative in the way it asks students to embody, feel and properly respond to, the contractual power of national-filial narratives.

**Vietnam’s National Pantheon of Warrior Heroines**

When I ask which famous heroines I should know about co Nhut cites a familiar list of national patriots starting with mythic figures that predate a modern, postcolonial Vietnamese state by nearly two thousand years, and ending with well-known patriots from the French and American struggles. Co Nhut names the Trung Sisters, Trieu Au, Vo Thi Sau, Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, and Nguyen Thi Dinh as those whom Nhina, her students, and I

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45 For more on filial piety and Confucianism’s relationship to anti-colonial struggles, see Tai (*Radicalism*).

46 In Vietnam, it is believed that “historical hero figures as guardian deities continue to watch over the nation’s affairs and, thus, transcend and tie together past and present” (Giebel 86). Giebel explains that “inclusion into (and exclusion from) the national pantheon [of ancestral guardian spirits] was (and still is) an ongoing process” (86). Deciding whose spirits “should be ‘in’ and who should be ‘out,’” has always been an “eminently political and self-serving” endeavor (86). Malarney explains that “[t]hroughout both wars, the nation and the military necessity of saving and protecting it, were placed in indisputably sacred space. The wars were not simply described as wars (*chien tranh*) in official discourse. The French war was described as *khoi nghia*, rendered in one dictionary as to ‘rise up in arms (against oppressive rule).’ The American War was described as the ‘War of National Salvation Against the Americans’ (*Chien Tranh Chong My Cuu Nuoc*). Dying and suffering in the name of such a cause, which was similar to the great historical struggles of the Vietnamese people, were given noble and transcendent qualities” (“Fatherland” 48-49). See Giebel’s and Malarney’s chapters in Tai’s *Country of Memory* for more on the national pantheon of historical deities and the Party’s attempts to alter and utilize beliefs about death and spirits to serve the war effort.
must recognize and study. It is common knowledge that all of these figures, save Nguyen Thi Dinh, died prematurely, and willingly, as a result of their patriotism, and are valorized by the state as national martyrs. The Trung Sisters are especially beloved, and have a national holiday, numerous temples, shrines, festivals, and local cults devoted to preserving their memory and honoring their brave and dutiful sacrifices. All of the women Co Nhut lists, and many others, are profusely commemorated throughout Vietnam in the form of statues, charms, paintings, photographs, historical accounts, poetry, oral sayings, and direct quotations. Co Nhut uses the stories of Vietnam’s heroic women, in the ancient and recent past, to demonstrate for her students the importance of female leadership in all aspects of society, “all playing different roles in the process of developing our country.” She feels it is critical to teach others, especially but not exclusively women, about these heroines’ “spirit, soul, and strength.”

The Trung Sisters (Trung Trac and Trung Nhi or Hai Ba Trung), sometimes described as descendents of the Hung Kings (the mythologized founders of Vietnamese nationhood), are said to have led a successful insurrection against the Chinese in the year 39 or 40 A.D. in retaliation for the murder of Trung Trac’s husband. The Trung sisters ruled until the Chinese overthrew them two years later and the sisters “committed suicide—in aristocratic style—by throwing themselves into a river” (Karnow 100). Trieu Au, audaciously independent and often referred to as the Vietnamese Joan of Arc, is a character of truly mythologized proportion and “according to an eighteenth-century account, was nine feet tall,

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47 Pelley gives an in-depth account of the way in which the Trung Sisters became nationalized historical figures (143-145, 159, 172-173, 176-182, 191).

48 Refer to Pelley’s critical, highly detailed historiography of Vietnam’s postcolonial history for more on the construction of the Hung Kings as the founders of Vietnamese civilization and nationhood in the third millennium B.C.E. and their use as nationalist figures.
with breasts three feet long,” that she slung over her shoulder as she rode into battle (Turner 27). She is said to have led a “revolt against China in 248 A.D. [. . .] wearing golden armor and riding an elephant as she led a thousand men into battle,” but defeated in the end, she too commits suicide (Karnow 100).49

Trieu Au “is quoted in history books as having replied to an inquiry about her marriage plans: ‘I wish to ride a strong wind and tame fierce waves, kill sharks in the Eastern sea, force back the Chinese armies and throw off the chains of slavery; how could I possibly accept to be some man’s servant?’” (Phan Huy Le et al., qtd. in Tai, Country 147). However, though Trieu Au and the Trung Sisters often appear as valiant warriors, their mythic embodiment of female nationalism is not simply an exaltation of strength. In many tellings, the women’s “natural” female qualities of modesty, helplessness, and bodily and mental weakness are what bring their downfall, while other innate womanly virtues such as purity, self-sacrifice, and loyalty become their redemption, inspiring their proper social actions (often in the form of committing suicide). For example, “[a]ccording to some stories,” Trieu Au “is as brave as a man in battle, but as weak as a woman when confronted with dirt and chaos” so that “[w]hen her armies were defeated because the enemy had offended her feminine sensibilities by sending unwashed ruffians into the field, she ran off and killed herself” (Turner 27).

The Trung Sisters’, Trieu Au’s, and other mythic Vietnamese women’s stories exist in many variations and can be traced and analyzed in relation to the different historical

49 Pelley makes an important point regarding the way these stories were taken up by the communists during wartime. It is interesting that, despite the Trung Sisters’ and Trieu Au’s eventual failure to secure Vietnam from Chinese rule, the women are still seen as successful heroines. Pelley notes that the eventual failure of the sisters’ rebellions “did not diminish what the Trung sisters had achieved.” Rather, communist historians “contrasted [the sisters’] heroism with the fecklessness of other Vietnamese” and “emphasized that in the contemporary struggle against the United States, revolutionary leaders benefited from what the Trung sisters tragically lacked—popular support and a powerful military” (181). This mythological imagery and rhetoric was used to support the idea that North Vietnam’s “struggle would surely succeed” (181).
periods in which they were popularized. The narratives change greatly depending on the sentiments of those who periodically retell, rewrite, and reuse the women’s stories to serve political agendas within a given historical time (Pelley 2002; Tai 2001; Turner 1998). For instance, “both oral tradition and Confucian historiography turned [the Trung Sisters] into paragons of feminine meekness and modesty [. . .] timid women who set aside feminine decorum to avenge the wrongful death of the elder sister’s husband and, in the process, overthrow Chinese tyranny” (Tai, Country 173-4). Later, the famous anti-colonialist nationalist Phan Boi Chau, describes the Trung Sisters acts as derived from their deep sense of patriotism. While the more strictly Confucian versions can be read as reinforcing women’s proper virtues, duty, and subordination to her husband, Phan Boi Chau’s account emphasizes the sisters’ nationalism precisely “at a time when women’s support for a nationalist revolution against the French was badly needed” (Turner 26). Many versions of these stories circulate in print and as oral accounts within Vietnam today. The women and their actions are painted as more nationalist (battling in the name of the nation-state), as obediently Confucian (battling in the name of a husband), or as exemplifying communist ideals as early “leaders of an international and class-based attack on feudalism,” as showing women’s natural weaknesses, properly displaying virtuous femininity or defying it, and so on, depending on the teller and their current symbolic needs (Nguyen Minh’s views recounted in Pelley 180).

50 The Trung Sisters’ and Trieu Au’s stories “have been used to explain the popular saying ‘When war comes, even the women must fight’ (giac den nha, dan ba cung danh),” which Tai sees as indicating that “[u]nless war comes so close to them that they no other alternative, women have no business fighting” (Country 174).

51 To read more about the historical meanings and contemporary usages of images and stories about women such as the Trung Sisters and Trieu Au, as well as to compare the differences and similarities in their interpretations by Vietnamese studies scholars and historians, see Pelley (143-145; 176-182); Tai (Country 173-174); and Turner (24-28).
In more recent, twentieth-century history, Vo Thi Sau, whose story will be discussed at greater length later on, was a teenage rebel nationalist, and purportedly the first woman revolutionary executed by the French. She was imprisoned and killed on Con Dao at the age of sixteen. Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, an ardent advocate for women’s equality who often represented Vietnam’s communist interests abroad, was the highest ranked women in the Indochinese Communist Party at its founding in 1930. She was executed by the French in 1941 and is attributed with having said, “[a] rosy-cheeked woman, here I am fighting side by side with you men. The prison is my school, the sword my child, the gun my husband” (Turner 19).\footnote{52 For an exceptional personal account of Nguyen Thi Minh Khai’s and Nguyen Tri Duc’s revolutionary work and simultaneous struggles for gender equality, see Quinn-Judge (“Women” 245-269). For additional reading on women’s rights struggles during the revolutionary colonial period and Nguyen Thi Minh Khai’s role in shaping nationalist and women’s equality discourses at that time, see Tai (Radicalism, 244-245).} Nguyen Thi Dinh, the leader of several famous peasant uprisings in the Mekong Delta (including the Ben Tre Uprising in 1945), was a founder of the NLF and made its Deputy Commander during the American War, she later became the president of the Women’s Union, served on the Party Central Committee and as a National Assembly delegate (19).\footnote{53 More on the remarkable life of Nguyen Thi Dinh can be found in Turner (35-37, 126, 130).} Pelley notes Nguyen Thi Dinh as “one of the few women who attained a high level of authority during and after the American War” (181). Notably, all three of these contemporary heroines are southerners like co Nhut and the other performance group veterans.

**Gendered Legacies of National-Filial Devotion**

The Trung Sisters are often cited as the first in the nation’s lineage of female revolutionaries. While co Nhut was organizing and fighting against the American and ARVN soldiers in the south, the state’s official historians were working to give
“metahistorical meaning” to the Vietnamese past, such that “[b]y evoking the mythicized memory of the Trung sisters” it was suggested that “twentieth-century Vietnamese who struggled against American aggression shared the eminence of first-century heroes who had resisted the Chinese” (Pelley 145). Their story was and is still used to illustrate the “indomitable spirit of the Vietnamese,” specifically demonstrating the “‘capacity of women’ (khả năng của phụ nữ)” to “unite all Vietnamese against an external foe” (180).

For co Nhut, the sisters demonstrate “the development of their love, of their own country, and their love for their own family [. . .] and develops a strong hatred for the enemy.” Co Nhut notes how ba Trung, the elder sister, took revenge on the Chinese for killing her husband, leading an army that included women, in a valiant fight against the enemies. Her version of the Trung Sisters’ story highlights women’s national and filial devotion in terms of “love.” Curious about how these figures are used to inspire more specific directives, I ask co Nhut:

Rivka: And what is the most
Important lesson
For the students to learn,
About the Trung Sisters?

Co Nhut/Nhina: She would like students to
Acknowledge this
Ideology,
Like,
As female,
As women,
In this country,
Society,
You are expected to get your love for
Family,
And your love for country
Mixed together.
I mean,
At all times.
I mean,
Even now,
When you are enjoying peace
Full time.

Rivka: Even now.
Okay, so this is the message
That she feels is important for
Women today?

Co Nhut/Nhina: Yes.
The love of
Country and the
Love
Of family
Mixed together.

Rivka: Do you love the country,
Like you would love the family?

(Music blaring from a car backing up in the street outside overpowers
Co Nhut/Nhina: It is,
I mean,
Indeed,
Impossible,
For
A person to
Distinguish the love for
The country,
And a love for
Their family.
I mean,
Distinguish,
So clearly,
About that.
It is impossible for them.
I mean,
To her.

“At all times,” in war and in peace, “you are supposed to get your love for family, and your love for country all mixed together” co Nhut explains. This is the primary message co Nhut wishes to emphasize through the Trung Sisters’ narrative. This directive was initiated during the First and Second Indochina Wars; co Nhut feels it is still an important, necessary lesson for postwar generations.

Pelley explains that “[t]o encourage a greater sense of the nation,” official Marxist historians deliberately worked to construct an image of the family-state that allowed scholars
such as Vu Nhu Lam to assert, “Vietnamese should obey the state as they obeyed their fathers and mothers” (Pelley 12). Although the communists described themselves as being vehemently opposed to “feudal” Confucian laws and practices, such a reference to familial and national obedience cannot help but call on Confucian sentiments. As Pelley notes, though “[c]onventional Marxists normally reject nationalism and condemn the reactionary image of the family-state, which naturalizes the idea of hierarchy,” Vietnamese scholars often “depicted the nation and the state as extensions of the family” as a means of mobilizing and utilizing hierarchy and filial duty to support communist nationalism (12). When it was to their strategic advantage, on the battlefield or in the organizing and directing of society, Vietnamese communist leaders often drew on Confucian themes and ideological structures as a means of rallying people to their own causes.54

In Confucian terms, obedience and duty take on very different forms for women than men. The Confucian “Three Submissions” for women “mandated a women’s obedience first to her father, then her husband, and finally her eldest son” (Pettus 9). Although the communists overturned many Confucian laws, deeming them “backward” and oppressive toward women, amending social practices and naturalized beliefs regarding “innate” sexual

54 Duiker looks further into Ho’s use of Confucian frameworks in building and guiding communist revolution and “national reunification.” He explains that “[t]he main difference” between Ho Chi Minh’s and Lenin’s “ethical rules of conduct” “lay in the spirit behind [their] [. . .] revolutionary standards. Where Lenin assumed that contemporary standards of morality had little relevance to the revolutionary code of conduct, and indeed that on some occasions there were irreducible contradictions between the two, the ethical core in Nguyen Ai Quoc’s list of behavioral norms was strongly reminiscent of traditional Confucian morality: be thrifty, be friendly but impartial, resolutely correct errors, be prudent, respect learning, study and observe, avoid arrogance and conceit, and be generous. Indeed except for references to the party, Quoc’s revolutionary commandments could easily be accepted as behavioral norms in any devout Confucian home” (Ho 135). Duiker continues to speculate about Ho’s self-consciousness regarding the utilization of Confucian models for communist revolutionary causes. He conjectures that “[i]t might be said, of course, that Nguyen Ai Quoc’s [Ho’s] list of revolutionary ethics was simply a means of dressing up new concepts in familiar clothing; it is not unlikely that the thought crossed his mind. After all, it was obvious that the bulk of the early recruits to his cause came from scholar-gentry families. Although most had rejected traditional Confucian ideology, they were still influenced subliminally by many of its core values, and Quoc always sought to tailor his message to the proclivities of his audience. Still, the standards of personal conduct [. . .] should not be dismissed as window dressing” (135-136).
differences proved far more difficult. This was especially the case since the “naturalness” of gender differences between women and men was largely unquestioned. Although the communists may have helped improve conditions for women in some regards, Pettus gives a biting explanation of how the Party, in the most fundamental ways, failed to truly alter gender ideologies and practices during revolutionary times, and how these foundational nationalist, paternalist ideologies continue to perpetuate women’s subjugation:

[t]he Indochinese Communist Party’s (ICP) ascendance within the anti-colonial factions of the 1930s established a new alliance between the women’s movement and the nationalist cause. Vietnamese Marxists linked progressive change in women’s treatment and legal status (for instance, women’s right to vote, freedom of marriage and divorce, and equal pay for equal labor) to society’s liberation from a whole system of colonial and class oppression. Yet while party leaders subsumed the women’s cause within a larger popular struggle, they did not abandon the idea of a separate female morality. The communists were prepared to eradicate the harshest Confucian traditions [the Three Submissions] [. . .] but they sought to retain and rework milder patriarchal codes. They saw no contradiction in assigning women’s inferior status to social forces, while, at the same time, exalting women’s ‘natural’ virtues of endurance, faithfulness, compassion and self-sacrifice as invaluable to the national cause. These feminine moral attributes allowed the revolutionary movement to ground its emancipatory promises in primordial sentiments and sacred traditions based on the patriotic struggle of oppressor and against oppressor, victim against persecutor, meek against powerful. The more the party praised the brave and selfless contributions of mothers, wives, and daughters to the national case, the more the Vietnamese woman’s prescribed qualities took the form of a national obligation that would secure her subjugation in the new nation. (emphasis added, 8-9)

The enduring belief in innate moral and behavioral differences between women and men proves a fundamental problem for women’s attainment of social equality then and now. What could be a more powerful rhetorical strategy, deliberate or not, than to subjugate women through excessive praise? How does one escape, or remake, the powerful discourses that bind women by means of exaltation?
The Party’s “milder patriarchal codes” did not abandon the notion of “natural” feminine morality and virtue nor the useful social organizing model of Confucian social directives, but rather remodeled them into forms that appeared more equitable, and that first and foremost, served the communist leaders’ nationalist needs. For example, although the Three Submissions were overturned by the northern communist state, during the American War awards were given to women who displayed the “‘Three Competencies’ (Ba Dam Dang)” which were comprised of “competence in replacing men in production work; mobilizing relatives into the army; and competence in fighting if necessary,” or being properly “[l]oyal, courageous, and resourceful” fulfilling devotional obligations to the nation rather than one’s husband (Tai, Country 176). As Tai critically notes, “[o]f the three virtues [] recognized, only the second [courageousness] is not traditionally associated with femininity” (176). Loyalty and resourcefulness are considered women’s natural qualities that, at this time of need, instead of being directed toward the household (husband and husband’s family), are ultimately in service of the nation-state’s war for “national salvation.”

The Three Competencies movement, also translated as the “Three Responsibilities,” was launched in the north in 1965 by the Women’s Union to help women “harmoniously” interweave “the party’s goals of social and scientific improvement, display[] courage in the face of enemy threat, and yet never lose sight of her primary identity as a wife, daughter, and mother” in terms serving and supporting the nation (Pettus 45). The similarities between the Three Submissions and the Three Competencies, in form, instrumentality, and in the taken-for-granted “natural” qualities of femininity, provide just one example of how, despite claiming to overthrow Confucian laws, what the Party essentially did was overwrite them (Confucian social organization and sex-roles were just too useful to throw away). It
continues to be the case in Vietnam that women carry different social duties and expectations than men during times of war and peace, and that of course, communist revolution and “national reunification” did not inherently bring sexual equity.

**Devoted to the Fatherland**

If a woman is asked who her husband is, she should reply: “his surname is ‘Viet,’ and his given name is ‘Nam’” quips a well-known Vietnamese saying. The playfully serious saying embodies Confucian and twentieth-century nationalist ideologies. The saying draws on Confucian tenets, specifically the Three Submissions, stating that a woman must always be under the governance of a man, whether it be her father, husband, or son. Combining the familiar Confucian reference, of the necessary localization of women’s loyalties and duties, with a modern nationalist response, the saying steadfastly answers back that Vietnamese women are willfully wedded to the land. She is a devoted daughter of the Fatherland. She is mother to the nation. She is married to Vietnam. During the American War this phrase responded to various problems regarding the disruption of women’s traditional roles and behaviors. When pertaining to young southern fighters like co Nhut and the other veterans, the saying served to address the fact that these women were: remaining unmarried longer (perhaps indefinitely), fighting a war rather than managing a family, and enduring the loss or absence of their husbands. The saying serves to inseparably weld women’s devotion toward family with sacrifice to the nation during times of war. “You are expected to get your love for country, and your love for family all mixed together,” explains co Nhut. It is women’s duty to father, husband, son and nation to remain chaste, devoted, loyal, and willing to give everything in the name of the “Fatherland.”
The use of familial associations in reference to the nation and state can be seen as growing from Confucian social and ideological formulations, from the interconnecting tradition of ancestor devotion and worship, especially as both are bound up in common Vietnamese speech. In the most basic sense, in lieu of pronouns Vietnamese language uses an array of familial references (ba “grandmother,” ong “grandfather,” anh “older brother,” chi “older sister,” em “younger sister or brother,” etc.) to address family members, friends, colleagues and strangers depending on the sex, age, social position and relationship between the speakers. Hierarchy between the sexes is also brought into linguistic formations: a husband is anh (older, more experienced, brother) and a wife is em (younger, less experienced, sister).

Husband and wife generally refer to themselves and each other using the anh and em titles, which “may automatically affirm[s] the man’s social and sexual power” (Duong 206). Most women prefer to be referred to as em, or call themselves em when socially fitting, as the term is bound up with desired qualities of feminine sexuality: youth, innocence, gentleness, demure nature, and beauty. “In today’s Vietnam, generally, women may feel the need to refer to themselves in the first person as ‘em,’ because of their subordinate place in certain social settings,” Wendy Duong explains, “she may feel obligated to use ‘em’ to refer to herself in addressing a higher ranked male or the person in control, thereby [] ‘lowering’ herself into an inferior status” (206). Through popular language, Confucian socio-philosophical structures, nationalized myths and official history formations, society is often viewed as, and named in terms of being, an extended family, organized by elaborate myths.

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55 The familialization of the Vietnamese state “cannot be traced exclusively to political designs because vernacular speech [. . .] makes these figures of speech etymologically correct” as “[t]he vernacular expression for state—nha nuoc—is based on the word for ‘house’ (nha) and even ‘spouse’” and “the term for state (quoc gia) is the root for family (gia)” (12). See also Pelley’s discussion of political attempts to linguistically “defamilialize” the state (157-161).
and hierarchies of the feminine. One can see how the government can benefit from filial-social organizing forces by translating these practices and beliefs into nationalist affiliations and agendas, encouraging it to “indeed, [become] impossible, for a person to distinguish the love for the country and the love for their family. I mean distinguish, so clearly, about that. It is impossible.” This is the discourse reiterated performatively throughout co Nhut’s performances of self, history, and gender.

**Remembering History and Learning “where they are expected to go”**

Co Nhut’s aim is to help women “get to know about where they are expected to go.” She describes her wish to “guide them back to their history,” in order to help them discover where to “go” and how to continue to make the present and future:

Co Nhut/Nhina: Co Nhut would like,

All of the young ladies,

[...]

All students, in general,

And all ladies, in particular,

To get to know

About

Where they are expected to go,

[..]

To fulfill her mission like that,

She is supposed to

Guide them,

Back to their history,

Of women,
Of women’s treatment,
The history of women.

Rivka: So these women today,
Learn where they are supposed
To go in the future,
By learning about
The past?

Co Nhut/Nhina: Yes.

With great conviction, co Nhut claims that in order to learn how to live their life, Vietnamese people today must have an historical understanding, or rather, a historical memory; they must feel the force of the national past within their present life as if it was their own memory.

For co Nhut, history is personal, in the Vietnamese familial sense. It is a past full of intimate, ancestral spirits. The now-living owe their lives, their autonomous nation and country, to those who were once-living, those whose spirits continue to live vibrantly as protecting ghosts, embedded in the mountains, rice fields, homes, and even in the rhythm of people’s hearts. Co Nhut believes young people, young women especially, must learn history in order to share a sense of spirit with their national ancestors. If young women today feel the memory of the nation as their own lifeblood, they will know how best to repeat and rearticulate the “national character,” “national essence,” and “national spirit” so trenchantly embodied in their ancestral heroines. They will “know [] where they are expected to go,” as part of Vietnam’s future.
Co Nhut is a kind of intermediary, translator and teacher, between past and present. She “guide[s]” women in their understanding of history so that they may learn, translate, carry, and recreate Vietnamese tradition into the future through performances of remembering. To co Nhut and the other veterans, women today must understand their own lives as historical, in particular female, nationalist, communist, Vietnamese, ways. As discussed above, the familial composition of history, and the gendered, national obligations that accompany filial historical memory and social duty, can be particularly oppressive for women. However, this intense, relational bond with those in the past can also be a positive force in women’s social and personal life. For co Nhut, national heroines helped inspire her revolutionary quest for freedom, her survival in prison, and her current social activism. Remembering herself in relation to heroine ancestors enabled co Nhut to find optimism, perform survival, and create possibilities for social transformation. These are the powerful, political forces of memory co Nhut performs in the pedagogical contexts of home, interview, public stage, and classroom. For co Nhut remembering is not an option, it is a necessary process of self and social survival.

**Ancestral Haunting**

The filial-ancestral force co Nhut embodies and performs resonates with Derrida’s *hauntology*. It reflects on an ethos and practice of reckoning with spirits in the pursuit of learning to live more justly in relation to others. In Vietnam, specters of the past (and future) whose lives transcend temporal and mortal boundaries takes on diverse formations and functions. Relations with spirits and transactions with ghosts can be motivated by individuals’ economic needs, the State’s desire for social control, a daughter’s loving-obligation to care for her parents, or all three at the same time. In other words, all spirit
relationships are impure; they are politically and culturally imbued with diverse meanings and contingencies. Living with hauntological consciousness does not take a single form or style, nor is it inherently a more ethical, humane, and socially just practice. But, as Derrida suggests, living with hauntological consciousness can be a way of conjuring and making more just social relations and realities.

In Vietnam exchanges with ghosts and spirits are forms of inter- and trans-subjectivity considered necessary to the equanimity of the individual self and the social body. Traditional filial practice or hauntological consciousness promotes recognition of diachronic and synchronic social interdependence. Living with ghosts suggests self-conscious recognition that: I do not live just for and by myself; my corporeal constitution is not permanent, singular, or stable; my thoughts and knowledge are not simply mine; I depend on others in order to know, live, and be in the world; and so I must recognize my responsibility, in certain socially humane ways, to those others who are presently living or otherwise present in/as spirit. Hauntological consciousness is a social economy of interdependence that cuts through borders between self and others, life and death, near and far, past, present, and future. As Derrida claims, it is not possible to learn to live from oneself and by oneself. Only by allowing oneself to be inhabited by ghosts, learning from the other and from death can we learn to live. This is an ethics, a politics of hauntological heterodidactics between life and death, a conversation between those present, when presence is not limited to the temporality or geography of the living. Co Nhut’s personal practice and pedagogy makes hauntological consciousness an explicitly performative politics of memory. She remembers, enacts, and teaches the social productivities of performativity and the transformational, interventionist possibilities bound up in each performance of tradition.
In her classes, and with me and Nhina, co Nhut asks her students to let their lives become infused by the spirits of their national heroines. Vietnamese women today must “get to know about where they are expected to go” in their lives, and co Nhut’s “mission” is to “guide them, back to their history, of women” in order that they might learn how to live. For many Vietnamese, and for co Nhut, it is necessary to participate in these exchanges with familial and national ancestors, at the edges of life, beyond singular subjectivity and in the realm of spirits, in order to live ethically in relation with others. In Vietnamese ancestral practices, one is accountable to, and in different ways responsible to, those in the past, those presently living, and those yet to come. As Derrida similarly states, justice does not seem possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born, or who are already dead. This form of trans-temporal recognition of and responsibility to others is central to Derrida’s hauntology, to Vietnamese beliefs and practices regarding filial piety and postcolonial communist revolution, and to my extension and reformulation of co Nhut’s hauntological consciousness as the ground of a performative politics of memory.

The Artistry of Performing Tradition

Co Nhut teaches her students to let the spirit of Vietnamese heroines inform their thoughts, motivate their lives, and move their actions. Young Vietnamese women are encouraged to think and do like them, for them, with them, to cultivate an historical imagination that lights and ignites the women’s daily lives. Living with this kind of hauntological awareness and responsibility requires certain forms of performativity. Performativity is and depends on repetition, as a practice of sameness and alteration. Co Nhut enact a retrospective and prospective performativity of optimism that is precisely
citational yet adaptive. Co Nhut describes this process as one of careful cultural and historical “integration.” Later she depicts women’s skills of practicing and adapting Vietnamese traditions as forms of artistry.

One cannot live the same kind of life as the Trung Sisters or Nguyen Thi Minh Khai. Contemporary conditions are different. But one can aspire to live like, and to think with them, to allow one’s present actions and thoughts to be inflected by these ancestors, these “national spirits.” Curious as to what particular values these spirits might impart, I ask Co Nhut:

Rivka: And what are the main Values, That women should learn From this history?

Co Nhut/Nhina: Ah, She would like to raise the topic, On integration, But still keep your own Distinguished features As a Vietnamese. Because young people these days, And young women in particular, They deals with lots of, I mean, New air from Western countries. […] New culture.
New technology.
Everything is very new to them,
Because they, we, we got [the] open market right now.
And she would like young people to
Choose among them,
What is suitable for them,
What is the best for them.
[ . . . ]

But ah,
Still keep your distinguished features
As a Vietnamese.

Rivka: And what are some of those
Distinguished features
Of Vietnamese?

“She would like to raise the topic, o[f] integration,” explains Nhina, of “still keep[ing] your own distinguished features as a Vietnamese,” within the changing, “new” contexts of the present. Through and with Nhina, co Nhut expresses her view that “young people these days [. . .] they deal[] with lots of [. . .] new air from Western countries [. . .] everything is very new to them, because they, we, we got [the] open market right now.” In this passage, Nhina stumbles between she-your-they-them-we in her attempt to simultaneously translate and internalize what co Nhut is saying about “young people” of her generation. Co Nhut is talking about and to Nhina. In translation, Nhina is speaking about herself to herself and to me. Nhina’s slippages and uncertain footing mark her recognition of herself in co Nhut’s
descriptions and directives. Co Nhut wants Nhina and her students to recognize and take responsibility for their roles in shaping their society. To do this properly and ethically they must know their past. Knowing the past is not simply a matter of memorization, but of internalization, performed duty, and dialogue with national ancestral spirits to whom you are responsible, and to whom you must answer for your present actions. Enjoy breathing the "new air" from other places, but do not breathe too deeply that you forget who you are, you must remember your cultural roots (nguon goc van hoa).

Co Nhut intervenes on a "new" Vietnam, one defined by building tensions between maintaining traditions, autonomy, and state power, and emerging transnational technologies, ideas, governing structures, economies, and cultures. As Tai notes, "[t]ensions between images of Vietnam as either an urbanizing, modernizing country or a fundamentally peasant one are sometimes couched in gender imagery" (Country 9). One implication of gendered national imagery is that women have the double, often paradoxical, burden of representing, practicing, and securing both primordial tradition and modernizing social developments at the same time.

Teaching a course in women’s studies and history, co Nhut embraces the familial-national duties of women. Co Nhut “uphold[s] the shifting ideals of the nation” through her performance-centered pedagogy and gender performances (Pettus 7). However, she does so in ways that empower women to participate actively in making their futures. She teaches Nhina and her other students how to practice their traditions and how to transform them.

Dogs in the street bark loudly. Nhina and I strain to hear co Nhut’s voice. She continues, noting Vietnamese women, “know how to balance between the duties for country and the duties of family”:
Co Nhut/Nhina: In terms of culture,

Vietnamese ladies

They are all,

Artists,

Who are,

Who are able to preserve,

Preserve and spread,

Our own traditions,

Our own customs.

Co Nhut describes women’s abilities to properly “preserve and spread, our own traditions” as a form of artistry. She names tradition an art, or arts of practice. As she says, “[i]n terms of culture, Vietnamese ladies [] are all, artists.” Co Nhut teaches young women their history and traditions, but, in so doing, instructs them in the performative and performance-oriented crafts of translating, transposing, and remaking Vietnamese culture over time and within changing contexts. Theorizing the practices of everyday modern life, de Certeau calls art a “way of making” or “making do” that uses techniques of “bricolage” to “re-use” and refashion the old into the new (de Certeau using Levi-Strauss’s term, Practice xv). Co Nhut teaches tradition as a practice of bricolage and way of making contemporary life through the translation of tradition. By calling the performance of tradition an art, co Nhut “draw[s] attention to the specific value of [practicing] a politics of cultural production” (Bhabha, Location 29). In the case of the veterans, the arts of tradition are practiced through their performative, hauntological and prospective, politics of memory. Co Nhut teaches the arts and agencies of tradition.
Performing the Female (Im)possible?

While the image of women as artisans of social and cultural life can be seen as empowering, it can also be viewed as a strong prescription of what women must do and must do well, as art, in order to be dutiful wives, obedient daughters, and nurturing, self-sacrificial mothers. Are there any other tenable choices for women? “Confucian tradition defined women only in terms of her relationship to male authority (as a daughter to her father, a wife to her husband, a mother to her son)” this formulation and definition of women by way of their relationship to men, or those whom they selflessly serve and nurture, is still pervasive. While speaking with co Nhut and the other veterans I found myself continuously wondering: to what extent do the veterans’ narratives and performances make powerful alternatives for Vietnamese women possible, and to what extent to they double for a female impossible, normalizing, disciplining, and reifying paternalistic social values and expectations?

Following her call for women to balance cultural integration and traditionalism, co Nhut describes the duties of Vietnamese women “stated by Ho Chi Minh during wartime.” The “Eight Golden Word” are paired into four qualities describing both the nature and duties of Vietnamese women during the American War: anh hung (heroic), bat khuat (unyielding), trung hau (faithful, kind-hearted), dam dang (resourceful). I see these emblematic words each week when I attend the veterans’ rehearsals at the Southern Vietnamese Women’s Museum. They stand in gold letters at the bottom of the large stone statue of an old woman in front of the museum entrance. These words seem to describe perfectly the performance group women. Or, in terms of prescription, the veterans have perfectly assumed and completely achieved living and becoming these ideals.
As co Nhut speaks, I think of the Confucian “Four Virtues” (*tu duc*) pertaining to women: “*cong* (good management), *dung* (decorous comportment), *ngon* (harmonious speech), and *hanh* (appropriate behavior)” (Tai, *Country* 192). The Eight Golden Words of wartime are in many ways a revised version of the Four Virtues. Although the wartime attributes have a stronger, more liberated, even masculine, ring to them, they bear striking similarity to the Four Virtues in their form and in the useful slipperiness between *descriptive* qualities and *prescriptive* duties. Powerful commands masquerade as valorized, innate qualities. “In pre-Revolutionary Vietnam [. . . ] Confucian morality limited women’s roles to the home, where their primary duties were to enrich, promote and perpetuate the patriarchal clan” Pettus explains, “[d]aughters learned the ‘four virtues’ of chastity, diligence, physical grace and deferential speech in order to ensure the honor of their father’s family and later of their husband’s family” (30). Later, during the anti-colonial revolutionary period and then the American War, “adherence to the Four Virtues [] enable[d] women to contribute to the struggle against invaders” (Tai, *Country* 174).56 Once again, Confucian-derived tenets are altered, but not discarded by the Party. They are just too useful in their promotion of women’s wholesome behavior (*lanh manh*) for securing a proper, well-ordered and prosperous socialist society.

The Four Virtues have been used in various guises during wartime and postwar years, and though younger Vietnamese may brush them aside as old fashioned, they nonetheless

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56 Tai discusses the Four Virtues’ usefulness in wartime mobilizations, noting that resourcefulness and good management to be ranked most important during wartime as “[w]omen, after all, are charged with managing their households and protecting the well-being of their families, duties that call for skills worthy of a battle-hardened general” (*Country* 174). She describes how “[t]he association between generalship and domestic management is humorously captured in the popular description of the housewife as ‘general of the interior’ (*noi tuong*)” (174). Possibly in slight variation to Tai’s observation, at least in the South, where women were more likely to leave their homes and enter into direct combat, the first virtue (in Uncle Ho’s Eight Golden Words) emphasized by co Nhut (and on placards in the Southern Women’s Museum) is heroism (*anh hung*) as the preeminent wartime attribute and social directive.
continue as cornerstones of correct Vietnamese feminine practice. In the post-Doi Moi era of the early 1990s, as daily life started changing through increased economic and cultural exchange with other countries, the government felt threatened and blamed undesired changes and rising social problems on “Western” influences. The government called these “corrupting,” “Western” influences—such as prostitution, gambling, and drug use—“social evils” and launched nationwide campaigns to combat their spread. There was a general feeling that Vietnamese society was experiencing a moral decline (as a result of the new market reforms). As promoters and protectors of official state morality, the Women’s Union viewed the root of the problem to be one of “poor upbringing,” essentially placing much of the blame on mothers for failing to maintain proper household life and not teaching their children traditional Vietnamese values (Pettus 89). They sought to address the problem by “reintroduce[ing] Confucianism’s ‘four virtues’” placing chastity as the “most important for the contemporary Vietnamese woman” (89). Pettus calls the state’s social campaigns, where organizations like the Women’s Union promote government policies by “employ[ing] ‘traditional culture’ as both an antidote to the ills of market modernization and a vehicle of civilizing progress,” a practice of using “tradition in the service of progress” (88).

I end this part of the conversation with mixed, somewhat confused feelings: admiration for co Nhut and her civic devotions and strong, optimistic beliefs, yet incredibly disturbed by the immense burden of expectations, usually premised on some form of biologically determined notion of womanhood, inculcated in women often by other women and women’s state organizations and their respective performances. The responsibility of

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57 During our conversation about the Eight Golden Words and the Four Virtues, co Nhut says that the wartime duties/qualities supported by Ho Chi Minh are understood as having “double meanings.” The social directives, or virtues, simultaneously apply to both family and nation. For example, co Nhut notes that the virtue of faithfulness and loyalty has the dual meaning of “faithfulness to your husband, your family, and also
women to practice and uphold the sanctity of Vietnamese traditions while simultaneously enacting the government’s evolving, “modernizing” national ideals creates demands of mythic proportion. Women are glorified for embodying, and therefore mandated to perform, a female impossible whose redemption—as modeled throughout Vietnamese history from the Trung Sisters to Nguyen Thi Minh Khai to co Nhut—lies in absolute self-sacrifice: whether that means martyrdom in death, being willing to die, or relentless dedication to the service of others.

The performance group women know how to correctly undertake, and successfully achieve, these self-sacrificial duties. They managed to survive, though they were always willing and ready to give their lives for their families and for their nation. They have found ways to thrive under all forms of harsh conditions during wartime and in peace. The performance group women are, in fact, the ideal picture of Vietnamese femininity for they have mastered the ability to embody and practice all versions of ideal feminine virtues at once, and in correct measure. They perfectly perform the Confucian Four Virtues, Uncle Ho’s wartime directives, and the proper qualities and values of the postwar era’s correct socialist society.

In their practice of proper womanhood, the women have become expert adaptors to the changing ideals of Vietnamese femininity. The veterans practice these ideal attributes to

faithfulness to your country.” As co Nhut describes the successive government reinstatements of the Four Virtues, Nhina and I become confused by the slight differences in the ordering, wording, and prioritizing of the tenets. Co Nhut tries to clarify, describing how the virtues are periodically updated in relation to contemporary needs and social conditions. Co Nhut explains that Uncle Ho’s list expressed the importance of virtues during wartime, so his first virtue was “heroic” because at that time it was of primary importance for women to join the fight for “national salvation.” However, in 1995, the “secretary of the state reordered the virtues to fit with the process of developing the country” and placed “well managed” as the first directive. Though there seem to be many iterations and revisions stemming from the Four Virtues, the primary intentions and social messages are consistent and quite clear: women have definitive obligations to family and nation based on their sex’s innate moral, emotional, and behavioral composition, and they must devote themselves to fulfilling these natural-national duties.
the extent that they have now become the material incarnation of correct Vietnamese femininity. Their practice of ideal Vietnamese femininity is flawless and is now the standard by which others are measured. They, as so few can ever hope to for, have achieved mastery over the *female impossible*.

The veterans’ success is not so much in overcoming the subjugation Pettus describes, but rather in continually achieving and remaking performative perfection of Vietnamese female ideals through their practices of tradition with transformation. Through the achievement and reinvention of performative traditions, the women’s performances encompass and exceed the boundaries of ideal femininity, and in so doing, stretch acceptable gender practices for themselves and for other women. As *artists of the present*, to again borrow from Bhabha, the veterans succeed in stretching and remaking performativities of proper gender and national commitment *beyond* prior cultural norms and traditions into inventive “‘in-between’ spaces [that] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular and communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of [re]defining the idea of society itself” (*Location 2*).

**Performing the Patriotic Body Under Conditions of Torture**

The arts of femininity echo state mandates for socialist realist aesthetics. Nora Taylor’s work on Vietnamese painting and visual artists, discusses the political delicacy of producing socialist realist styled “[a]rt for the people,” by which aesthetics become a policy according to which scenes, gestures, and feelings are formally judged as achieving, or failing to embody, proper representation, demonstration, and promotion of “national spirit” and “national essence” (2001). Impressionistic, or other non-realist works, were often
“considered too obscure,” for if “the masses [could] not understand it,” it was deemed “unacceptable” or worse yet, as encouraging “untruthful,” “inaccurate,” or heretical beliefs (119). If a soldier’s expression in a painting was judged by those in the Ministry of Culture as showing “fear and unease” rather than proper bravery and optimism, the work (and quite possibly the artist) could be seen as “lacking in enthusiasm” and possibly demonstrating, and therefore encouraging, “doubt or apprehension” in relation to the Party (118). Today in Vietnam cultural productions tend to fall into the somewhat loosening category of Vietnamese socialist realism, bear it’s marks of censorship, or are responses (political or “apolitical”) to its imposition on creative processes.  

As cultural artists and public performers co Nhut and the performance group women, are expected to promote proper visions of history and “harmonious community” (Taylor, “Framing” 117). The women’s performances reproduce nationalist sentiments and values through their usage of stylized bodily gesture; proper feminine dress, speech and demeanor; patriotic lyrics; and canonical stories of Vietnam’s heroic martyrs. The same socialist realist tropes, imagery, patterning, and sentiments permeate the personal interviews I conducted with the women. Co Nhut’s unflinching certainty that, “I believed that my comrades would win the fight,” and her statements that she, and her comrades, never lost hope nor experienced doubt of an eventual communist victory during the decades of protracted war, exemplify normative tone and diction. In Vietnam, for a communist war veteran to express publicly ambivalence or skepticism toward anything “political” could be found socially damaging, politically threatening, or simply unacceptable, and disciplined accordingly.

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58 Taylor explores the artistic backlash to socialist realist political aesthetics in the Doi Moi era in her essay “Framing the National Spirit” (in Tai, Country). Interestingly, she finds the response of many emerging visual artists to be founded on claims of the right to produce “apolitical” art. Perhaps this is because there is still scarce, if any, public space for “political” cultural productions that question, go against, or are judged to be in opposition to the Party.
During our conversations, co Nhut’s narratives and explanations often employ socialist realist sentiments, utterances, and tropes. And yet, just as the socialist realist statues of prisoners in the Con Dao prisons make claims of one correct version of history but, in their reductive insistence, end up suggesting the powerful presence of counter-memories, so too the absence of pessimism and continual claims of “never losing belief of victory, in co Nhut’s and the other veterans’ narratives, suggests that proper ideological performance may be masking greater emotional struggles or critique. Wondering whether co Nhut might welcome an opportunity to address otherwise prohibited feelings, I ask whether she ever experienced depression and doubt about her personal survival or the success of the communists during her many years in prison. She responds with a powerful story about surviving torture:

Rivka: I wonder if I can ask a personal question.
And you do not have to answer if you do not want to.
But I am wondering if you ever felt,
A loss of hope?
And if so,
What did you do?

c o Nhut/Nhina: At the very first stage of
Being arrested,
They attacked me with
Lots of sticks and
Physical punishment,
Electric on breasts,
And sexual organ.
Electric stick
Inside her sexual organ.
[...]

So now,
It is impossible for her to
Hold her arms like this.
And on the left side,
She cannot make a fist.
Yah, because they hit her fingers.
[...]

The enemy try to hurt her with
Cigarettes,
Burn her,
On her belly.
[...]

A, they try to squeeze your head
Very hard,
To get your eyes out.
[...]
And they shine a light in front of your face,
And if you close your eyes,
They got something to keep them open,
[...]
That is why I cannot make images clear.
And after two days,
It seems impossible for me to
See things around me,
And my legs tremble,
And I could not walk.

You know,
At that moment,
It did happen to me,
Like,
I have a question to myself,
Like, I may become a
A, a disabled person,
And how come I survive?
And as a result,
I become a pressure,
For my family,
For this society
[As a] paralyzed.
Or disabled person.
[…]

At that moment,
[My] legs seemed paralyzed and
It comes to [my] mind,
At that moment,
Right now,
I’ve got only hands,
And arms,
Because eyes,
It seem impossible for me to see
Things around.
I cannot walk with my legs any longer.
[...]

So I,
I will be able to write something,
With my arms and hands.
[...]
And next,
Hmm, I thought I could,
Survive
With my own voice,
[...]
I could write,
And I could sing.
She tried to count
All possibilities
For all things she could
Ever do
Later on.

Co Nhut remembers her torture with calm clarity. Co Nhut has no use for pity or self-aggrandizement. Her narrative demonstrates the enduring, successful strength of the Vietnamese women’s tradition of optimism. If there is a protagonist, in this story and in
others that she tells me and Nhina, it is not co Nhut as an individual but as part of a larger group of comrades, prison-mates, and moreover the female pantheon of Vietnamese heroines with whom she shares, and from whom she inherits, the durable “tradition” and “national characteristic” of optimism.

In her memory performance, what I might be tempted to call “private” feeling and “public” representation are entirely collapsed. Ultimately Nhina and I cannot know if co Nhut experienced doubt or despair while in prison. We will never know the reasons why co Nhut chose to answer my question with this particular story. Here and elsewhere co Nhut inadvertently forgets, or explicitly leaves out, detailed comment on possible emotional struggles and the physical pain she endured. Is it because this kind of commentary could appear self-indulgent? Perhaps. Is it because expressing the extent of her physical pain during torture to me and Nhina is too difficult or too emotionally upsetting to recall? Or is it because co Nhut feels personal sentiment and descriptions of pain are not constructive in this context? In any case, what gets retold to me and Nhina is what is speakable and useful to co Nhut in this moment: the stark facticity of her physical impairment, her familial and national devotions, and her decisive commitment to survive because of the overarching social duties she feels for her nation.

Co Nhut’s recollection turns on a question. After repeating the assorted forms of violence inflicted on her and others, she notes: “I have a question to myself.” Co Nhut asks herself whether or not her survival is justifiable and useful. Survival is warranted only insofar

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59 For Auge, memory exists as an entwined embrace between remembering and “oblivion,” or forgotten remembrance. Forgotten remembrance is memory that one once possessed, but that has now eroded into a forgetful abyss. It is necessary, he says “to recognize the work of oblivion” not as an enemy to remembering but as a “component of memory itself” (14, 15). We cannot “preserve every image” from our lives “but what is interesting is what remains [. . .] remembrances or traces [. . .] what remains is the product of erosion caused by oblivion” (20). What is interesting is what remains, what gets retold, how it gets re-performed, and why.
as she can remain useful, through labor, to her family and to the communist cause in South Vietnam. Eventually she justifies continuing to live, because even if she is left partially paralyzed and blind, “I could, survive with [my] own voice [. . .] [I] could write, and [I] could sing.” Writing and singing, as understood within the greater context of our conversations, are permissible reasons to survive if they are used in service of promoting and sustaining family, society, and nation.

Perhaps while in prison, co Nhut felt or expressed despair. Maybe now, by herself or with close friends, co Nhut does voice past feelings of doubt. But it seems just as likely that the shape and content of the memory she tells is not sculpted just for Nhina, me, or other public audiences. Co Nhut speaks with evident sincerity. These are the narratives, values, and social ideals co Nhut believes and lives by, not simply the pre-scripted, collective, nationalist stories or ceremonial utterances she is supposed to tell. She views her revolutionary activity and survival in terms of pragmatic, socially oriented directives and aims; these continue to guide and sustain her current advocacy work.

**Materializing Memory and Paying Respect**

As the conversation comes to a close, Lien, co Nhut’s eldest granddaughter, comes back into the room to listen. Co Nhut describes how the women would sew intricate embroideries using goods smuggled inside the prison by sympathetic guards. She walks over to a chest of drawers and brings out a stack of carefully folded embroideries, made over thirty years ago and now yellowing with age. There are brightly colored countryside landscapes and minutely stitched pictures of birds and flowers. When the embroiderries were finished, the women would secretly send them back to their families as gifts but also to let their parents and siblings know they were still alive.
I ask Lien if she has ever seen these embroideries. “No,” she says. I ask her if she has ever heard her grandmother’s stories. “Seldom,” she answers. “How does it make you feel when you hear these stories?” I ask? “[I] admire and respect [her]” Lien answers in the most polite Vietnamese, “because of [my grandmother’s] contributions and sacrifice.” With this response, Lien reciprocally enacts, through proper bodily comportment and patterned speech, her own performance of deferential respect to her familial elder. This is what co Nhut’s granddaughter is supposed to say as a dutiful child, but whatever “script” she is performing seems imbued with love and devotion. Co Nhut smiles. Turning back to the stacks of folded cloth, co Nhut remarks that she has not looked at these embroideries in over ten years.

Though our conversation is laden with nationalist citation, gaps, misunderstanding and struggles to communicate, it also exceeds these containments and becomes an enactment of what Della Pollock calls “the essential promise of oral history performance: that the body remembering, the bodies remembered, and the bodies listening in order to remember [. . .] will be redeemed in some kind of change—the small changes that come with repetition in different moments with different listeners; the large changes that might result from entering the memories of a whole body politic [. . .] into the human record of daily living [. . .] in the ongoing reckonings of human understanding” (Pollock, Remembering 2). In the shadow of her family’s ancestral altar, co Nhut, her adopted daughter Phuong, granddaughter Lien, Nhina and I all sit on the floor together, holding the delicate, nearly brittle pieces of hand-sewn cloth. Co Nhut shows us handkerchiefs she stitched and pillowcases given to her by friends, some of who perished in prison. She tells of protest plays and hunger strikes while we carefully hold, admire, and refold each piece of embroidery. The patriotic patterning of Nhut’s remembering does not seem stilted or hollow. In fact, the familiar socialist stylization
of her stories and citational speech feels like an enactment of respectful devotion, of prayer-like honoring for her friends who are no longer living.

That formal patterns of remembering exist, that these words and stories have been said before and will be told again, makes comfort and connection by binding disparate temporalities and lives together. Sitting on co Nhut’s living room floor, we feel a new sense of closeness in having shared in honoring this past. The bits of tattered cloth in our hands materializes memory, as co Nhut’s secular invocations of friends’ names call their spirits into renewed liveliness. As listeners all born after the war, we do not know precisely who we are remembering. Nonetheless we give these unknown friends, and the other lives and pasts they in turn conjure, our recognition and respect. This planned, yet unexpected “meeting over history” becomes an impromptu memorial performance, a shared commemoration to past lives, struggles, and immeasurable endurance (Pollock, Remembering 3). Despite the recognized incommensurability of all our lives, those presently living and dead, co Nhut continues inviting us to imagine into memory landscapes that are not our own, “challeng[ing] us to remember more than we ever knew” (Appy xxvii).

Transforming Traditions

By “restaging the past” from their place within power, the women engage in “the invention of tradition,” or the (re)invention of tradition, through performativities and performances of precise historical citation and skillful alteration (3). The veterans do not circumvent national narratives; they (re)tell and re-member Vietnamese culture by performing with and through official histories.60 By performing affiliatively (rather than

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60 I am responding to Tai’s claim that because “[t]he socialist telos of the old historical narrative has never been repudiated, [] new visions of the future—and thus, discrepant versions of the past—must be told around it rather than in open challenge to it” (Country 4). Co Nhut and the other veterans often take a different tack. The
antagonistically) with national-cultural traditions the veterans condition and produce spaces that stretch beyond present norms into uncharted territories of self-making and social relation. Contrary to expectation, performing tradition is what enables the veterans to move beyond normative renderings of patriotism and femininity. The women use their respected status as female veterans and former political prisoners to leverage new spaces for more progressive, inclusive forms of cultural belonging, national identity, and gender practice in Vietnam. By performing the performativity of national histories and cultural identities, the veterans rekindle the powerful forces of shared tradition. But, as co Nhut teaches her women’s studies students, Nhina, her granddaughter, and me in different ways, it is necessary to both carry and adapt traditions.

The veterans’ performances of femininity, in particular do not simply conform to oppressive gender regimes. The women use the memory, strength and spirit of the national heroines they hail and to which they are hailed to transform national narratives and empower themselves within the present. The veterans are committed to teaching younger generations of Vietnamese women both about their heroic ancestors as well as how to take up and actively employ these inherited histories within their own lives. Co Nhut and the other performance group women show how innovation and change can occur from within spaces that appear hegemonic. The veterans perform, and teach others how to practice, the meaning-making and life-sustaining powers of conserving and reinventing tradition through memory acts.

veterans esteemed status as war heroines gives them the ability to tell through the state’s historical narrative rather than around it.
Figure 3 – Co Nhut and co Kim Dung (July 2006)
CHAPTER II
Co Kim Dung: Masquerading, Haunting, and (Re)Making Identities in Performances of Forgetting and Remembering

“A Very Great Woman”: Heroic Performativity

Co Dinh/Nhina: Before starting to talk with Ms. Kim Dung

Ms. Dinh would like to make a remark that

You should, you should

Have lots of questions

Because Ms. Kim Dung here

Is a very great woman.

[...]
Kim Dung’s shiny silver bracelet, with her name engraved in cursive script on a plaque at the center of the chain.

The bracelet has rarely, if other than for this picture and for her sons to admire, left her wrist since the day she acquired it. She was fifteen years old at that time, in prison, awaiting fulfillment of her death sentence. It was flung anonymously through her small prison cell window. In the picture, it is placed alongside the poem, which is titled, “The ‘Bracelet’ (plaque), an unforgettable memory” (“Chiec ‘lac’ (plaque), ky niem doi nao quen”). The poem is an imagined conversation between co Kim Dung and her father, recounting the story of her imprisonment and the gift of the bracelet. At the bottom, the two friends who composed and gave the poem to co Kim Dung have written personal messages and signed their names. *For our dearest sister, Kim Dung. Your brother and sister, Dan Than & Buu Lien.*

Co Kim Dung wanted the poem to be photographed with the bracelet, to create a visual linkage between the mementos. Crafting a collage of remembrance keepsakes, co Kim Dung adds her picture to the top left corner and the bracelet alongside the poem so that each interconnected article of import—portrait, poem, and bracelet-plaque—can be captured together in the commemorative photograph. When we spoke together at her kitchen table, co Kim Dung took out the original poem, and an 8 x 12 life-size photograph of the collage, both preserved under glass in gold frames. Now at my desk, turning over my smaller version of the same photograph, I see she has written on the back of the photo: “Co Kim dung offers this memento to Rivka Syd Eisner to fondly remember the days she has studied in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (“Co Kim Dung, ky niem tang Rivka Syd Eisner nho nhung ngay hoc o Vietnam, Than Pho Ho Chi Minh, ngay 22-03-2005”). She signs her name with a flourish,
writes the date, and gives her address. As I read, I recall that the Vietnamese words *ky niem* can mean both remembrance and commemoration. The photograph, with its thoughtful, aggregative configuration of the poem, portrait and bracelet, inspires both my remembering of co Kim Dung, and a wish to commemorate her life, and the bracelet is co Kim Dung’s token of *ky niem*. In it, the spirits of the dead and the pulse of the living form a covalent, revitalizing force. The bracelet—the act of giving it, the practice of forever wearing it, and the duty of retelling the stories it holds—is an embodiment and practice of loving remembering.
Figure 4 – Co Kim Dung’s bracelet collage
Have you heard the story yet?

From my very first day at the veterans’ rehearsals, everyone told me, as a gentle yet firm order, that I must speak with co Kim Dung. During one Wednesday afternoon rehearsal, as the women gather around the electronic keyboard to sing “Ho Chi Minh Rescuer of the Nation” (*Ho Chi Minh Cuu Tinh Dan Toc*), co Dinh touches my shoulder and whispers in my ear as she takes co Kim Dung’s hand. Showing me the chain and rolling it with her thumb and index finger, co Dinh’s eyebrows raise as she tells me, “You must hear the story of co Kim Dung’s bracelet.” Turning to Nhina she continues, “During French times, co Kim Dung was a member of a battalion named for the revolutionary heroine, Nguyen Thi Minh Khai. It was called, the ‘fight to the bitter end’ battalion. They were very brave and heroic!” Co Kim Dung smiles and begins to sing as the women’s voices launch into heartfelt, high-pitched praise to Uncle Ho. I nod my head in agreement as Nhina and I join the chorus.

*You must hear the stories of co Kim Dung*, the women say to me and Nhina, *do you know she shared a prison cell with the great martyr Vo Thi Sau?* This fact earns co Kim Dung endless respect with the performance group women. Because co Kim Dung fought during early revolutionary Viet Minh times against the French, she is considered one of the respected elders of the group by the younger women, in their fifties and sixties, who served primarily during the American War. She is a role model, a central figure and founding member in the performance group since its beginnings in 1996. Co Kim Dung is especially revered because *the French gave her the death sentence when she was only fifteen years old. Did you know that? She was given a death sentence and endured many hardships in prison. Have you heard how she got the bracelet?* As the proper answer to a yes or no question in
Vietnamese is either “already” (roi) or the ripe possibility of “not yet” (chua), I answer “em chua biet,” not yet, I do not know the story yet.

Pictures of a Wartime Heroine

On the day of our first interview, at 8:30 am, co Dinh, Nhina and I walk through her metal gate, into the small two story house whose interior is adorned with clusters of family photographs. Co Kim Dung lives alone, with a small white dog and gray cat that she rescued from life on the streets. Her husband died several decades ago and her two sons, contrary to Vietnamese traditional practice of residing in their parents’ home but as part of a growing urban tendency toward living separately, are choosing to raise their families in their own houses. As we slip off our shoes and don plastic indoor sandals, co Kim Dung asks co Dinh how she is feeling. “Healthier,” (suc khoe hon) co Dinh answers.

On the motorbike ride over, I noticed co Dinh seemed stronger, only wobbling a little when parking her bike. Only a week ago, I visited her in the hospital where she spent three days due to “weak blood” and headaches. These are some of the chronic ailments co Dinh suffers from as a result of living through torture. At rehearsal I explained that she did not have to accompany me to co Kim Dung’s house, but co Dinh insisted on proceeding as planned. Although co Dinh often hesitates to tell me about her own past, she has dedicated herself to scheduling my meetings with the other women in the group, and takes great pains to ensure that I am being properly educated about the veterans’ lives. Co Dinh looks at Nhina and then at me, encouraging that I “should have lots of questions because Ms. Kim Dung here is a very great woman.”

As we sit down at co Kim Dung’s kitchen table, I admire the contrast between everyone’s choices of clothing. Co Dinh wears her customary black rayon pantsuit; a
modern, more fitted version of the typical daily dress wore by the veterans, and most peasants, during the war. Nhina looks stylishly-hip in a pink and white striped skirt, red Converse sneakers, and an Andy Warhol-styled Che Guevara tee-shirt. Co Kim Dung has dressed up for the interview. Usually she wears colorful, loose blouses and plain colored pants, but today she has on a light blue dress, belted high at the waist, with delicate pinhole embroidery around the edge of the collar. As always, her silver chain bracelet encircles her left wrist and several gold rings, featuring jade and pearls (beautiful, but not too ostentatious), adorn fingers on each hand. She wears her characteristically large, thick butterfly wing-shaped glasses, tinted pink and blue at the top. Her gray hair is neatly curled around her face, her cheeks are lightly blushed and her lipstick is a darker rose color. I offer her a kilo of small Chinese mandarins (trai cay quit) with two hands and give a brief nod. She thanks me with an acknowledging, reciprocal nod. Although their lives bear little resemblance, co Kim Dung’s soft yet solid build, stiff movement, lively eyes, and welcoming smile always remind me of my great aunt Elsie.

On every wall hang pictures of co Kim Dung and her family. In one, she is a teenage schoolgirl, posing in the traditional conical sun hat and white ao dai dress. Several other pictures were taken when she was in her twenties, wearing her military uniform. Next to the table, framed pictures show the performance group women posing in their brightly colored ao dais following a performance. There is also a photograph of co Nhut and her now deceased husband, shortly after they were married with the “permission” and blessing of a commanding military captain, in 1954. Looking at the photograph, I remember that subsequent to the communist victory against the French at Dien Bien Phu the Party encouraged men and women soldiers to get married in military ceremonies. Still another
picture shows co Kim Dung, after she returned to Vietnam from school in Bulgaria (1970-1975), standing with colleagues in front of the University of Science in Ho Chi Minh City where she was a dean and teacher of pharmacology.

From this collection of photographs, it is clear co Kim Dung was never a slight, withering-violet of a woman. Her figure is strong and sturdy, more like the Vietnamese version of the Rosie-the-Riveter style worker-women depicted in war era propaganda posters than the ubiquitous will-o-the-wisp young schoolgirls in white ao dais pictured on everything from tourism billboards, Miss Saigon perfume bottles, and postcards to lacquer paintings and shop window mannequins. Like co Nhut, co Kim Dung embodies the strong, heroic, wartime physique and air of indestructible confidence, rather than the re-popularized ideal of the sinewy-lilting, dutiful modern housewife/working professional of today. My gaze comes back to a picture of co Kim Dung, taken after her release from prison, in green military uniform and cap. The gentle, grandmotherly woman I am sitting with once carried out armed insurgency.

**The Telling and the Already Told**

Two weeks after speaking with co Kim Dung, Nhina and I are looking at the exhibits in the Southern Women’s Museum. Opened before Doi Moi, “on April, 4 1985, in time to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the fall of Saigon,” the Ho Chi Minh City women’s museum “devotes far more space to showcasing women’s wartime contributions that does its counterpart in Hanoi, which was inaugurated a full decade later” and places more focus on “the role of women in peace” (Tai, Country 186). By the time the Hanoi Women’s Museum opened “in November 1995, the great wave of commemoration had largely ebbed, and public interest was refocusing on the present” (186). About eight thousand people visit
the museum each year. This is a small fraction of the around 400,000 visitors, foreign and Vietnamese, to the popular War Remnants Museum (*Bao Tang Chung Tich Chien Tranh*) located just a few blocks away.

The Women’s Museum stands as proof of the women’s state and social value, and as a symbol of devotion and thanks, but its emptiness is telling. Within these kinds of contexts, where the past is either painted in nostalgic-nationalist sepia tones, too painful (or too “political”) to recall, or simply deemed irrelevant (an era whose time has “passed”), how do co Kim Dung, and the other performance group women, sustain a sense of the vitality they describe feeling so strongly in the past within the present?

We turn on buzzing fluorescent lights as we enter each room. The lights cast everything—display cases, photographs, plaques, paintings, and statues—in a pale yellow hue. Yesterday I saw two older backpack-toting tourists ascending the stairs to the three exhibit halls, but today we are the only ones here. As we enter the second floor gallery, Nhina and I instantly spot a familiar black and white portrait hanging beside two others. It is a grainy copy of the military photograph taken of co Kim Dung after her release from prison when she was in her twenties that we admired in her living room a few weeks ago. Round face. High cheekbones. Milk-white skin. Resolute. Heroic. Her chin optimistically raised. Her eyes, clear and wide, look toward a future lying somewhere far beyond the photograph’s frame. Below the photographs the caption states: “three women soldiers [. . .] belonged to the 950 Suicide Battalion participating in the attack on the Majestic Theater on June 10, 1948 killed twenty French soldiers and injured fifty.”

I know this story. Here it is again, re-produced and condensed down into one essential sentence. Seeing co Kim Dung (and later co Nhut) framed and foregrounded in the
museum reminds me that the women are narrators of themselves and of their pasts, but they are also already narrated subjects (and prized patriotic objects), of the nation. Authenticated by the state “[a]s narrator,” co Kim Dung “is narrated as well,” so that “in a way she is already told, and what she herself is telling will not undo that somewhere else she is told” (Bhabha citing Lyotard, Nation 301). In a sense, and in the spirit of co Kim Dung’s and the other veterans revolutionary life as a play of layering personas and hiding and revealing identity performances, the state photograph that simultaneously tells her, and signifies that it has already told her, hangs as a photographic trace, a national portrait-as-mask, preserving and proving her leading role in the heroic past.

Advantaged and bound by the state’s valorizing claims on the veterans’ pasts (and differently, their presents and futures) Kim Dung’s and the other women’s narrative performances are compulsory and, in many aspects, already scripted. Their narratives must, and enthusiastically do, conform to the states prescribed socialist realist stylizations of nationalist propriety and truth. Although they willingly, passionately play their national personas on a regular if not daily basis, the veterans have long survived capture and censure through their expert skills of masquerade. During the war they used aliases and fake identification papers. I can be Van. Phuong. Ngoc. Thuy. Pulling their sunhats over their eyes. Slipping in and out of crowded streets. Shedding one ao ba ba shirt for another, of a different color, underneath. Embedding messages in the cork of their fish sauce bottles. Secretly passing and posing as ordinary and typical young peasant girls. The women, then young girls, played the foreigners’ proclivity for collectivizing and stereotyping to their own performative advantage. They will give you what you expect. If you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all. “V.C.” “Charlie.” “Mama-san.” “Boom-Boom Girl” takes on a whole other
meaning when applied to “Long-haired Warriors” bearing grenades and toting Russian rifles. As masters of disguise and concealment, if they can evade police capture and strategically keep their “undervaluated” [sic] status by keeping mum and “playing dumb,” then they can surely escape the stronghold of being already told, by drawing on their ample stash of other identities and alternate performances.

**Armed Insurgency as Masquerade: Performing Radical Revolution**

Back at co Kim Dung’s kitchen table, her damp, twinkling eyes and marbled voice mix with Nhina’s light laughter and excitement as she prepares to translate the story’s enticing entrée. Co Kim Dung’s cat brushes my legs under the table and her little dog barks in jealousy as I bend down to scratch its rival’s ears. “She picked up these animals off the street,” says Nhina, “she really has a love for dogs and cats, especially ones without homes.” In our conversation around the kitchen table, over pale Lipton tea, cookies, and puckeringly-sweet, homemade candied kumquats, from behind her tinted, wide-framed glasses Co Kim Dung describes how she carried out her secret “missions.” She stresses the need to appear and “behave like an ordinary person.” As Nhina and co Kim Dung explain, you must blend in:

Co K.D./Nhina: I mean,

You should behave like an ordinary person.

Because if you get dressed in a strange color

Or a strange fashion,

You might get caught.

[...]

And when women,
Go out to buy stuff,
They keep a small basket next to them,
[…]
And then, she [co Kim Dung] covered the documents or weapons
With vegetable.
Maybe you could imagine,
It [the basket] is made of bamboo,
With a cover.
[…]

The enemy, they use to
Undervalue
Ladies, and ahm,
Ordinary people as well,
So,
That is how I get my missions done.
And to me,
Ah,
I have only two ways out:
Win or lose,
Success or failure.

Nhina slips from “she” to “I” as she translates. “And then, she covered the documents or weapons with vegetable.” “That is how I get my missions done.” Nhina shows the precarious, slipperiness of identity in embodying and retelling narratives as co Kim Dung expresses the necessity of hiding one’s identity and allegiance by “behaving like an ordinary person.” In this preface to the Majestic Theater bombing story, co Kim Dung
describes self-consciously working to pass “naturally” as herself, a young Vietnamese girl, under the policing eyes of the French patrol. This space of visible surveillance and control, the realm of the “public transcript,” is the stage for “open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate” where “the whole story about power relations” is unlikely to be perceptible for “[i]t is frequently in the interest of both parties to tacitly conspire in misrepresentation” (Scott 2).

Under French colonial occupation, and when fighting the Americans and Republic of Vietnam, members and supporters of the Viet Minh, and later the NLF, used the techniques and philosophy of Marx, Lenin, Mao, and their predecessors, to exercise political rebellion and revolution under the calculated and improvisational camouflage techniques of guerilla warfare. The Viet Minh, and later the NLF, and their supporters erased their distinguishing features with disguises, masking themselves as what they were, wanted to be, and/or had to perform. The veterans enact the expected performativities of “ordinary people,” in their publicly enscripted renditions of everyday life, in order that they may engage in the covert activities of guerilla warfare that will eventually rupture the quotidian street scene into explosive sites of untidy rebellion as the insurgents, literally and figuratively, shatter colonial power structures.

With sentiments similar to those expressed in more particular, personalized terms by the performance group women, Mao describes guerilla warfare as “the inevitable result of the clash between oppressor and oppressed when the latter reach the limits of their endurance” (39). He continues:

It is a weapon that a nation inferior in arms and military equipment may employ against a more powerful aggressor nation. When the invader pierces
deep into the heart of the weaker country and occupies her territory in a cruel and oppressive manner, there is no doubt that conditions of terrain, climate, and society in general offer obstacles to his progress and may be used to advantage by those who oppose him. In guerrilla warfare, we turn these advantages to the purpose of resisting and defeating the enemy. (40)

Making the “obstacles” of the “more powerful aggressor nation” the “advantage” of those in oppressed and subordinated positions is central to guerrilla warfare and akin to the logics Scott addresses in his critical analysis of the power-laden, performance-centered dynamics between dominating and subjected peoples. Oppression under the French, and later war with America and Republic of Vietnam, often made showing one’s feelings, allegiances, and beliefs dangerous, if not life-threatening. As a result, the actions and sentiments of those who opposed the French were hidden from public view, pushed inside and underground. In a very literal sense, the Viet Minh and NLF were pushed under the ground into their system of secret, interlocking tunnels and into the shadows of unseen caves, bunkers, and alleyways, with their communications kept to the privacy of whispers, coded messages, double-talk and the safety of vague and blurry meanings and affected naïveté. The veterans would dig into their earthy hiding places, cover their bodies with camouflage, affect an inscrutable expression, lay in wait, only to erupt when the enemy was least suspecting, at the precise “kairos,” the “right point in time,” to “produce[] a founding rupture or break” in the colonial transcript (de Certeau, Practice 85).

The tactical maneuvers of finding, making, and seizing power through guerrilla warfare are necessarily organized in secret and performed by way of concealment and disguise. Hiding. Obscuring. Averting. Eliding. Overplaying. Passing. Posing. The disguise is played on the surface while the planning and implementation of guerrilla warfare happens, to a great degree, in the spaces of the “hidden transcript,” secreted and veiled
locations, languages, practices, techniques and “discourse[s] that take[] place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation from the powerholders” (Scott 4). Playing off and preying on expectations, norms, and everyday practices—by performing the mute, the commoner, the fool, the girl, and the colonized stereotype—the guerrilla finds advantage and power in the over-sights of the “more powerful” foe (Mao 40).

During the day, when walking the streets, co Kim Dung had to “behave like a normal person,” or else she “might get caught,” and “fail” at her mission. However, at some point, as co Kim Dung expresses, the “mission” must be carried out, and executed, in public space where there are “only two ways out: win or lose.” Co Kim Dung explains that she and other “ordinary people” succeeded in their missions because “the enemy, [] use to undervalue [sic] ladies, and [] ordinary people as well.” Co Kim Dung uses the added, gendered, presumptuous dismissal of women and girls as possible threats to colonial authority to her advantage. As she walks down the street in early morning co Kim Dung blends in with the crowd of other young girls carrying their bamboo baskets back from the market. The secret message is hidden under the carrots and cucumbers. If anyone bothers to look, all they will see is a blank piece of paper. The letter is written in invisible ink. She walks by a French policeman, hiding her eyes under her sunhat, and folds back into the protective anonymity of the busy street. Adhering to one of Mao’s most famous directives, co Kim Dung “move[s] amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea.”

Voluntary Sacrifice

Describing herself as having “only two ways out,” “success or failure,” co Kim Dung proceeds to tell the story of the central, defining mission of her life. The narrative shows how Mao’s advice to “make war everywhere” was put into practice by the Viet Minh (63).
Listening attentively to co Kim Dung, Nhina conveys the context of the mission with anticipation and great care. She must get the story right. The mission had to be precisely executed in order to “win” and not fail. Nhina feels this urgency and call to accuracy as she re-performs the story, continually checking herself and marking her position within the narrative through stabilizing repetitions. “They found out a *French ship*, a brand new *French navy ship* [. . .]. The Viet Minh got a *mission, a plan* that they *should, they should* attack [. . .] at the very *first stage, early on.” Nhina carefully continues:

Co K.D./Nhina: The intelligent agent, of Viet Minh

They found out a French ship,
A brand new French navy ship,
Did arrive in Saigon.

. . .

The Viet Minh got a mission,
A plan
That they should,
They should attack the, the
French navy,
At the very first stage,
Early on.

And the Viet Minh
Know the schedule of all the French navy people at that time.
At first they [the French] would have a meeting,
A formal meeting,
And then later on,
They have time,
In the cinema,
So the Viet Minh decide to
Attack the French in the cinema.
This is the plan.
In 1948.

At first they [co Kim Dung and her friend] weren’t
Expected to join the attack,
Because they were so young.
They were not chosen to do the attack,
But they volunteered.
They volunteered, they insisted.

“They were not chosen to do the attack but they volunteered.” Co Kim Dung and then Nhina repeats, “They volunteered, they insisted.” Volunteering is a characteristic the veterans often cite, following in, remaking, and sustaining the tradition of great heroic Vietnamese women, like the Trung Sisters and Vo Thi Sau, who willingly face their fears and towering challenges head-on. Co Kim Dung’s emphasis reminds me of a prison story co Nhut and co Dinh both recounted for me on separate occasions. It is the story in which everyone wanted to injure themselves, to the point of death if necessary, in protest of the bad prison conditions. Nine months with no vegetables. Only the most minimal amount of rice and water was allotted each day. Co Dinh says, the food was “rotten and salted [. . .] really horrible and terrible [. . .] and some ladies died” from eating it. The prisoners were suffering continually from untreated illness. We had to vote because too many people volunteered to sacrifice themselves. Co Nhut explains, everyone in prison was “willing to self-sacrifice,” for the others, to “open their stomachs, and maybe experience death” by
In a spirit akin to Co Nhut’s and co Dinh’s recollections of excessive prison volunteerism, Kim Dung expresses several times that she and the other women were “more excited than they were fearful.” They were “not afraid,” and even “eager to do this work.”

As Mao instructs, “[i]t is a mistake to impress people into service,” for “[a] guerrilla group ought to operate on the principle that only volunteers are acceptable for service” (77). One must be “courageous and determined” to “bear the hardships of guerrilla campaigning in a protracted war” (77). People must be moved to “volunteer” and to “insist” on joining the resistance. Young or old, farmer or teacher, woman or man, most importantly, you must be willing and “[y]ou must have courage” (67). Through her retrospective remembering and recitation, co Kim Dung marks and generates the unflinching certainty and fearless volunteerism of her valiant past and in so doing, then and now, performs herself into the national pantheon of mythologized Vietnamese heroines. The Trung sisters, Trieu Au, Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, Vo Thi Sau, the “Long-haired Warriors”—sisters, “we” “insist” on volunteering our bodies and committing our minds to fearlessness in the forging of radical action. For our families. For the people. For the nation.

**Affluent (Tres)passing and Ambivalent Subjectivity**

Co Kim Dung is too young to partake in the mission, but she is too right for the part to be left out on account of age. To execute the attack, the Viet Minh must secretly infiltrate the theater. They will do this not by sneaking in the back door but by going, “in plain sight,” through the font entryway. They will enter by means of masquerade, putting on the costumes and affects of high society, Frenchified Saigon girls. Having grown up in a well-off family, co Kim Dung knows how to behave like a girl from the upper echelon. She will “assume [a]
false appearance”” that is not entirely false (Tseelon citing the Oxford English Dictionary entry for “masquerade,” 2). Her youth makes her an even better candidate. If “the enemy use to undervalue [sic] [] ladies” then young Vietnamese girls in “pure” white ao dais are all the more benign.

For this attack, co Kim Dung and her friends shed their hand-sewn, black Viet Minh dress of black ao ba ba and trousers. Instead, they don fancy, borrowed white ao dai, purses, make-up, perfume and costume jewelry so as to blend in with the wealthy crowd. Co Kim Dung is the youngest. She volunteered for this mission because she wanted to “join the attack.” She “insisted.” After our conversation, later in the day, I write in my field notes:

Unafraid. Fourteen years old. She is from a well-off family so she knows how to act the part of the well-mannered, elite. She knows how to behave in ways that make her visibly invisible. She knows how to perform the high-class decorum necessary for maneuvering easily, and “naturally,” with a cultured grace and finesse that she could have only learned by way of a proper civilized, colonial education. She politely glides through the guarded entryways with a bow of her head and a grenade in her purse.

The “four ladies” chosen for the mission will strike early and decisively, as soon as the new French soldiers and officials leave the boat. Nhina listens and repeats:

Nhina: Four ladies,
But only three grenades,
Three bombs!

[Nhina laughs with nervous excitement. She is impressed and amazed by co Kim Dung’s bravery. I sigh in suspenseful awe. Our shoulders are tense and our ears are pricked.]
At first, co Kim Dung describes having to “behave like an ordinary person” to pass unnoticed in the streets of Saigon. The context of the theater requires a different performance. The Majestic Theater “at that time […] is just for rich people.” Nhina corrects herself to differentiate the regular bourgeois theatergoers from people like co Kim Dung, “I mean, the French, and the employees of the French,” she restates, “French soldiers and officials.” To be allowed passage into the theater co Kim Dung will have to act a different part. “Ordinary people never attend, or get inside the cinema.” Co Kim Dung must perform
the part of the civilized oriental, the exotic Indochine schoolgirl who is passively-pleasing to
the French colonial gaze. If she performs the proper colonized image the French desire and
expect, then co Kim Dung will be allowed, even invited, to (tres)pass.

The twist in co Kim Dung’s story is that coming from a wealthy family she could
“afford” and “get inside the cinema.” Her family was wealthy but they rejected colonial
privilege. Her father owned a gold and jewelry shop. Unlike many peasants and “ordinary
people,” and especially girls, co Kim Dung was able to attend school. Born the youngest of
eleven children in 1933, she grew up in the southern Mekong Delta province of Dong Thap.
Co Kim Dung’s father and other family members were communists, and financially
supported the Viet Minh’s anti-colonial causes with their successful jewelry business. After
her father and brothers were taken to jail and severely beaten for their anti-colonial activities,
it became unsafe for co Kim Dung’s family to remain in the countryside so they moved to the
city. When she was in grade school, co Kim Dung’s family decided to move to Saigon to
escape continual surveillance by the French. In the city, co Kim Dung says “it was much
easier to blend in and get lost in the crowds” and escape the watchful eye of the French.

Using stock communist phrases and storylines articulated in a similar manner to those
told by co Nhut and the other veterans, Co Kim Dung expresses that “from an early age I
understood the French oppression of Vietnamese” because “everyday I witnessed the death
or the bad treatment by the French to people in my hometown.” Like co Nhut, co Kim Dung
cites colonial violence to friends and family as her motivation to join the resistance war and
the spark of her “hatred toward the French colonialists.” In particular, seeing the beaten
faces of her father and older brothers in prison “created my hatred toward the French.” A
few years later in 1947, after her family moved to Saigon, co Kim joined the Viet Minh. She was 13 years old.

Co Kim Dung’s description of stealing away in secret is a theme present in other veterans’ recruitment narratives. After joining, co Kim Dung prepared for service by stitching a black *ao ba ba*, the loose southern peasant shirt with long sleeves and slits on the sides. When asked what she was doing, she replied with hinting irony to her older sister that she was “preparing herself to become a good housewife.” *If they ask who your husband is, reply: “His surname is Viet, and his given name is Nam.”* Not long after, co Kim Dung secretly went to train with the Viet Minh, leaving home while her family members were taking a nap. Less than a year later, co Kim Dung volunteered and was chosen to participate in the Majestic Theater mission. In Vietnamese and English I ask Nhina and co Kim Dung:

Rivka: So how did they get inside?  
Wouldn’t they would be suspected  
Because they are Vietnamese—  
And they looked—

Co K.D./Nhina: You are expected to look like a queen at that moment.  
I mean, look luxurious,  
And so rich, and  
You can get your way into the cinema.

“You are expected to *look* like a queen at that moment. I mean, *look* luxurious.” Nhina and co Kim Dung are differentiating “looking” from “being,” or what Tseelon describes as the “relationship between supposed identity and its outward manifestations” and
the common desire to disambiguate “essence and appearance” that the mask differently complicates for wearers and for audiences (3). What is the truth? What is the real? “And they looked—.” “Ordinary.” Looking. Appearing. Seeming. Being. Co Kim Dung and her comrades are performing the stereotype of young Frenchified Vietnamese girls. As Homi Bhabha writes, the colonized stereotype is an “ambivalent” and “paradoxical mode of representation” that “vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” (Location 94-95). The girls are relying on the expectation of the “already known,” while “anxiously,” duplicitously, repeating. However, their anxiousness comes from another place, not out of a desire to perform perfected compliance toward the colonizer but rather devotedly oriented toward pleasing the anti-colonialists with a successful mission. How apt that this trick of looking, appearing, and seeming, should be staged at a theater, at the colonial cinema where the objects of fancy are already visually oriented around the desires of sighted forms of knowing.

Through playing with fatal danger and mimicking the delicious excesses of the colonial lifestyle, revolutionary masquerade entices the doubly taboo pleasure of simultaneously enjoying the decadence of bourgeois consumption and the thrill of risking one’s life and committing revolutionary insurgency in order to eradicate the oppressions of that self-indulgence. During her Majestic Theater bombing mission, co Kim Dung dons and performs a disguise that simultaneously reveals and hides her identity as a privileged, educated girl from a wealthy family. This ambivalent performance of inherited, embraced, and rejected affluence increasingly “unsettles and disrupts the fantasy of coherent, unitary, stable, mutually exclusive divisions” between polarities of self and other, sameness and
difference, “true” identity and performance, the real and the fake, or what is often described perhaps too easily in terms of “essence and appearance” (Tseelon 3).

Self-Conscious Mimicry and Double Identities

Co Kim Dung and her friends’ performances differ from those who recite the French Indochine stereotype as “the mimic man [sic]” in that the girls are wittingly performing a mocking trick, making a violent farce out of the tenuous, already paranoid discourse between colonized and colonizer (Bhabha referencing Naipaul and others, Location 125). Performing a doubled-double identity the girls play-on the already ambivalent “‘play’ in the colonial system which is crucial to its exercise power” that “produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an ‘other’ yet entirely knowable and visible” (101). The girls subvert the “repertoire” of already “conflictual positions constitut[ing] the subject[s] in colonial discourse,” replacing them with their own imaginations of rebellious “fixity and fantasy,” proclaiming and disseminating their difference with the surprise eruption of a counter-reality, a terrifying dreamscape where young girls in “pure” white ao dais throw grenades into crowds (110). If colonialism “repeatedly exercises its authority through the figures of farce,” creating “a text rich in the traditions of trompe-l’oeil, irony, mimicry and repetition,” the girls pervert an already twisted colonial scene through even more excess and out-of-control slippages, creating a schizophrenic, insurgent surreality (122). The social scene at the cinema is about to become explosively hyper-visible and seen as the re-doubled, farcical yet all-too-real stage of revolution within the greater theater of emergent war. The colonial show cannot go on.

The veterans learned the survival skill of secrets, masks, and identity-subversion from their folklore and literature, their lived and inherited history of making do under colonial
rule, and most deliberately from the mythic lives of cherished revolutionary role models and their miraculous escapes.\(^{61}\) Ho Chi Minh (a name he gave himself to mask his identity while traveling under the guise of a journalist in China, meaning “he who enlightens”), as everyone in Vietnam knows, has an unending list of pseudonyms and pen names through which he published, passed across borders, escaped incarceration, and shook the hands of enemies (Duiker 248-249). \textit{Who did you meet? Was it:} Nguyen Ai Quoc (Nguyen the Patriot)? Van Ba (Third Child)? Bac Ho (Uncle Ho)? Nguyen Sinh Cung (birth name)? Nguyen Tat Thanh (“he who will succeed,” given by his father at Ho’s eleventh birthday)?\(^{62}\) Guy N’Qua (playwright pen name)? Phan Chu Trinh and Duong (in France)? Ly Thuy (while in China)? Wang (in Canton)? Lou Rosta, Nilovsky, and Linh (in Russia) (Karnow 1983; Duiker 2000)?\(^{63}\) \textit{Yes, I met all of them. No, I met no one. We are duped, we never knew, we are too late. Uncle Ho was everyone and no one, everywhere and nowhere. Omniscient? Clairvoyant? Ubiquitous? Yes. Omnipresent, unmistakable, and yet, nearly always invisible.} His list of names goes on. So do his fantastical vagabond legends and tales of

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\(^{61}\) In Bakhtin’s view, calling on folklore and historical memory helps produce real acts and beliefs of fearlessness within the present by locating power in people and within popular cultural practices. “Even the most ancient images of folklore express the struggle against fear, against the memories of the past, and the apprehension of future calamities, but folk images relating to this struggle helped develop true human fearlessness,” so that “struggle against cosmic terror in all its forms and manifestations did not rely on abstract hope or on the eternal spirit, but on the material principle in man himself” (\textit{Rabelais} 335-336).

\(^{62}\) As Duiker recounts in his epic biography \textit{Ho Chi Minh: A Life}, “as was traditional in Vietnamese society,” children are given new names at adolescence that “reflect the parents’ aspiration for their child” (22-23, 18). Ho’s birth name, or “milk name” was Nguyen Sinh Cung and this was later changed to Nguyen Tat Thanh by his father when he was about eleven years old (17, 23). See Duiker’s extensively researched history of Ho’s life for detailed stories on the many names and identities he embodied in order to proclaim his political sentiments while simultaneously remaining hidden and evading capture (17, 23, 59 85, 113, 151, 170, 200, 201, 231, 232, 234, 236, 241,248-49, 250, 508).

\(^{63}\) See chapter three, “The Heritage of Vietnamese Nationalism,” in Karnow’s \textit{Vietnam: A History} for a more condensed, epic account of the “trail of legends” Ho Chi Minh left in the wake of his world travels and revolutionary battles (125). For an exceptionally detailed, scholarly history and historiography of Bac Ho, see Duiker’s \textit{Ho Chi Minh: A Life}.
harrowing escape. His mysterious stories are as numerous as his names. As Stanley Karnow writes, in 1928, shortly after leaving Paris:

Ho turned up in Bangkok, now a center of Vietnamese dissidence. He shaved his head and donned the saffron robes of a Buddhist monk to proselytize [communism] in the temples. Then he went to northeast Siam, the site of a large expatriate Vietnamese community, where he opened a school and published a newspaper. He concealed his identity under a collection of pseudonyms, such as Nguyen Lai, Nam son, and Thau Chin [. . .]. Even after becoming north Vietnam’s president in 1954, Ho continued to hide behind aliases, perhaps a holdover from his clandestine past. He wrote articles under such names as Tran Luc, Tuyet Lan, Le Thanh Long, and Dan Viet, the last of them signifying Citizen of Vietnam. (123-124)

Citizen of Vietnam. Everywhere. Nowhere. He was just here, I swear it. A moment ago . . . you are just a minute too late. He even escaped a prison hospital in China, while suffering from tuberculosis, by feigning death so convincingly that “[h]is obituary appeared in the Soviet press and elsewhere, and the French authorities closed his file with the notation: ‘Died in Hong Kong jail’” (125).

Disguises, masks, and vagrancy enabled Ho Chi Minh to be famous, mythic, anonymous, more-than-living and beyond-dead all at the same time. Adding languages to his pack of tricks wherever he went, Bac Ho wrote, spoke and published in French, Russian, Cantonese, Thai, and English, among others. The veterans studied Ho’s performance techniques, adapting and repeating his methods for their own feats of camouflage and masking noms de guerre. Identity illusions were magnified, ramified, and multiplied throughout Vietnam during decades of war. Camouflage meant survival. In this climate where one false move meant death, and where moving falsely was all one could do to survive, it is a wonder that anyone could remember who they were, let alone know for certain
who someone else was . . . trickster, traitor, friend, foe, double-agent? Yes, certainly. No, of course not. For self protection and “National Salvation,” one had to go under-cover, into shadowy jungles, earthen tunnels, and the anonymous city crowd, burying, erasing, and masking oneself under layers of costume and camouflage.

**Cultures of Disguise in Vietnam**

In Vietnam, in order to survive colonial rule, decades of war, and communism, it has become necessary to know the arts of disguise, to be an expert at performative re-citation. As Michel de Certeau describes, and the veterans well know, “[t]o ‘recite’ is to play on the extra element hidden in the felicitous stereotypes of the commonplace” (*Practice* 89). Or, put another way, many people in Vietnam have learned the art of “multiple presence” of being “both between and within entities,” rather than resorting to a binary choice (Trinh 94). Those who have survived these eras wrought in espionage, subterfuge, surprise, submission, and secrets, are masters of concealment. Embodying multiple forms of performativity, the masterful blurring of the tenuous relations between seeming and being is what enabled survival through the firestorm of total war and the twisted and life-threatening political allegiances and conditions it fostered.

Co Kim Dung and the performance group women used American and French racism against itself, performing the performativity of the stereotype as a mocking-mask for hiding in plain sight as they executed revolution. If the “discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence” and “must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference,” then that something extra, that abundance of difference is also masked, rendered visible yet illegible and unknowable (Bhabha, *Location* 122). The veterans found opportunity in a colonial status for a “‘partial’ presence” that is “both ‘incomplete’ and ‘virtual’” (123). What
better way to hide and obscure one’s identity, belief, intention, and belonging than to capitalize on their already partial, incomplete, excessive, and virtually-perceived identities? The guerrilla fighters embraced their incomplete and overabundant selves, turning this plurality and partiality of identity into ambiguous advantage.

However, insofar as masking and inscrutability were necessary survival skills, people on all sides of the cultural-political spectrum in Vietnam became adept at the arts of disguise, of seeming and being multiple. After 1975, the victorious communists had to keep up their own appearances, heightening and materializing their performances in order to manufacture and materialize power into the landscape and the public psyche quickly. Those caught in the middle of ideological battles had to perform allegiance in order to appear devoted, while the appearances of those who had assisted the enemy as American “puppets” and “lackeys” could not be trusted and so had to be “re-educated,” escape, or else submerge into silent and silenced anonymity. The terms “puppets” and “lackeys,” used by the communist government to describe the Republic of Vietnam and those deemed to be followers, figure as more pejorative terms than colonialist and imperialist. If you are an imperialist or colonialist at least you are real, you stand for something of substance even if it is deemed malevolent and oppressive. If you are a “puppet,” you either perform for or are performed by others. Selfless and spineless, you are all performance and no substance; you are a “puppet” in a failed performance. As a puppet, you are the lowest of the low because you are not even real enough to really “matter.”

When ambiguity is disallowed, and the choice is between black and white, people will appear to choose while, underneath, all are pursuing survival by living out every imaginable shade of gray. A friend, still living in Vietnam, who was sent off for “soft”
ideological “re-education,” said that day after day she would obediently repeat, exactly, what the party cadres taught her and told her to say. She wrote and rewrote a scripted renunciation of her past “puppet” life and swore a new allegiance. She went through the communist motions time and again. Repeating. Reciting. Mimicking. (Mocking). Finally, after numerous repetitions, the cadres believed her corrupted mind to be cured of bourgeois capitalist thought. It was not, but her performance proficiency made her seem cured. In some cases, “doing is believing,” or doing makes believing, but in others, one just goes through the motions, and overdoing cannot overcome disbelieving and instead becomes distrust and disdain (Myerhoff citing Moore and Myerhoff, Number 32).

Today, under the communist government’s problematic, paranoid censorship of behavior, speech, and press, it is still a common, practical practice to conceal one’s identity, beliefs, and underlying feelings. For example if you write for a newspaper, or even submit an editorial, you do not use your real name. A friend, who once worked as an editor for one of the most daring, reputable popular newspapers hesitantly told me her story to explain why people conceal themselves. All of the newspapers have to be censored. Some important people in government were angry about a string of corruption scandals the newspaper was covering. They were looking for a way to remove me as editor. The newspaper republished an article about Ho Chi Minh’s personal life, talking about his lovers, that had been initially published in China, and had already been republished elsewhere in Vietnam. They fired me and said it was for publishing this article. It was not for that . . . but, luckily, I was able to move, anonymously, to a position at another magazine. I worked under a pen name at the newspaper and I use a different one here at this new job. Having “stage names” for use in
public is important. This editor’s career possibilities were not ruined and her identity was not made public.

In this case, the government and the editor work on a kind of “don’t ask don’t tell” policy by which both benefit from obfuscation: my friend quietly shifts to another job, sustaining her livelihood and her family’s reputation, and the government does not doubly “lose face” (or lose its face-mask of propriety) for attempting to block its corruption exposure. Masking one’s identity as a means of personal defense is still a common everyday practice in Vietnam. If a person lobs a social critique in the newspaper under a pseudonym, he/she has protection from social exposure and potentially damaging ramifications through the shield of untraceable anonymity. If a comment could be too “political,” you had better cover your tracks or don an impermeable disguise. I have also heard stories in which the real author of a controversial article will have a friend in a higher socio-political position publish the writing under their name because some people have earned the ability and have the status to publicly question and critique while others simply do not.

Remembering and Forgetting Selves to Survive

Every veteran I spoke with had a pocketful of identities, each one slightly different, to serve the unpredictable circumstances of warfare. False names. Phony identification papers. Imaginary family histories. Fake addresses. To protect themselves, the veterans had to erase themselves. Separate from family. Leave home. Keep moving. Several women even recount concealing their pregnancies while being tortured or while in prison. If they were on missions, they would go home to give birth and leave their infants in their mothers care after just a few days. The children did not know the identities of their fathers, or sometimes even their mothers. For safety reasons, sometimes the women would not see their children for
years at a time. The women would dream of their children while sleeping on the prison floors. *I wonder what she looks like now? Does she have her father’s eyes?* *Forget. Forget. Keep moving. No talking.* Invent a new name each week. Wear layers of clothes so that costumes may be shed at a moment’s notice. Days. Years. Decades. The veterans spent a lifetime playing the ultimate improvisational identity masquerade where unmasking could mean death and keeping silent could incite torture.

With so many layers of costuming it could become difficult to remember who you really are, or rather, who you must be and become, in a given situation. Must one’s self be virtually forgotten in order to convincingly don another? Are these shattered selves and masks ironically the only way to actually “keep ones self together” during the pathological wreckage of war? *Forget pain. Forget violence. Forget self. Family. Husband. Remember what? Remember whom?* As Tseelon notes, sometimes the mask “assumes the existence of an authentic self,” but another “approach maintains that every manifestation is [potentially] authentic, that the mask reveals the multiplicity of our identity,” when “the distinction between self and role is not between a deeper truth and a surface appearance but between two masks, two ways of speaking, two modalities,” duplicitous at the very least (Tseelon elaborating Nietzsche, 4-5). In other words, self-consciously constructing masquerades and performing performativities (of the colonial subject stereotype at the cinema or in the banal routines of everyday life) reveals the multiplicity, strengths and vulnerabilities, of identities that are always under construction, slippery, tipping, and wavering, putting the subject on a teetering tightrope. As Trinh argues, “[a]uthenticity as a need to rely on an “undisputed origin,” is prey to an obsessive *fear*: that of *losing a connection*” with the apparent stability of the “real,” losing balance and “falling apart” (94). Accordingly, authenticity is itself
performative, compelled by threat of loss of origin and so of “self.” Paradoxically, identity emerges as a shadow figure, apparently stable, nonetheless useful in its instabilities.

**The Pleasures of Performing and Remembering Revolution**

I look at co Kim Dung, with her grandmotherly smile, soft voice, round features, and butterfly-shaped glasses, and then to the framed picture on the wall showing her in smartly-fitted, olive-colored military garb. I try to combine these two images into some kind of composite portrait in order to imagine co Kim Dung as a young girl revolutionary, masquerading in her borrowed “pure” white *ao dai*, with a live grenade in her purse. Nhina turns to me and resumes after a long stretch of listening intently to co Kim Dung describe her delicate identity negotiations between socialist and socialite, or more accurately, between avowed ascetic communist and decadent cinemagoer:

Rivka: Did they get in that way?

Did they dress up, like that to get into the cinema?

Co K.D./Nhina: Yes, she did dress up,

Make-up,

She, she was

In a wealthy family,

She knows how to do this!

[We all laugh. Increasingly, laughter is sprinkled throughout the conversation.]

Rivka: I see! I see.
[Laughter.]

So the women all dressed up.

Co K.D./Nhina: Yes, they did

Wear jewelry,

Ao dai,

They did dress up in ao dai,

The white,

It is a pure color.

“Yes, she did dress up, make-up.” “They are expected to look like a queen at that moment.” “Luxurious.” “So rich.” We are all enjoying the sumptuousness of co Kim Dung’s description, and of what it must have been like . . . We laugh excitedly together. Co Kim Dung’s eyes light up as she illustrates the details of her costume, gesturing with her hands. Small gold earrings. Long soft sleeves. A purse full of candies and make-up (and a grenade). The girls dressed in “pure” white ao dais, jewelry, and lipstick, making themselves up for this queenly, colonial drag act.

As co Kim Dung says herself, and Nhina repeats, “she was in a wealthy family, she knows how to do this!” She knows how to do this performance of affluence and high culture; this self-conscious charade-masquerade of colonial mimicry. Following Jacques Lacan, Bhabha describes mimicry as being “like camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically,” such that “threat [. . .] comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory ‘identity effects’ in the play of a
power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no “itself” making “resemblance” the most terrifying thing to behold” (128-129). Co Kim Dung and her girlfriends camouflage themselves; they ambivalently play with the powers of resemblance. But is it correct, in this particular situation, to claim that the girls have lost their “selves,” that they are not also performing a deeper sense of identity and purpose beneath, and entangled within, their masquerade?

Re-Semblance with Substance

This description is serviceable in some theoretical colonial contexts, particularly in describing possible social psychologies operating within the colonizer’s paranoid fear of losing overt power, authority, and control (or the unraveling thread of dread-doubt of wondering if that power has ever been fully possessed in the first place). The desired, demanded, and disallowed semblance, in the colonized’s performances of camouflaging resemblance, can unmake the colonizer’s own substance with the realization that there is no secured essence or fully secured power behind either mask, their own or the Other’s. But this sense of either certain essence or abyssal nothingness lurking behind the mask may not be sufficient when addressing co Kim Dung’s story or when listening to the “Others” of colonialism speak for and about themselves. Concurrently, calling the mask or masqueraded identities “resemblance,” where the performer holds “no ‘itself’” and the mask too is overriding considered fabricated and false, may be discrediting to the potential power constituted through mimetic or farcical iterations.

It is unlikely that co Kim Dung would agree to descriptions of herself as a resemblance without an itself to hide from view. During the masquerade, co Kim Dung feels she had to hide her “true” revolutionary allegiance and intentions. The French received an
electrifying jolt when they realized just what kind of powerful *selves*, in concerted revolt, they were up against: fourteen-year-old girls confronted them with so much determined *being*, it was the colonizers’ world that became a crumbling semblance. Again, as addressed in the previous chapter, it is insufficient to cast repetition as just fake, or lacking real substance. Likewise, to render the mask *simply* an empty form—a shell needing to be filled with something more real—is to overlook its dynamic, covalent power to shape and be shaped, to manipulate while also being manipulated, through performance.

For the guerrilla fighters, the performance of colonial mimicry and dress-up is critically different than the mutually desired semblance Bhabha describes. In co Kim Dung’s narrative, mimetic decadence is deployed in the service of self-aware sedition. Bhabha writes that “[m]imicry repeats rather than re-presents,” but it seems that co Kim Dung and her comrades are both repeating and re-presenting in a performance of luxuriant “mimicry and mockery” in which the girls themselves explosively emerge as figures of “resemblance and menace,” in multiple knowable and unfathomable masks (*Location* 125, 123). They re-present, re-presence themselves, through repetition. Repeating and re-presenting are not polarized; they are integral. Repeating, as sameness and adaptive alteration, operates as a way to re-fashion the old and already done into something familiar yet different though re-doing, bringing something re-newed into the world. In other words, presence is always already, in part, a form of re-presenting of re-presencing that involves repetition’s deft sleight-of-hand: of seeming like pure indexicality when really, alteration and sameness are at play between (Diamond 1996; Madison, “Performance” 1998) and within repetitions (Pollock 1999).
In co Kim Dung’s story, repetition does not simply generate an(other) act, a semblance or re-semblance, but is the constituting activity of radical, insurgent, world-remaking substance. The recitation of the “extra element[s]” of the stereotypical everyday, “[t]he ‘insignificant detail’ inserted into the framework that supports it makes the commonplace produce other effects” (de Certeau, Practice 89). Together with her comrades, multiple, conflictual and congruent performativities and extra, (in)significant details, are wedded and woven in repetitions—performativities of Frenchified high society, proper Vietnamese femininity, radical anti-colonial communism, Vietnamese nationalism and ancestral devotion—to constitute a substantive, shattering, and halting intervention into the world as it had previously been operating. With her silk-gloved hand, co Kim Dung silently pulls the pin on the grenade. She tosses it up, into the air and over her head. The grenade spins and whirls. Eyes look up. For a moment, time is slowed, before it is pressed sharply into an instantaneous fast-forwarded destruction. One performativity stumbles and shatters. Bodies break. Lives end. The colonial show cannot go on. Fire. Smoke. Destruction. Death. The exclusive space of the Majestic stage has been exploded into the public theater of war.

Looking Luxurious and Overturning Affluence

As co Kim Dung tells her story, she describes wanting to look the part through performing, but this is messy territory so she stresses a distinction between practicing indulgence and being indulgent. “You are expected to look like a queen.” The stress on expected marks her masquerade as a duty, a performance command that she must follow. “She did dress up, make up” in order to “look luxurious.” Nhina’s careful, repetitive wording makes clear this is a critical masquerade, but co Kim Dung’s affective remembering
blurs the boundaries and distinctions between appearing, feeling, and being. This point is further complicated by co Kim Dung’s affluent history. At the theater, co Kim Dung masks her wealth by playing it; through masquerade’s delightful “deliberate” “overstat[ing],” she keeps a delicious double-secret of the present charade and a not-so-distant memory of taboo privilege (2). As Della Pollock states, a “secret is itself two-faced”; it exists “[a]s a secret, embedded in secrecy, it double talks, permeating the delicate membranes that keep inside from out” (Telling 193).

Co Kim Dung must not confuse the inside from the outside, yet the feeling of enjoying the excesses of indulgence compounded by the pleasures of masquerading a secret, muddy the waters between the euphoria of revolutionary purity and the forbidden attraction of bourgeois frivolity. Co Kim Dung’s mission is based on and steeped in extravagance: a special meal, sumptuous clothes, the purchase of candies, expensive tickets, jewelry, perfume, and make up. In contrast, within her guerrilla training co Kim Dung and her comrades perform daily rejection of the colonial and colonized lifestyles and ideologies. In this mission, she must participate in the excess she both rejects and enjoys in order to dismantle its oppressive power. Co Kim Dung and her comrades overcome colonial decadence through performing it in a trumping eruption of usurping excess that overtakes the colonizers waste and oppression by turning opulence (useful or socially valuable, desired waste) into refuse (non-useful, socially expelled waste) in the form of exploded buildings and “wasted,” dis-membered bodies.

As she tells it, co Kim Dung’s family recognized and rejected their privilege. Yet it is clear co Kim Dung did know how to practice and perform wealth from having lived within its decadent folds. Now, the pearl, jade, and gold rings on her fingers are some of the few
visible traces of her affluent past. As a young girl, co Kim Dung knew how to operate the technologies and bodily practices of privilege. It is this knowledge, coupled with her enthusiasm, that caused her to be chosen for the Majestic Theater mission. The mission became an opportunity for co Kim Dung to use her expertise and simultaneously reject it by skilfully performing its subversion. In her retelling, co Kim Dung does not hide her affluent background but she does frame the lifestyle of the theatergoing Saigon elite, the “employees of the French,” as decadent while emphasizing her family’s sacrifices, support, and commitment to the Viet Minh. After telling me about her family’s jewelry business, and how they supported the anti-colonialists, Co Kim Dung is quick to add that in the aftermath of the French defeat in 1954, her family switched to owning a rice-processing factory in order to better “help the communists.”

That co Kim Dung and others in the performance group came from upper and middle class families is not uncommon. Finding an “unsettling” prevalence of upper and middle class backgrounds amongst founding Party members and leaders, and the elision of these less than humble backgrounds in his study of revolutionary prison memoirs, Peter Zinoman states, “[o]ne of the striking things about the VWP [Vietnamese Worker’s Party] is the high percentage of its early leaders who sprang from an elite background,” such that in “Bernard Fall’s comprehensive study of party leadership in the1950’s approximately 75 percent of high-level party cadres come from solidly middle-class or upper-class families” (38). Middle-class backgrounds are “actively obscured” in written revolutionary prison memoirs, “by the obsessive comparisons offered between prisons and schools,” where the evocation of “colonial prisons as the ‘universities of the Vietnamese revolution’ conveniently draws attention away from the fact that the leaders of this explicitly proletarian and peasant
revolution were products of the most elite educational institutions the colonial state had to offer” (39). Co Nhut presented citational narratives relating the prisons to schools but Co Kim Dung excuses, or overturns, her affluence in a different manner. Co Kim Dung’s story shows that her knowledge of how to perform affluence was an invaluable, necessary skill for the communist insurgents. Masquerading affluence, and using her class-based knowledge for the revolution, enables Co Kim Dung to overturn her inherited privilege, proving her allegiance to the communist front.

Co Kim Dung’s role in the successful, sensational theater bombing; her highly publicized death sentencing; and her fortuitous release from prison on a prisoner trade with the French allows her to “reconcile [her] inherited class background with [her] adopted ideological inclinations” by narrating her revolutionary masquerade and having her story narrated by the communists as a model performance of voluntary, fearless, explosive class-rejection (Zinoman 39). Her performance of radical insurgency, and later her death sentence, proves her willingness to give and risk anything and everything for the revolution. However, as Trinh T. Minh-ha reminds, as a matter of necessary up-ending, “[o]f all the layers that form the open (never finite) totality of “I,” which is to be filtered out as superfluous, fake, corrupt, and which is to be called pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic? Which indeed, since all interchange, revolving n an endless process? (According to the context in which they operate, the superfluous can become the real; the authentic can prove fake; and so on)” (94). Keeping categories of identity separate is always a delicate balance, even when not willfully performing added layers of subversive masquerade.
Narrative Geographies

As we near the narrative’s climax, co Kim Dung heightens the suspense by tracing the mission in terms of familiar geography. She locates me and Nhina within her past by planting the story in the materiality of familiar streets, the streets through which we travel during every ordinary day. But June 10th, 1948 becomes a non-ordinary day. The scene is set “right around the corner from here,” where we sit at co Kim Dung’s table in her modest home. Only a few streets away. Sixty years ago. The Majestic Theater was near the Saigon River, off of what is now Dong Khoi street in the heart of downtown Saigon. The cinema is no longer there but the adjacent Majestic Hotel still stands. The hotel is regal and white with black trim. It has stained glass windows, elegantly sloping walls, and a rooftop balcony for viewing the river, where one can relax and feel removed from the noise and dirt of the streets. Today the sidewalks are brimming with tank-top wearing tourists fumbling with maps while unsuccessFully shooing away peddlers.

With a newly restored facelift to smooth away the traces of communist mismanagement and disrepair, as the city hurriedly remakes itself for ever-burgeoning tourism and business, the hotel still has the feel of old French Indochine. For all the years that have passed, the colonial style continues to inspire an uncanny rise of nostalgic romance in the hearts of unsuspecting tourists and expatriates. The alluring pull of the colonial stereotype is still strong, and these days boldly re-striking its fashionable poses with a sly smile, new paint, cosmopolitan luxury high-rise villas, and souvenir shops selling Indochine- geisha eveningwear and reproduced propaganda poster commie-kitsch t-shirts, side by side. Colonialism and communism have become lucrative brands that can now occupy the same clothes rack or window display. Now the streets are full of humming motorbikes and
rumbling cargo trucks night and day. The river is the color of milk chocolate: fast-moving, full of wooden boats and neon billboards, and littered with plastic bags, bottles, and bobbing bunches of water hyacinth. In 1948 there must have been fewer people, more bicycles, horses and carriages, but the same fast-flowing river and thick, humid air. After sharing a special dinner together, the girls are ready to proceed:

Co K.D./Nhina: They started out from,
    A, the base
    Which is located around
    Pham Ngoc Thach street,
    And Vo Thi Sau street,
    Right around the corner from here.

They got out from two cyclos,
They went in, a pairs,

She asks if you know,
The name for Dong Khoi street before—
It was
Catinat, Catinat.
French?

[Nhina asks for co Kim Dung’s verification.]

Yes, Catinat.
That is the street they take.
“Rue Catinat” during French times. “Tu Do” during the short-lived Republic of Vietnam. “Dong Khoi” today. The street is one of the central arteries pulsing through the heart of the city. Co Kim Dung’s question causes me to remember that today the streets in Vietnamese towns and cities share the same names. After 1975 the new communist government rewrote history and subsequently renamed all the streets in Vietnam after national leaders, martyrs, mythic ancestors, patriotic battles, and historic dates according to their version of the past. Every city’s specific, local past was overwritten with the same centrally-planned national narrative sent down from Hanoi.

Communist Party leaders materialized the (new) history by sinking it into the streets. Catinat—Tu Do—Dong Khoi. Today, as people move through the city, they time-travel within their re-scribed postcolonial past. As they speed down crowded boulevards on their motorbikes, their bodies are incorporated into the geo-historical corpus of the nation. Like blood pulsing within the body, they flow and course through the veins and arteries of the city, circulating within the historical corporeality of the state. This physical inscription of history on everyday place causes people both to remember and to forget their past. (Dien Bien Phu is the victory battle over the French, but it is also the street where I get my dry cleaning done.) The mundane, the profane, the exalted, are all enmeshed together within the daily masquerade of Ho Chi Minh City’s simultaneously abundant and destitute streets.

The mention of Dong Khoi in co Kim Dung’s story causes me to remember an evening when I found myself talking with a taxi driver while heading downtown. We are on Dong Khoi street, speeding past café Givral, where the bombing Graham Green wrote about in _The Quiet American_ occurred in the middle of the boulevard. Café Givral is only a few blocks up from the Majestic Hotel where co Kim Dung carried out her bombing four years
earlier. In the taxi, we stream by the old American embassy building, and the rooftop from which Americans fled in the last hours before the “fall of Saigon.” I walk down these streets every day. History is so thick here it has calcified itself into the concrete, yet at the same time the past is also vulnerable to being washed away with the monsoon rains. “You know,” the taxi driver says, “this street use to be Rue Catinat in the French days. Then the Americans came and the Saigon government changed the name to ‘Tu Do,’ meaning ‘Freedom Street.’ Then, the northerners came, called the street “Dong Khoi,” and took away our freedom!” He laughs. I laugh too. When the north took over Saigon, they renamed Tu Do Street, “Dong Khoi,” after a popular peasant uprising in the Mekong Delta. Freedom Street became “General Uprising” Street and Saigon became Ho Chi Minh City. Many things changed, and many things stayed strangely the same. The cabby tells this joke with lightness. He smiles, shrugging away the seriousness of “losing freedom” and decades of what he might call civil war, not national liberation or reunification. What else is there to do but tell the joke? He drives these streets every day. This is where he lives. Life goes on. He must go on. He has learned how to remember and how to forget in order to continue moving, driving, and living-on.

**The Sinful, Sensuous, Sensory Pleasures of Revolution**

My thoughts come back to co Kim Dung. Walking down Rue Catinat—soon to be Tu Do—and then Dong Khoi, on the way to the theater, the girls stop for candy:

Co K.D./Nhina: They stop in

They stop in front of a

Indian candy shop,
In order to buy candies there,
Yah, they did buy candies there.
It was very expensive
Ah---

Rivka: In order to be appear normal?

Co K.D./Nhina: Yes, I think so.

 Appearing. Feeling. Looking. Being. Why did they buy candies? “In order to appear normal?” While listening to the sumptuous descriptions of the masquerade (insurgency) ball I wonder, is this scene a place where, “the repressed carnivalesque has returned in the ambivalent mixture of attraction and repulsion,” as co Kim Dung subversively re-dresses and reckons with her inherited social class, both at the time of the bombing and now again, through remembering (Tseelon citing Tseelon, 1998, 8)? As co Kim Dung (re)makes herself up, through re-dressing (1948) and remembering (2005) is “What has been expelled as other,” wealth, individualism, capitalism, the colonial, the colonized, irreverent decadence, “return[ing] as the object of horror and fascination, nostalgia and longing” (8)?

At the time of the bombing co Kim Dung was repudiating wealth and everything considered to be tainted by colonial or feudal power. Did she feel a sense of nostalgia or longing for the more decadent life she once lived as she donned borrowed jewelry, perfume, and the white ao dai? These days, in the resistance, we eat only a little bit of rice and some steamed morning glory vines if we are lucky. I remember eating my first French chocolate after school one day when I was eight years old. It was wrapped in silver foil and tasted so delicious, I asked my mother for more. If taboo sentiments (such as enjoying, wishing for, or
dreaming of opulence) are stirred, can these feelings be justified through the prevailing, subversive intentions of the masquerade? That is, the girls are not there to take pleasure in the social life and leisure of the cinema; they are only there to enjoy the experience in so far as their enjoyment becomes a means of successfully executing the act of rebellion. *We are here to perform a revolutionary mission, interrupting the decadence of the colonial life with our own farcical reality play. Expensive perfumes and candies help us play the part . . . we use these “props” for “show” . . . but, hmmm, these lemon drops do melt away so deliciously on the tongue . . .*

Is a fourteen-year-old’s delight at dressing- and making-up permissible, or dangerously degenerate, in the eyes of the party? Is co Kim Dung allowed to enjoy this perilous and decadent mission for its luxurious thrill, when the pleasures of dressing up and joining the festivities of an elite crowd are not easily separable from the excitement of performing a subversive, secret mission? What about now, as she remembers the story; does she ever yearn for the adventurous days of her youth when she carried out secret missions, wielded great power, and helped to transform the political-cultural landscape? The excitement and care with which co Kim Dung describes the masquerade spreads to me and Nhina. Following co Kim Dung’s affects and gestures we admire her costume, laugh with amazement, “practice” hiding the grenade with our hands, and listen intently in breathless suspense.

No matter how co Kim Dung felt during the actual mission, shortly afterward while trying to escape, later that evening when trying to sleep, or when in prison awaiting execution, the story is now told with exuberant pleasure. Co Kim Dung enjoys telling this story and in so doing she transports me and Nhina into the pleasures of imaginatively
remembering her story as well. On the currents of pleasure, we follow Trinh’s mandate: “The story depends upon every one of us to come into being. It needs us all, needs our remembering, understanding, and creating what we have heard together to keep on coming into being” (119). We collude with co Kim Dung in the process of narrative becoming. Suspense builds with every sensory detail:

Co K.D./Nhina: And they also did prepare some sort of
Of, special smell.
Special perfumes,
Really expensive,
In order to be, be like
Rich ladies

[Nhina pauses to listen to co Kim Dung.]

Ah—
You know,
The reason they did that
Is because they would like to—
To get, to get the smell when you use weapons
To make it disappear.

Rivka: Oh, to hide the smell.

Co K.D./Nhina: Yah, to hide the smell.
When you keep a,
Or attack with weapons.
The grenades is,
The grenades is put
At the bottom of her purse,
And she cover it with ah,
Paper and stuff like cosmetics.

To her [co Kim Dung],
The enemy has got
Some weakness,
First,
They undervalue [sic] ladies,
They, they [co Kim Dung and her comrades] were considered as
Kids, as kids.
So, the enemy probably see them
As, just kids who join the cinema for fun.

“Hide.” “Keep.” “Cover.” “Disappear.” Co Kim Dung and her comrades play their masquerade well, going so far as to “cover” the gunpowder scent of the grenades with the smell of wealth: they are stinking rich instead of stinking of revolution.

As they enter the Majestic Theater with the other cinemagoers, co Kim Dung describes feeling “very confident,” even “at the moment when her purse was checked.” She “opened her purse and, ahm, showed them the ticket.” After being searched, the girls go into the theater. They choose their seats carefully, sitting in the row just in front of the French navy. They are planning to throw the grenades backwards, over their head and into the section where the French sailors, who just arrived to Saigon that evening, are seated. Co Kim Dung emphasizes the deliberate selection and placement of the seats, demonstrating
their intent of targeting the French Navy, not non-military French or Vietnamese civilians. However, there is ambivalence in her gesture that simultaneously speaks toward the rationalization of their use of violence. Following co Kim Dung’s careful explanation of their purposeful choice of seats in the cinema, she describes the civilians who go to theater as “not good,” aiding the other side as “French officials, officers, employees [. . .] they are like French servants [. . .] anti-communist, anti-Viet Minh.” The impression with which I am left is that they are targeting the French Navy, but if other theatergoers are harmed in the process, that is not only the unfortunate cost of warfare; the presence of the civilians in the theater in the first place is questionable.

**Remembering and Forgetting Violence**

Nhina and I are enjoying the story. Yet, while I sit at co Kim Dung’s table sharing her phenomenal story and tea, I feel unsettled. Something is missing. The absence emerges from the excesses of the story and the taboos they summons. The palpable enjoyment of putting on costumes, *as if* for a masquerade ball. Joining in the decadent jubilation of the colonial theater. The attention to details: expensive perfume, candy, make-up and borrowed jewelry. The deadly explosion leaving buildings and lives in wreckage. As I listen, the omission of the material messiness and ethical entanglement of enacting violence is glaring. These critical details have been forgotten, or deliberately left out of, co Kim Dung’s description. What about the use of violence? She says between twenty and thirty soldiers died, were killed, and approximately fifty people were wounded. Died. Killed. Wounded. These words, and their complementary statistics, sanitize the wreckage.

Violence is omnipresent in the story, central to its climax, and is the central fact from which other subsequent stories flow, yet it is never directly addressed. Violence is an ever-
present shadow looming over us at the table and haunting this story. The violence lurking between the lines, within the sighs, and uncomfortable laughter of this story are part of a brutal landscape, and way of life, that comes with the everyday atrocity and banality of warfare. The question I wanted to ask during the interview awakens again, coming to my lips now as I listen to the tape and as I write. I want(ed) to ask: *Within the contexts of condemning the use of violence by the French and the Americans in Vietnam, and now the Americans again in Iraq, how did you then and how do you now think of your own practice of lethal warfare?* This is a question I do not ask. I wanted to ask it, but during the interview it seemed like inappropriate territory. At the time, I decided to see if she would bring it up later on, or if I could sense critical engagement with these questions through more oblique comments. I wait and listen.

**Narrative Pedagogy: How to Hide a Grenade in Your Purse**

After quick mention of the civilians in the theater, co Kim Dung comes back to the mission’s tangible and experiential “facts,” noticeably veering away from discussions of “politics” as I have observed her do several times throughout our conversations. Sometimes I was surprised by invisible walls that would suddenly spring up during conversations with the women, while other times they expressed very candid, personal responses. The veterans were often inconsistent regarding the topics that they were willing or unwilling to discuss. Whereas some of the veterans were hesitant to tell me too many details about how they hid documents or carried out their secret tasks (almost as if they felt they must keep this knowledge a national secret for the “next time” it is needed), co Kim Dung voluntarily shows me and Nhina precisely how she hid the grenade from view while her purse was searched at the theater (almost as if to help us in case we ever needed to use this skill).
The most clearly excluded topics for conversation for co Kim Dung were issues relating to Vietnam’s loans from the World Bank and desire to join the WTO. I asked a few outright questions about her opinions, comments that I thought would be considered benign, only to find myself at the limit of co Kim Dung’s willingness to discuss “political” issues with a foreigner. The theater bombing story operates differently. It is not a taboo subject or story, but rather a prized history of highest honor and a marker of personal sacrifice and commitment to the revolution. However, certain kinds of questions pertaining to the story are disallowed, so obviously and powerfully silenced that I know, clearly without being told, precisely which areas are off limits. After locating the boundary in our conversation about development and trade earlier in our exchanges, I conclude that asking outright about the details and ethics of her use of violent force would deliver me to another wall of polite refusal and possibly put co Kim Dung on the defensive. My decision is made. I will obey the unspoken yet palpable grounds for the discussion as they have been set by co Kim Dung.

Continuing on after listening to co Kim Dung, Nhina imagines aloud and asks me:

Nhina: I can imagine her purse,
Can you imagine it?

[Co Kim Dung holds up her own purse, sitting next to us on the table, demonstrating how she opened the latch for the guards and showing how she hid the grenade.]

Co K.D./Nhina: You know,
When they check ah, the purse and,
The grenade stay ah in the,
Palm,
I mean the whole of your hand,

Of,

Like this,

You hold it,

You hold it.

They [the guards] just see cosmetics.

[Co Kim Dung demonstrates again as she speaks, taking the bottom of her cloth purse in her hand. Nhina also demonstrates. We all hold our hands out and grasp the bottom of her purse in our hands in order to imagine the size and feel of the grenade and how we might hide it. There are audible gasps and some laughter from all of us as we review and practice how the grenades were concealed within co Kim Dung’s purse.]

Rivka: Oh, oh I see!

[More laughter.]

We laugh together throughout the masquerade bombing story, and here especially as we imagine the nerve-wracking search of co Kim Dung’s purse as she enters the theater. What if she had been caught? How did she pass through the inspection so smoothly? Perhaps co Kim Dung’s own excited laughter at the theater served to soften the searcher’s guard, she is just a young girl coming to the cinema for fun with her friends, while also quelling her own nerves and anticipation over executing a successful mission.

During the interview, I remember noticing our laughter. Its awkward, somewhat inappropriate, yet uniting comfort caused me to think of Mikhail Bakhtin’s analysis of the
subversive and powerful functions of laughter. “Terror,” he says “is conquered by laughter” (Rabelais 336). Perhaps the expression of laughter and the farcical, playful dynamics of this particularly feminine masquerade mission enabled co Kim Dung to feel confident and fearless, purging paralyzing doubt and worry from her body? If she ever felt fear creeping into her thoughts, maybe she rejected it with a hearty guffaw or a barely audible chuckle, feeling power in knowing a secret to which few others are privy.

As we take the imaginary grenade in our hands, Nhina, co Kim Dung and I laugh, separately and together, to cover our various dis-comforts with the story’s emergent, exciting violence. We laugh to show our identification with the building of narrative tension and to demonstrate our recognition of the risks co Kim Dung has voluntarily undertaken. “Oh, oh, I see” I exclaim as co Kim Dung passes the purse and imaginary grenade for me to hold and practice concealing. Now I understand how she hid the grenade from view. When the purse was opened for search, co Kim Dung held the bottom of the purse in her clutched hand so that all one could see were the candies and make-up on top. The fancy perfume hid the smell of gunpowder. The girls’ youth, costuming, physical affect, and femininity did the rest of the concealing. “Oh, oh, I see!”

Actually, I am seeing, but am having some trouble imagining myself in co Kim Dung’s position.64 Co Kim Dung and Nhina continue:

Co K.D./Nhina: The ladies wait until all the French officials,

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64 Later that day in my field notes I write: “I am listening to a story that, if it had taken place today would likely be told within U.S. contexts under the rubric of terrorism. A terrorist bombing. I am listening to these stories, spoken from the lips of a grandmotherly woman who [. . .] as she tells the story, continually invites (obliges) me to eat more cookies. She looks out at me through thick butterfly wing-shaped glasses, tinted blue at the top. She is best known for carrying out the Majestic Theater bombing [. . .]. It is hard to picture, even with all of the state museums, shrines, and propaganda posters dotting the city and all of the personal photographs and government certificates of honor preserved under glass in the veterans’ homes.”
And high rank status,
They are settled down and they, they—

Before, before,
Seeing the main film,
In your country, like you see a—ah,

Rivka: A newsreel?
Or a short film?

Co K.D./Nhina: Yah, a newsreel,
And then a short break,
And then it happen.

They ah, get the grenade out
During the time the newsreel was shown.

Yah, you have to remove something,
And then you have to,
Keep it tight,
Because if you cannot—
You destroy yourself.
You damage yourself.

Nhina asks if I could ever do this. I say probably not. Could you do this Nhina? “You [could] destroy yourself. You [could] damage yourself.” “I don’t know” she answers. “Yeah, I don’t know” I agree in response. Co Kim Dung says that as she waited in her seat,
time slowed down. Her thoughts and bodily sensations quickened while everything and
everyone else seemed to slip into slow motion. Waiting for the newsreel to finish, she asks
herself, “Why is it taking so long?” Finally it finishes. Then, before she can hesitate and
think too much, she pulls the pin. There is no turning back. Co Kim Dung is the first to
throw her grenade and the other three girls follow suit.

**Breaking and Remaking**

With a toss of her hand, the grenade is flung up and backwards. It lingers, in slow
time, spiraling back through the air. Time pauses for a moment only to be sucked into a
vacuum and exploded outward as if on fast-forward. This is the moment in the masquerade
where the trick is turned, the mask is thrown off and “[t]he paradox of the masquerade
appears [...] present[ing] truth in the shape of deception” (Tseelon 5). The girls do not
throw off their own masks as much as they blow away the decadent sets and burst apart the
bodies of the colonial masquerade. The girls keep themselves concealed even while they
forcibly unmask colonial power, inciting a violent, destructive interruption that they hope
will continue unfolding as radical, revolutionary transformation. The historical
performativities of colonialism are being subversively assumed and utilized to trick and
interrupt itself, enabling the self-ascribed counter-stance of Vietnamese communism
performativities to destroy the previous order and begin inscribing its own performances and
seizures of power.

Co Kim Dung’s revolutionary masquerade invites comparison with Bakhtin’s sense
of the carnivalesque. In this narrative, revolution can be conceptualized as a figurative and
subversive “feast of becoming, change, and renewal [...] hostile to all that [is seemingly]
immortalized and completed,” solidified and secured within the colonized Vietnamese
landscape (Rabelais 10). Un-doing the performativity of the colonial masquerade “reveals the essence of the grotesque,” with its carnivalesque play of and with the body in its “relat[ion] to transition, metamorphoses, [and] the violation of natural boundaries” (40). Co Kim Dung and her comrades stretch carnivalesque play beyond its limits until its elasticity snaps.

In the aftermath of the explosion, the bodies attending and participating in this colonial masquerade are dis-organized, dis-articulated, and in some cases dis-membered. They are re-made and un-done as grotesque excess and rendered expendable. The subversive bodies are also, differently, grotesquely transformed through the explosive unmasking. Echoing sentiments similar to those of Bakhtin and Bhabha, Tseelon expresses, “[t]he enemy is” often thought of as “clearly marked and external to the system, whereas the Other is the enemy from within,” so that “[o]ften lacking an observable sign of difference, the Other becomes a source of ambiguity, hence a threat” (5-6). The bodies of co Kim Dung and her comrades are monstrous in that they can manipulate and perform too much signification at once, they are excessive, doubling the trick and threat through “lacking an observable sign of difference” (6). They at once embody too much and too little; they possess too much signification and yet not enough difference to be discernible as “Others.”

This fear of the subversive, camouflaged Other, this “enemy from within,” is the great nemesis of power. At different times, in their own ways, the French, the Americans, the anti-communist Republic of Vietnam, and the ruling communist state all fall victim to their own obsessive paranoia over the transgressing, camouflaged “Other.” As such, it may be said that “[t]he mask,” and the performance of masquerade, “shares some basic troubling features with the [familiar looking] stranger in modernity: both defy order, introduce ambiguity and
suggest lack of commitment and the questionability of belonging and not belonging,” so that
their “modern and postmodern usages are multiple and shifting, metaphorical and real,
expressing danger and relief” (Tseelon 6). If fourteen-year-old girls are the masked and
masquerading Others and strangers of modernity, who can ever possibly be trusted or
known?

What happened next? What happened after they threw the grenade? There is no
more laughter. Co Kim Dung and Nhina soberly describe total disorder:

Co K.D./Nhina: Chaos,

Chaos, a mess,
And they try to find a way out,
I mean,
They try to find an escape.
Yah, ahh.
You know,
Because,
When the mission gets done,
You are expected to
Escape on your own.
Like you know you are with friends,
But you are supposed to ignore
Each other.
And then,
They ran away.
“When the mission gets done,” the comrades are to disassociate completely, treating one another as strangers. “Escape on you own.” “Ignore each other.” You must “find a way out [. . .] find an escape,” and “run away.” Running away is their final disappearing act.

Although the girls have revealed their trick, exploding the pomp and circumstance of the theater into a war zone, co Kim Dung and her comrades attempt to maintain their cover, slipping away through the smoke and chaos. Through performing multiple performativities at once, most obviously their subversive colonial drag act, co Kim Dung and her comrades have un-masked and un-done parts of the colonial performative’s public façade and internal psyche, shaking the very grounds and structures of dominant power. Here as elsewhere, the veterans understand that “radical” undoing, as its etymological origin implies, means shaking and unmaking structures from their roots. Co Kim Dung and the other performance group women know that radical performances are “acts that question or re-envision ingrained social arrangements of power,” and that radical revolutionary performances rearrange those powers through a combination of selective invitation and strategic force (Cohen-Cruz 1).

**Radical Revolution in the Streets**

The veterans understand full well that the very processes of performance that instantiate and produces power and substance can also be made to reveal its weaknesses so that, “if the ground of [] identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity, the spatial metaphor of the ‘ground’ [can be] displaced [] and revealed as a stylized configuration [. . .] [showing the] groundlessness of this ‘ground’” and thus the possibility for change (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 141). Radical revolution pulls up and overthrows dominant social and cultural norms from their roots, tills the soil, and begins seeding the social landscape for the cultivation of “new” governing structures and practices.
The performance group women’s enduring belief in the possibilities for social transformation, and their tendency to act on and live by this optimism, is one of the shared qualities I most admire about the veterans.

Through performing the Majestic theater bombing, co Kim Dung participates in violent, radical revolution as a means of seeking out and making renewal. She explodes the private venue of the colonial cinema into a “porous,” “public by-way[]” of the street, making once-restricted space into an open “arena for the display and creation of power” (Cohen-Cruz 1, 6, 4). Her radical performance opens up and makes space for itself for “[l]ike community, truly public space may be ever longed for but non-existent materially,” as “space is always controlled by someone and exists somewhere, so is inevitably marked by a particular class or race and not equally accessible to everyone” (2). Co Kim Dung’s performance of radical revolution can be seen as an act of altruism, and is expressed in this light by her comrades. She selflessly “offer[s] [her] body for [a] common goal, without the safety of an impermeable frame” (3). Kim Dung’s performance “draws people who comprise a contested reality into what its creators hope will be a changing script” and “strives to transport everyday reality into something more ideal” (1). Yet, she uses violence to achieve that something more ideal. Does violence discredit, fully or in part, those who employ it and undercut the potential enactments of the alternative ideals for which it is said to serve?

Radical revolution is often discursively constructed and materially enacted through violent upheaval and by way of the “grossly carnivalesque traits” of death, destruction, and killing, where “[d]eath, the dead body, blood as a seed buried in the earth, rising for another life—it is one of the oldest and most widespread themes” (Bakhtin, Rabelais 327). The performative story of radical revolution commonly enacts an inevitable tale, a teleological
performativity, of “death inseminating mother earth and making her bear fruit once more,” of initiating and justifying death (one, five, twenty, three hundred, two hundred thousand, as many as “necessary”) in order to cleanse and create a new culture, a new people (327).

As I sat listening to co Kim Dung’s narrative and as I listen again, transcribe, and read it over and over, my own “com[ing] into being” (Trinh 119) entails conflictual affect. I feel great admiration for co Kim Dung’s daring willingness to fight unjust conditions and for her unyielding belief in people’s ability to enact world-remaking social transformation. Yet I also feel jarred and unsettled by the violence of this radical performance and the omission of its closer examination and discussion within her narrative. As this story comes to an unsteady close and opens into another chapter of co Kim Dung’s revolutionary life, I find myself still wondering: How should I understand co Kim Dung’s use of violent force and the apparent sanitization of brutality alongside her condemnation of others’ violence and the absence of direct, shared reflection of her own ethical positioning within this story? What do her omissions and silences tell me or teach me about her appraisal of her own life and about her views on society more generally? What kinds of knowing or recognition might be expressed through her silence? What forms of forgetting and remembering am I witnessing? Silence, or omission, of course, is not always the space of forgetting. Later that afternoon, after speaking with co Kim Dung, I wrote in my field notes:

I will always remember the smell and sticky, sweet and bitter taste of the preserved kumquats we were eating as co Kim Dung spoke. A strong taste. A deep red-orange hue. The fruits pressed flat in the shape of an open flower. The girls’ excitement in the theater. Sweet and pungent. Throwing the grenades up and backwards. Her hands going up over her head to show me. The destruction and chaos. The bitterness of biting into the rind. The emptiness of co Kim Dung’s belly in jail. Sweet. Bitter. Fearless. Perhaps afraid.
Performing Poetry in the Colonial Prison

A few months after co Kim Dung and her comrades “ran away” from the bombing at the Majestic cinema, she was caught. While under torture, another comrade told the French authorities that co Kim Dung was one of the perpetrators of the bombing. She was arrested on the street and taken to jail. Her family found out about her imprisonment and charges by seeing her picture in the newspaper. At first, co Kim Dung tried to evade the police by telling them her name was Van and showing them her fake documents. But soon, they discovered her “real identity” and put her in a prison cell where she was to await trial. The room measured “two meters by one meter [. . .] very small.” Tracing the shape of the kitchen table round which we are gathered, co Kim Dung says, “it was very small, like the size of this table.” The cell had a dirt floor, one dim light bulb, a straw mat for sleeping, and a “small hole to let the air in” and to “try to see outside.” The bulb was left on all day long. Sometimes it ran out and wouldn’t be replaced for weeks at a time. “I lived in darkness.” As co Kim Dung later describes, “[w]hen I was released from prison,” nearly eight years later, “it was impossible for me to see . . . I mean physically, I could not see because of spending so much time in the dark.”

Recalling the darkness, her increasing blindness, and the small confines of the prison cell, co Kim Dung’s eyes become heavier and deeper. She looks at me and Nhina as she speaks, but her gaze is more distant. In contrast to the exuberance and fearless certainty co Kim Dung expressed feeling during her successful mission, she now describes being “afraid” and “alone.” She longed for her family, for some form of company:

Co K.D./Nhina: I mean the first feeling,

The first experience,
I am afraid of isolation,
Of being alone.

I desire for,
Voice,
Among my family members.
Smile or laughter among friends.

The solution is,
Like ahm,
I keep myself away from the feeling of loneliness
Or isolation like
I, I was singing,
I, I, I was reading poem.

Just the way I, I would like to
Create some voice
Or some sounds around me.

Rivka:  So, she would actually speak these [poems and songs]
Out loud?

Co K.D./Nhina:  Yes.

“I desire for voice.”  But there is no one around her, so co Kim Dung makes her own voice and generates her own companionship.  She is utterly alone day after day.  She struggles against panic in the small, damp, and dim room.  She feels her eyesight fading,
leaving her in ever greater isolation from the world outside. Nothing can be done about the increasing blindness or the confining prison cell. But she can “create some voice, [] some sounds around me.” On the tape, all of our voices have become softer as co Kim Dung speaks about her time in prison. Co Kim Dung’s voice, in particular, is difficult to discern amidst the hammering construction work going on outside the open window.

While Nhina listens to co Kim Dung she nods her head with proper deference and periodically repeats the respectful “yah, yah” (in Vietnamese, written “a” or “da”) utterances of Vietnamese linguistic practice to show she is listening attentively to an elder. When co Kim Dung finishes a passage, Nhina turns toward me to translate. Feeling the need to get this part of the story right, to accurately and adequately express the gravity of co Kim Dung’s solitude in prison, Nhina staggers on and repeats the pronoun, “I, I, I” as she attempts to translate. Nhina’s “I, I,” makes an uneasy counterpoint to the hammering outside the window. As the workmen beat out their rhythm on the bricks, Nhina rehearses her translation, trying to sort out her own, “I, I” placement “in” and “not in” the prison cell with co Kim Dung. Nhina’s repetition, “I, I,” expresses her effort to position herself in ethical relation to co Kim Dung within this story recognizing that “In this chain and continuum, [she] is but one link” in a story that “is me” but is also “neither me nor mine” (Trinh 122).

This passage should almost be spoken in a whisper, maybe softly sung as a lullaby, but the hammering prohibits a full decrescendo. The doubled narratives, lives, and voices, the slippage and stammer of Nhina’s embodied “I, I, I,” and the distressing, metronomic pulse of the hammering outside combines to form a syncopated, somewhat disjointed melody that sobers but does not lull any of us into an easy sleep.
I have asked Nhina to translate in the first person, embodying co Kim Dung’s voice. Embodying a double-voice can be difficult to maintain and Nhina’s translation often slips in and out of first and third person voices (“I” and “she” referring to co Kim Dung), personal commentary (“I” referring to herself), and collective assertions (“we,” referencing co Kim Dung and herself, and sometimes Vietnamese women or Vietnamese people in general). This slipperiness of translation makes it difficult to separate where one voice and opinion ends and the other begins. As Trinh writes, “[w]hether I accept it or not, the natures of I, I, you s/he, We, we, they, and wo/man constantly overlap” and “display a necessary ambivalence, for the line dividing I and Not-I, us and them, or him and her is not (cannot) always (be) as clear as we would like it to be” (94). More than deciphering precisely whose words, voices, and opinions I am hearing, it is more interesting to look at the place where these gray zones and slippages can be sensed, to consider the possible reasons underlying these melded and rebounding voices, as well as the new kinds of meanings that are formed through the unruly messiness of speech. What is interesting is the “[t]ruth [that] does not make sense” but rather makes critical forms of sensing and knowing through “exceed[ing] meaning and exceed[ing] measure” (123).

In this passage, rather than adding a layer of spoken commentary and analysis to co Kim Dung’s story, Nhina performs her respectful interpretation and her admiration with and through co Kim Dung’s words. Nhina feels the weighted responsibility and necessity of conveying both the story and her respect for co Kim Dung’s life. “I, was singing.” Co Kim Dung speaks her words plainly, with matter-of-fact certitude. “I, I, was singing.” Nhina repeats co Kim Dung’s narrative with heightened emotion and affect, commenting on the story while telling it. Nhina has the dual responsibility of communicating the narrative to me
while honoring co Kim Dung by showing her respectful reception of her story. Nhina’s repetition of “I, I,” shows the slippage between the doubleness of the two “I’s” telling this story and the respectful admiration she wishes to perform for co Kim Dung. Later, after these particular interviews have concluded, I come to realize the extent to which Nhina, through her devoted embodiment of co Kim Dung’s narratives, has repeated and translated these stories into her heart and into a lived practice of thoughtful, continual remembering. Similarly and differently, as we retell co Kim Dung’s past to others, Nhina and I “feel greatly responsible for” these stories “that do[] not really belong to” us, but we also feel and “enjoy the irresponsibility of the pleasure obtained through the process of transferring” the “pleasure in the copy, pleasure in the reproduction” that remains faithful through the dynamism of citation and alteration, preserving the story by telling it, letting it go, encouraging it to live-on within and beyond us following co Kim Dung’s example (Trinh 122).

Co Kim Dung was in prison from the age of fourteen to twenty-one. She lived each of those days expecting that at some point she would be executed by the French. Early on, she describes the “solution” to her “feeling of loneliness,” impending death, and “isolation” in terms of performance. She would sing and compose poetry out loud. “I desire for voice,” co Kim Dung states and Nhina repeats clearly, without hesitation. Co Kim Dung must perform for herself, becoming her own, self-generating, source of energy. In the absence of others, she performs witness to her own suffering. To survive, she “create[s] some voice [] some sounds around me.” She must personify herself, and in a sense, double herself through her voice so that she may have company and witnesses. “In the process of storytelling, speaking and listening refer to realities that do not involve just the imagination” which is
critical, but is rendered all the more powerful when connected to a speaking body, even one’s
own, that can be materially “seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched” (Trinh 121).

When the light bulb is on, she reads and recites the poems composed and left on the
walls by previous prisoners. Speaking their words, she embodies and enlivens these
anonymous lives, making her own company and companionship by way of others’ traces.
These ghosts, the words and spirits of those who survived and perished before her, become
c o Kim Dung’s confidants. The poems are scratched into the walls. These words, as remains
of bodies and lives once lived, of spectral others who can understand the depth of her
loneliness and fear, are revitalized through co Kim Dung’s voice, and in turn, replenish her
with an optimism and endurance that transcends the mortality of the individual body. She
revives these unnamed ghosts as companions of shared hardships while the spirits, in turn,
breathe sustenance into co Kim Dung’s voice and body, enabling her to live-on through a
lifeworld shadowed by too much death.

With a small bowl of rice and five liters of water each day for drinking and washing,
c o Kim Dung’s physical body becomes increasingly undernourished. It is impossible to keep
clean. She cannot rid herself of lice and stomach diseases. Sometimes, when sick or having
her period, co Kim Dung takes off her clothes and wraps herself in the straw bedding mat to
keep her only pair of clothes from becoming soiled and to hide her body from the guards who
“look in to check if I am dead or alive.” She knows too well that the guard’s watchful eyes
do not exist as just a passive gaze. On numerous occasions, the guards and prison
supervisors put co Kim Dung through physical and psychological torture. They interrogate
her for hours on end, but she does not give up any information. She keeps quiet even after
being given the “water treatment,” where prisoners’ stomachs are beaten after they are forced
to ingest gallons of water containing soap or lime. She also survives the “air tours,” a
euphemism used by the veterans to describe the practice by which prisoners’ bodies are hung
indefinitely, and sometimes sent whirling through the air, by their arms or legs. These forms
of abuse are now familiar, commonly described tortures, just a few among the litany of
organized torment techniques carried out during the colonial and American War periods.
The torturers, “would want to kill your spirit,” early on, “at the first stage,” of your
imprisonment, says co Kim Dung.

All of the women I spoke with describe undergoing systematized torture. During one
interview, co Lien engaged in a string of charade-like depictions of the tortures she
experienced: lying across her couch to illustrate how she was bound, gagged, and beaten;
pressing her fingers on the coffee table to show how bamboo was forced under her
fingernails; lifting her blouse to reveal scars on her belly where cigarettes where put out on
her skin. Listening to the women teaches me this: these pasts must continue to haunt us, to
trouble us. We cannot fully know the depth of others’ suffering, but to not try to better
understand, to look away, or to forget, is a form of passive injustice. It is the practice of
individuals’ passive injustice that too easily can become social, governmentalized
performativities of passive violence. As Dwight Conquergood observed, the “refusal to take
a moral stand is itself a powerful statement of one’s moral position” (“Moral Act” 8).

With this lesson in mind, and with attention to the multiple dimensions of politics at
play in this display of selective recollection, I remember the blue and black paintings
depicting commonly implemented torture techniques hanging on the walls of the War
Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City. Snakes released into prisoners clothing while their
hands and feet are bound. Women hung from the ceiling by a system of ropes and pulleys.
The infrastructures of torture speak to its systematization and legitimization, its shameless continuance and propagation over time, its political legitimacy. Electric wires attached to a woman’s breasts. I remember one veteran telling me how she kept her pregnancy secret while being tortured. If they knew, she thought, they would surely try to harm the baby. The placard below the electricity torture states in choppy English: “Provoking successive electric shocks by connecting up the phone wires with the body of the tortured person. Sensitive parts of the body as [sic] earlobes, fingertips, nipples or genitals were chosen by torturers to discharge the shocks.”

These pictorial references sit beside actual black and white photographs depicting people in the aftermath of torture. They show survivors living precariously on the slippery edge of life. One man, starved to the brink of death, lies on his back because he is too weak to get up. Another picture shows two women with blackened, burned off faces. The plaque, in Vietnamese, English, Korean and Japanese states: “Ms. Ngo Thi Ton and Kieu Thi Tu (two among the 410 female prisoners who were against the order to salute to the “National colors” [Republic of Vietnam flag]) therefore were attacked savagely with prosperous hand grenades.” Each person’s torture—those represented here in the museum and those conspicuously left out—may remain essentially unknowable while recognizable as a social/global atrocity. Accordingly: This did happen. It is always possible. Let it haunt you. To forget this unsightliness, this (in)humanity, is an injustice to those who suffer(ed) and to those who would-will become the next prisoners.

Narrative Inheritance

Through her abusive treatment, co Kim Dung keeps quiet. Despite co Kim Dung’s practice of determined silence under torture, her need for company and “desire for voice”
inspires her to keep singing and reciting the prison wall poetry. Co Kim Dung recites a phrase for Nhina. “Oh! Oh, I remember that one.” Turning to me, Nhina explains that she remembers “feeling the fire inside the poem” when she learned and recited it in grade school. The poem, Nhina says, echoes co Kim Dung’s hardships in prison, giving her a sense of hope to continue.

As Nhina interprets the passage, her own commentary, “I mean,” slips into a collective enunciation of the determination “we have.” This inadvertent slippage expresses Nhina’s internalization of these stories, “feeling the fire inside,” and her respectful connection with co Kim Dung’s and the other veterans’ suffering and struggles. You-I-we-I feel the “fire inside” the “[b]urning inside.” As co Kim Dung speaks to her and as Nhina, in turn, embodies and retells the narratives to me, I am witnessing the transposition, absorption, and continuance of these pasts from one generation to the next. “Words are like fire” Trinh contents, “[t]hey burn and they destroy” making “destroying and saving [. . .] one single process” in the transposition of story over time, spreading the “fire inside” one body to the “[b]urning inside” another (132).

The veterans’ stories are seeping into Nhina’s skin, “[b]urning” in her belly, resonating into relevance through her own voice. Co Kim Dung’s pasts, and the lives and ghosts her stories also carry, and are starting to circulate and live in Nhina. Nhina lends her voice to these pasts and past lives and they, in turn, inspire and sustain her. Embodying co Kim Dung’s story, sliding between “I” and “we,” Nhina is participating in the process of narrative inheritance. Narrative inheritance is an embodied, life-generating and sustaining activity of translation and transposition that is political and hauntological.
Nhina repeats these stories into her own remembering, opening herself to accumulating the breath, gestures, and fragmented pasts of others. In the small exchange taking place before me, between co Kim Dung and Nhina, I see that “any one self is [] ontologically and ethically inextricable from ‘others,’” each self “gains resonance in vibrant relation to others” (Pollock condensing Kelly Oliver’s founding claim regarding subjectivity, Remembering 4). “Every gesture, every word involves our past, present, and future” and the lives of known and unknown others, for “[t]he body never stops accumulating” (Trinh 123). As we listen to and retell each story “I dwell in” others’ pasts, “they dwell in me, and we dwell in each other, more as guest than as owner” making the revivification of the past a “chain of guardianship and of transmission,” passing the “burning inside” from one body to another (123, 121). Nhina continues:

Nhina: The message of the poem is,
   Like:
   In the dark,
   I mean, the surrounding is
   Very bitter,
   But if we have determination,
   If we see through
   Our deeds and the goal ahead,
   And stick to it,
   We will have something rewarding.
   […]
   She felt isolated and,
   That is why she was,
   Usually singing.
and singing some verses, some poems.

Rivka: So she sang to keep her spirits up?

Co K.D./Nhina: Yes, for optimism. She was all by herself in the jail.

“Optimism,” appears again. Co Kim Dung’s mention of optimism awakens memories of similar conversations I have had with other veterans. I hear co Nhut’s voice ringing in my ears: “Optimism, is one of our traditional features.” I remember the story of the old woman finding the jar of fish sauce amidst the ashes of her village. “Luckily we still have that can of fish sauce.” Co Kim Dung “was, usually singing [. . .] for optimism.” Singing for optimism indicates that one does not simply feel or have this optimism, as much as one must make it, perform it into being. Optimism is our national characteristic, our tradition. Optimism is our shared, and personal, survival practice. “Without a doubt, you can feel it, from every Vietnamese.”

The individual is conjoined to the social in the utterance of “every Vietnamese.” Co Kim Dung performs optimism, as the co-sustenance between the self and the social, throughout her years in prison. Here in co Kim Dung’s narratives, and also clearly marked within other veterans’ descriptions, optimism exists as a performed linkage between the individual and their community. Why did she sing? “Yes, for optimism. She was all by herself in the jail.” “I desire for a voice.” To “keep myself away from feelings of
loneliness.” “I would like to create some voice, or some sounds around me.” “That is why she was usually singing [. . .] Yes, for optimism.”

Coupled and layered with co Kim Dung’s explanations, Nhina’s narrative gliding from “I” to “we” in the passage above emphasizes the connections performances of optimism forge between individual selves and their social worlds, as well as the practiced ways in which these performances are taught and transmitted, given as a loving gift and sobering responsibility, over time from one generation to the next. Through the many examples offered to me by the veterans (and also, somewhat differently, by Nhina) I see how optimism operates performatively for the women, on social and individual levels of performance, in the past and the present, as a means of connecting the individual “I” to a greater, strengthening community of “we.” The connecting of “I” to “we” ensures some form of survival even if the individual perishes in prison or on the battlefield. Something of us, from us, a fragment—a story—will continue even though “I” cannot live forever. So, I send off this piece of myself, and the others I carry with me, in this fragment of narrative, for “[o]nce told, the story is bound to circulate; humanized, it may have a temporary end, but its effects linger on and its end is never truly an end” (Trinh 133).

For the veterans, performing the optimism of “we” makes a community of co-constituting subjectivities who together ensure the necessary remembrance of individual spirits and the continuation of one’s life’s work for, with, and through the lives of others. Subjectivity for the performance group women, “is a result of a continual process of witnessing” one another, a “circulation of bodies, images, and language; it is a responsive biosocial loop” powered by an often unspoken sense of a shared past performed together in daily life, through narratives, in rehearsals, and on public stages (Oliver 223). Performances
of optimism connect the “I” to the “we” contemporaneously, as well as trans-temporally and trans-spatially, constellating a community of spirits and ghosts of those dead, living, and yet to be born, all of whom are responsible to one another for their shared survival and for continuing the unending project of making more equitable social worlds. The veterans know that “[t]o preserve is to pass on, not to keep for oneself,” and so they live by this hauntological politics of memory every day, passing-on their lives and their pasts through performances of remembering (Trinh 134).

Despite her feelings of isolation, fear, and loneliness of prison, voicing optimism through songs and poems links co Kim Dung to her contemporaries, her comrades-in-arms; to the long history of ancestral heroines who have come before her; and to her family, who will lovingly tend her spirit in death as they have in life. All are symbolically condensed in the bracelet her father flung through the prison bars. It is sacred contraband, a souvenir, a memento, and an heirloom fraught with its own agency (Love and Kohn 2001).

**The Bracelet: Performative Co-Marking**

Co Kim Dung’s family came to her trial. Like the bombing itself, the trial was a highly publicized affair and was extensively covered in the Saigon newspapers. Co Kim Dung was sentenced to death by the French court. During the late 1940s co Kim Dung, and her legendary contemporary and onetime prison-mate Vo Thi Sau, became two of the youngest Vietnamese girls given death sentences during the colonial era. Vo Thi Sau was taken to Con Dao and, in 1952, at the age of nineteen, became the first woman executed by the French. Co Kim Dung was kept in prison in Saigon until 1954 when she was unexpectedly released on a prisoner trade with the French after their defeat against North
Vietnamese general Giap at the battle of Dien Bien Phu. The age of colonial rule was withering, and through its death, co Kim Dung’s life was renewed.

But after her trial, the future was not yet known or secured, and co Kim Dung was expecting to die. It was just a matter of waiting and doing what she could to prepare for death. However, even in prison, where unending days flood into months and years, futures that seem set in stone by the rule of law may be broken by surprises. As Nhina and co Kim Dung recount:

Co K.D./Nhina: One afternoon when,

When I was putting my mind into [composing] a poem,
I just recognized that there was,
I mean,
Somebody just threw something
Into my room,
And I could not recognize who he was,
A basket,
A small basket,

When I open it,
I saw a bracelet.
With, ah a note that says
“You are expected to wear it,
For, I desire to find you out,
To recognize your dead body later on.”
On the note her father wrote “seven Vietnamese words” that express, as Nhina translates: “You are expected to wear it, for I desire to find you out, to recognize your dead body later on.” “Who sent it,” I ask in limited Vietnamese (Ai cho qua co Kim Dung)? “From her father,” answers Nhina and co Kim Dung together. As co Kim Dung speaks, her eyes grow glassy. She looks quietly away, and then continues. Only a few minutes ago, Nhina and I were awed by her fearlessness at the Majestic Theater. At the theater. In jail. Through torture. On trial. Co Kim Dung endured and carried on without outwardly revealing her fear or sadness. She performed fearlessness and made herself impenetrable. But the gift, and now the memory of the gift—the silver bracelet thrown into her cell after the death sentencing—breaks her into tears. Then and now. At the moment of arrival, and now again in remembering.

The act of remembering causes co Kim Dung’s memory to overflow the borders of the body into the shared space of our conversation. Co Kim Dung’s memory spills into my and Nhina’s imagined remembering. Spilling. Flowing. Seeping. Saturating. As Toni Morrison describes, remembering can be a “flooding,” a “rush of imagination,” of “emotional memory—that the nerves of the skin remember” (305). This form of remembering, as the sensuous flooding and emotional memory of the flesh, teems over the edges of the individual body and flows into others with unexpected force.

Memory as a falling teardrop hits the tabletop and seeps into the hairline cracks in the plastic. Liquid memory begins leaking out of the framed pictures and down the walls leaving yellowing streaks. Breathing in the warm, damp air, co Kim Dung’s memory enters my breath and is absorbed through my pores. I did not grant it entry, and it did not ask permission. I look over at Nhina and see co Kim Dung’s past, as perspiration, gathering on
her forehead and eyelids. There is so much memory in Vietnam, where can all of it go? It fills the air with humidity. It gathers in pools and puddles. It seeps into the soil and streams, gushing down the city streets in monsoon deluges. The land here is supersaturated with memory. So it rushes as the rivulets and great branches of the Mekong River, depositing a rich silt-history into the delta and continuing out to the edges of the sea where it meets the openness, dissipation, and release of oblivion.

Remembering the gift of the bracelet fills co Kim Dung with the embodied, sense-memory of breaking open, “just burst[ing] into tears.” Her body senses, feels, and responds again, filling beyond containment, remembering anew where it has been before. Flooding. Cracking. Piercing. Spilling. This haunting memory returns. As a “revenant,” the bracelet memory operates as a specter and “begins,” flooding and piercing anew, “by coming back” (Derrida, Specters 11). As a memory “punctum” this piece of her remembering returns to make a “repeated” “wound” (Barthes 49). This shard of memory cuts co Kim Dung. It also, differently, fills and “pricks” me and Nhina as we listen and affectively imagine with her (27). The memory of the bracelet and her father’s love pierces and moves co Kim Dung unexpectedly into a “subtle beyond,” into the shadowy “blind field” of remembering as familiar, yet always partial, knowing (59, 57). She knows this memory, but still it surprises her with its power and overwhelms her ability to control, or reign in, its torrential force and its ability to puncture her composure. Nhina and I also feel it: an unexpected, unintended flood and pierce, received and felt differently by tellers and listeners engaged together in remembering.
“Beyond Words”

Remembering the gift incites a memory punctum but, as she describes it, receiving the bracelet in prison causes an initial, affective pierce. When co Kim Dung is given the bracelet, she experiences it as a pierce, a performance punctum. The bracelet causes her to remember her father and her family and to re-witness and re-member their love for her. Through the bracelet’s puncture, she imaginatively remembers into the future when her family will search for the bracelet, engraved with her name, in order “to recognize your dead body later on.” The note pierces her as a poignantly pragmatic directive, “you are expected to wear it,” and an expression of love, that is given and will continue to be given, after her death. Her family wishes to find and retrieve her body so that they may give her body a proper burial and then install her spirit into the family’s ancestral altar so that it may be properly tended, remembered, and loved-on past her mortal life.

Finding her body is a practical need. Marking her body with her name, her real name this time, is the pragmatic solution. *Her real name this time. Kim Dung. Make no mistake. It is I, Kim Dung.* Previously she spent so much effort trying to hide her identity, performing masquerades and donning masks to obscure her self and evade capture. Now imprisoned, she puts on the bracelet. *Kim Dung.* She wears her real name as a deliberate means of identification, as a “signal” for her father and family. She no longer hides her identity, but deliberately shows it as a kind of proclamation, or reclamation, of self precisely at a time when it appears that the future of her life is in others’ hands. Wearing the bracelet as a “signal” is not only a pragmatic solution, and a loving gift, it also enables co Kim Dung to perform self-sustaining agency and self-determination at a time when it seems the most out of her own control.
The bracelet was made by her father. He engraved her name on the plaque by hand. He made sure she received this last gift, thrown anonymously through the small opening in her cell, the “small hole to let the air in,” where the guards can “look in to check if I am alive or dead.” This act of love pierces her, then in prison, and now again in remembering:

Co K.D./Nhina: The feeling was beyond words,
    I don’t know why,
    But tears just dropped,
    I just burst into tears,
    And I felt so much love,
    I don’t know how to say it,
    Love for father,
    Love for family.

“The feeling was beyond words.” Co Kim Dung feels the puncture of performing remembering, the unexpected pierce of the punctum takes her “beyond words” or beyond in some way, the necessity of putting her feelings into words as an act of explanation. Then and now. “I don’t’ know why [. . .] I don’t know how to say it.” “I just burst into [. . .]” the feeling, the remembering, the imagining, of “so much love.” The love felt between co Kim Dung and her family, then and now, just is “beyond words.” It is the bracelet. It is the practice of wearing the bracelet. Since that day she has worn it always, taking it off only to clean it. “You are expected to wear it.” The “tears just dropped.” Then and now. The swell of emotion born deep in her past re-emerges through speaking this memory, spilling out as loving remembrance.
Through her thick, tinted glasses, co Kim Dung’s eyes moisten. The past’s “beyond words” fills and empties the present, almost sixty years later. The past cuts into the present, flooding and spilling, “overflow[ing] the boundaries of [torture’s] patriarchal time and truth [] overflow[ing] the notion of story as finished product (“just a story”)—one neatly wrapped, that rounds off with a normative finale and “leaves the mind at rest.” (Trinh 149-150). The gift of the bracelet pierced her, and now the memory continues to re-cut her with each re-collection, refusing the comforts of closure but redeeming itself in the promise of constant return.

Materializing Optimism

Co Kim Dung puts the bracelet on and does not take it off. Over and through time, co Kim Dung performs alchemy through continuing acts of devotion, turning the combination of extreme practicality and endlessly generous love bound up in the silver bracelet, into the sacred emblem of her life’s sustenance and unexpected continuance. The bracelet is optimism. It is her family’s love and her love for her family. By wearing the plaque, co Kim Dung performs her thankfulness for life, her loving devotion to her family, and her optimism for living-on in the company of others in a haunted world. Co Kim Dung expresses, in words and “beyond words,” that the bracelet strengthened her resolve to live-on in prison and long afterward. To this day, it continues to sustain her life. In prison, the bracelet gives co Kim Dung a tangible means of living-on toward death. Wearing the bracelet becomes a devotional performance of love to her family, in life and beyond her life. Today she wears it for similar reasons. The bracelet and the stories and love it holds and summons seems to transcend individual mortality, allowing her to “enter into the limitless process of interactions and changes that nothing will stop, not even death” (Trinh 94).
I look at Nhina. She is also looking at co Kim Dung’s bracelet. Nhina feels “something, burning inside, like a fire inside” as she listens to co Kim Dung’s stories and witnesses the bracelet’s power as a manifestation of enduring love and optimism. Listening to co Kim Dung, through “the fire” within and “beyond words,” Nhina confesses feeling pierced. She notices co Kim Dung’s stories are changing her. Through these narratives she can sense something—partial, and yet wholly important—about co Kim Dung’s life and the other lives her stories also carry. Nhina tells me:

Nhina: I am moved, by ah,
The emotion,
The emotion, the relation between,
Father and daughter.
[. . .]

“I am moved.” *I am in the process of being moved and changed by this story, by these pasts that do not feel past at all.* As Herschel memorably expresses to Barbara Myerhoff during one of their conversations, “[i]f I tell you, it would change you. You won’t be anymore the same. If I tell you and you are still the same, why should I bother to talk?” (*Number* 197). *If I tell you, I hope it changes you.* In response to hearing and retelling co Kim Dung’s stories, Nhina is compelled to tell me, “I am moved, by ah, the emotion, the emotion.” Nhina then slips seamlessly back into her translation for co Kim Dung, who is also expressing how the bracelet changed her life and how the gift and its remembrance “was so moving” that it is still moving and changing her to this day:

Co K.D./Nhina: It was so moving that,
After that experience,
In my life,
Also, it has long been considered,
The main source of energy,
For me,
To get further in my life,
To get further in my studies,
And study abroad,
Yah, and after,
Long-lasting energy.

“In my life,” the bracelet has become “the main source of energy, for me, to get further in my life.” Co Kim Dung wears the bracelet as she is released from prison in an unexpected twist of history. People in Saigon protest Co Kim Dung’s death sentence. The French lose at Dien Bien Phu. Co Kim Dung is freed. She wears the bracelet as she gives birth to her two sons. It is there, on her wrist, when she hears of her husband’s death. She rubs the plaque with her thumb and forefinger as the commander tells her the news. By now the engraving has been rubbed smooth. But you can still see her name. Kim Dung. She wears it while she raises her sons alone, attending graduate school in Bulgaria. “Yah, and after,” she wears the bracelet always. Always. “The main source of energy [. . .] for me [. . .] in my life [. . .] long-lasting energy.”

Co Kim Dung’s eyes look distant. She is speaking to us, but her eyes are beyond us. I glance over my right shoulder in the direction of her gaze. Co Kim Dung’s ancestral altar rests against the wall. On the altar rests a picture of Co Kim Dung’s father. It is a black and white photograph that has been tinted and painted in pastel colors. His face is set in front of
a light blue background as if he is floating in the air. Pale yellow skin and pinked lips. His face is clear and calm as he looks back at co Kim Dung. His spirit is carefully tended. He has been here in the room with us all along, and so have the spirits of others who did not survive the colonial prison.

**The Spirit of Vo Thi Sau**

One of the other spirits lingering and listening in the room with us is that of the national martyr (*liet sì*) Vo Thi Sau. She is one of the most revered ancestral spirits in the lives of the performance group women. Vo Thi Sau, like co Nhut and co Kim Dung, was a member of the Viet Minh. She carried out perilous guerrilla missions in the Mekong Delta starting, like the other veterans, when she was a young girl. Had Vo Thi Sau lived through her death sentence like co Kim Dung, she would have likely been a member of the performance group, singing and socializing with them each Wednesday afternoon. Instead, she perished in front of a French musket, was martyred into history, and is now hailed by many as the youngest woman put to death by the French firing squad. Vo Thi Sau’s memory lives in the hearts of the performance group women, especially co Kim Dung’s. For the veterans, Vo Thi Sau is revered as a kind of protective patron saint. For co Kim Dung, Vo Thi Sau is a haunting, sisterly twin.

The Southern Women’s Museum in Ho Chi Minh City is now located on Vo Thi Sau street. Perhaps the women think of her each Wednesday as they ride their motorbikes and bicycles to rehearsal, zigzagging amidst the traffic, along her thickly trafficked road. Her name is uttered, simultaneously remembered and forgotten, in the pragmatic exchange of giving directions. Maybe some of the other busy motorists take pause to remember her as they sit waiting for the cross-flow of commuters to pass, in the humid, exhaust-filled air.
Young schoolchildren riding on the backs of their parents’ motorbikes might recognize her name on the street signs as the heroine they just read about in their history books. Vo Thi Sau’s life was cut short, but in exchange she has been given a revered place in the nation’s pantheon of ancestors and her memory has been inlaid into the geo-historical landscape of the country. She haunts a street and is revered in monuments throughout the Mekong Delta. Her burial site on Con Dao is a site of pilgrimage for veterans.

To compensate for Vo Thi Sau’s short life, the performance group women make sure that every young person they meet knows of and remembers her. “You know Vo Thi Sau?” Remember Vo Thi Sau. When this phrase is uttered it is less a question and more a gentle yet firm directive. Vo Thi Sau will always be remembered as a girl, as who the veterans use to be when they were young. As the surviving veterans grow old, Vo Thi Sau’s spirit will forever be tended and recalled as a vibrant, fearless young girl. In some regards, Vo Thi Sau gives the women’s nostalgia for a bygone past a location, a shared point of narrative devotion.

Co Kim Dung recognizes the twin nature of their two lives, and comments on her own luck:

Co K.D./Nhina: You know Vo Thi Sau?

  In comparison with ahm,

  The heroine Vo Thi Sau,

  I, I always feel I am luckier than her,

  In this case,

  I mean,

  Civilians in Saigon,

  I mean, they protest against the

  Death sentence of mine.
[...]

And you know,

The protest was so strong that,

Everybody knows about it [co Kim Dung’s case and death sentence].

[...]

You know Vo Thi Sau,

She did her missions around suburbs [of Ho Chi Minh City]

And local areas,

But I work in Saigon,

And the protest [against co Kim Dung’s death sentence] seems,

Powerful, more powerful

Than in local places,

[...]

I, I cannot remember exactly when

Vo Thi Sau was arrested,

But she was moved from Vung Tao

To Saigon.

The decision for death sentence

For Vo Thi Sau was in Saigon.

I did, you know,

Before getting death sentence,

A group of women stayed together,

And Vo Thi Sau was there.

Yah, personally, I did know her.
But since we,
Vo Thi Sau and I got death sentence,
We were separated.

We were the same age.
Vo Thi Sau got death sentence after my case
And she was shot down when she was nineteen years old,
At Con Dao.

Her case received more publicity, because it occurred in the city. People protested her death in the Saigon streets. Vo Thi Sau’s case slipped through the cracks. The French removed her to Con Dao, away from public view and into a place where rumors, legends, and ghost stories are born. They killed her as an example for other would-be girl insurgents, and so catapulted her into infamy and beloved martyrdom. They made her into a powerful, enduring ghost.

Co Kim Dung remembers Vo Thi Sau as her twinlike sister-in-revolution. They carried out insurgency in different southern towns, they were caught, imprisoned, tried in the colonial court, and given death sentences. They met briefly in a shared prison cell. They exchanged stories, fears, and hopes. Then, by chance, their twinned lives split apart. One sister was killed. The other lived. Today Kim Dung tends and honors Vo Thi Sau’s patron spirit by remembering her life, with the other veterans, in song and story. The performance group women offer respect and garner strength by remembering Vo Thi Sau together. They give her memory to future generations, along with an encouraging but firm mandate to keep telling these stories on, and on, and on. In these small but significant ways, co Kim Dung helps carry Vo Thi Sau’s life toward immortality.
Pilgrimage Commemoration: Meeting Vo Thi Sau

A month after speaking with co Kim Dung, I find myself on a kind of pilgrimage to Con Dao with a group of war veterans and their families. After visiting the infamous “tiger cages,” we pay our respects at the Hang Duong cemetery for war martyrs. We walk on a narrow pathway amidst red-orange flowering Phuong Trees and thousands of graves; nearly all of them are unmarked. These people died in prison, or were put to death, during the French and American wars. As we walk down the path, people pause to place incense near unknown graves, giving a quick bow of the head and pressing their palms together before moving on. We are here to perform remembrance for all the ghosts in this cemetery, but especially, we are in procession to pay special tribute to the spirit of Vo Thi Sau.

About fifty of us gather around a large, polished black marble mausoleum flanked by gracefully willowing flowering trees. A white stone-carved portrait of Vo Thi Sau presides over visitors at the back of the tomb. On her stone casket, an engraved tombstone sites her as a “martyr” (liet si), a “heroine” (anh hung) who died in “sacrifice” for the nation (hy sinh) on January 23rd, 1952.65 The midday sun beats down on our foreheads and backs but no one is fazed. In some ways, paying tribute to Vo Thi Sau is the centerpiece of the Con Dao pilgrimage. She provides a personal locus for the veterans’ memories to join together in

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65 The term “hy sinh” has particular revolutionary meanings. Malarney writes, “[t]he revolutionary formulation of selfless virtue was conjoined with the public glorification of death and personal sacrifice to advance the revolutionary cause. The greatest virtue was achieved with death, a transformation that reached its apotheosis in the concept of ‘sacrifice’ (hi sinh). [. . .] With the Vietnamese communists, the semantic domain of hi sinh was recast, and sacrifice was associated with, and virtually restricted to, those who died doing the Revolution’s bidding” (“Fatherland” 49). In Vietnam there are different ways to name and understand death that relate to the age of the individual and the conditions under which the person died. Again, Malarney explains, “[t]he revolutionary elaboration of ‘sacrifice’ has had important linguistic consequences in everyday conversation as well. The verb ‘to die’ in Vietnamese takes multiple forms, with each particular form providing important social information about the deceased. Common people, for example, are generally said to mat, ‘to be lost,’ or bi chet, to ‘suffer death.’ Elderly people qua doi, or ‘pass from life.’ The emperor in pre-Revolutionary times would bang ha, or ‘pass far below.’ The deaths of Ho Chi Minh and other high officials are often described with the poetic and respectful expression tu tran, ‘to leave this world.’ Communist revolutionaries and soldiers killed during the struggle against the enemy can indeed ‘suffer death,’ but officially and in everyday parlance, people say that they have been ‘sacrificed’ (hi sinh)” (50).
bittersweet remembering to witness the triumphs and sacrifices of war. Her shrine becomes a site of re-calling the spirits of friends and strangers, a honorary space for re-collecting and remembering the remarkable survival and success of the veterans now present, and an opportunity for teaching this embodied remembering—passing down the nation’s great history through particular stories and the “habit-memory” practices of the remembering body—to awaiting generations (Connerton 88).

It is no mistake that the veterans’ families and the Youth Union members are accompanying the older veterans on this pilgrimage of revolutionary heritage and remembering. They are here to honor, witness, learn, and rehearse the past. At the tomb we practice remembering and recall the past through performing commemorative ancestor rituals and through listening to the young guide retell legends of Vo Thi Sau. The guide gives an animated telling to the enrapt and vocal gathering.
Figure 5 – Veterans with family members at Vo Thi Sau’s tomb, Hang Duong Cemetery (May 2005)
According to legends exchanged around her tomb, Vo Thi Sau’s spirit brought bad luck upon the French and upon the Vietnamese who were helping the colonialists. Later, during the American War, orders were given to take apart her grave because too many people were leaving offerings. The site was becoming too powerful and potentially a place of subversive, communist activity. Shortly after, those who dismantled her grave were killed in freakish accidents. Vo Thi Sau’s spirit had become angry, people said. So a Vietnamese prison guard, sympathetic to the cause of the Liberation Front, remade her gravesite. After that, no one dared touch her grave unless it was to make it more beautiful or to pay her tribute. This is the story the young tour guide tells the veterans, their families, and the members of the Con Dao and Saigon Youth Union. Everyone listens with rapt attention, even if they already have heard the stories a thousand times before.

It is said that Vo Thi Sau loved to sing. Like co Kim Dung and the other veterans, she sang in her cell each night to keep herself company. She sang so beautifully that other prisoners were comforted by her voice. Guards could not help but listen and become enchanted. Her moving voice caused some of them to change sides, in support of the communists. It is said that Vo Thi Sau sang for Vietnam’s liberation as she walked to her death. She was not afraid to die. Before facing the firing squad she asked for three things: to have her blindfold removed so she could look into the eyes of those who were to kill her, to speak a final statement supporting the eventual liberation of Vietnam, and lastly, to drink a bowl of water. Of course, as she knew, she was denied all but the last request. She drank her last bowl of water. This act, all Vietnamese know, was a way of marking her patriotism, “drinking in her nation,” as Vietnam is just as much defined by water as it is by land. The
Inheriting Memory

Co Kim Dung’s narratives evoke the ambivalent pleasures and playfulness of revolutionary masquerade, the necessity of enacting radical street performances against colonial power and the problematics of employing violence, the inspiring *pierce* of the performance/memory punctum as a narrative force that moves memory and history into and through individuals and across social bodies, the co-sustaining powers generated through exchange with ancestors, and the historical importance of commemorative pilgrimage as a means of teaching and moving memory from one generation to the next. A common thread throughout co Kim Dung’s narratives is the necessary practice of corresponding with ancestors as a practice of covalent sustenance between/for the living and the dead. Co Nhut expresses similar sentiments about borrowing and remaking cultural traditions, but co Kim Dung places an added emphasis on family and direct generational exchange. Co Kim Dung does not spell out the codes of proper filial-national duties; rather she shows how to make family ties strong and lasting as well as how to incorporate the social into the familial. She embodies the importance of learning from ancestors, paying them devotion, and receiving their strength in order to carry on.

As a result, Nhina and I will be forever inhabited by pasts, memories, voices, images, and words that are not “our own” but that now have become inextricably a part of us. A few weeks after our first meeting with co Kim Dung, I realize just how much Nhina has taken the veterans’ messages to heart. When I arrive at co Kim Dung’s house for our next conversation, Nhina is already there. Meeting me at the door, Nhina explains that she came...
early to spend time with co Kim Dung. She wanted to help co Kim Dung with her housework and have some extra time to talk. Later in the week, Nhina sends me her translation of Dan Than and Buu Lien’s poem about the bracelet. At the end, I find an extra letter from Nhina written to me, and seemingly also to herself, expressing what she has learned from co Kim Dung.66

My dear American Sister,

I do find the poem to be an expression of warmth. I, personally, would like to say that the plaque [bracelet] can be seen as a genuine “witness” to the love between father and daughter; a witness of a wonderful transmission of energy between father and daughter. Thanks to such a source of energy, she has since possessed more commitment, as well as a sense of determination during her struggle in prison. Such powerful words and feelings like these offers me an opportunity to travel to her heart, and feel her true love for her father. Now I do understand how incredible her present days turn out to be.

Finally, with the plaque [bracelet] I do sense the life of Mrs. Kim Dung, an excellent example among the former female warriors in Vietnam, a part of our national history, a part of our present energy, and no doubt a part of our future. In other words, Kim Dung and the lady veterans are able to guide us, the young generations, to the past and are able to offer us the way to the meaningful future through their own experiences and enthusiastic attitudes.

I do love this beautiful poem!

-Nhina

66 For the purposes of including this letter in the dissertation, I have edited Nhina’s note to make what I take to be her central intentions more clear for the reader. Wherever possible, I have kept her original words and grammar.
CHAPTER III
Co Dinh and Co Xuan:
Remembering Torture, Returning to Con Dao, and the Tradition of “Pain-Taking”

Bullet Wound

Rivka: Scars, scars… oh!
She is pulling up her pant leg.
Oh!
Oh!
Oh, my god.
How did she get that?
It’s on the inside of her left leg.
Oh my—
Oh—

[Co Dinh speaks rapidly as she rolls up her pant leg. Nhina translates simultaneously, trying to keep up with co Dinh. I narrate the scene aloud for the tape recorder.]

Co Dinh/Nhina: This leg is a bit shorter.
At that moment,
The, the ladies were on the street.
And they fire—
They shot—
And without doctor—
And they sent her to prison,
And it got worse,

[Our voices are overlapping.]

Rivka: Oh.
Oh—

[Co Dinh clutches the leg of her pants in her hands. Nhina and I look at co Dinh’s scar.]

Co Dinh/Nhina: It got worse.

Co Dinh’s story erupts unexpectedly. Before Nhina and I can process what is happening, we are overtaken. My conversations with the other veterans were not like this at all. The women told carefully controlled accounts of daring missions, sorrowful losses, patriotic resilience, and defiant protests leading to eventual success. One by one, wearing pastel colored poly-blend pantsuits and sitting properly on the couch, the women let me in on the presence of secrets without fully revealing their substance. Co Dinh’s explosion could not be more different. This is violent. Bloody. Emotionally volatile. This is a firestorm not a story; the violence she recalls is starkly emblazoned on her body. “This leg is a bit shorter,” explains co Dinh, pointing from her hip to toe as Nhina translates. Co Dinh wavers, but her gaze is steady as she balances on her good leg. She points at the wound: “This is why I walk with a limp.”
Trying to keep up with co Dinh’s rapid-fire pace, Nhina’s translation echoes co Dinh’s urgency with compounding, additive phrases: “And they fire—[. . .] and without doctor—and they sent her to prison, and it got worse, it got worse.” Co Dinh’s remembering is fragmented and half-told, “made up of [. . .] details, of broken pieces, particular fragments” (de Certeau, “Oppositional Practices” 41). Just as I am preparing to leave, weary from my very first day of interviews, co Dinh walks out of the kitchen toward me and Nhina. Hurriedly taking up her pant leg, she reveals first a bony knee and then the pale skin of her thigh. Startled, my eyes move all the way up to “the inside of her left leg.” Her fingers rest on the edge of a purplish gouge, about five inches below her pubic bone on the inner side of her frail-looking thigh. It looks like her flesh has been scooped out with a spoon then rubbed with blue-black ink. “Oh my—. Oh—.” What is that? “How did she get that?” There was no warning. I am stunned. I want to hear more, but feel apprehensive about what the wound’s impending story may bring to our new friendship. Co Dinh decided to tell her story and now there is no stopping, no turning back. “Oh, my god,” I whisper upon seeing her wound. It is a deep scar. “They fire—they shot.” “Oh. Oh—,” I stammer, caught-off-guard by what is suddenly happening. Co Dinh’s memories, dramatized in the place where bullets pierced her, are piercing me.

Nhina and I inherit memory, responsibility, and perhaps even forms of secondary wounds or trauma from “empathetic unsettlement,” but our experiences as witnesses must not be conflated with the women’s experience (LaCapra 717). A critical distinction must be made here, between the women’s pasts and my experience of their stories, in order to avoid universalizing notions of pain, and making other kinds of “leveling comparisons” (LaCapra qtd. in Oliver, 78-79; LaCapra 712, 723). As a witness, it is critical not to “confuse one’s
own voice or position with the victim’s nor seek facile uplift, harmonization, or closure” of their memories (723). Nhina and I are always at least “secondary witness[]” to their pasts (LaCapra 699).

In the process of inheriting memory, the wounds embodied by teller and listener, survivor and secondary witness, are not the same. The wound of the teller may be one relating to direct loss and personal experience with historical trauma. The wound resulting in the listener is a wound of responsibility which is partially derived from but in no way identical to the victim’s wounds (LaCapra). In this sense, knowledge is an implicating wound and learning is a kind of undoing, “unlearning,” or knowing-as-loss (Spivak, “Subaltern” 91).

Nhina and I were packing up the recording equipment, but our exit has been cut short. There is no cover. No way to avoid witnessing the bruised, twisted skin on the soft inner side of co Dinh’s left leg. Co Dinh holds out her leg for us to see. We cannot avert our eyes. To look away would be disrespectful; a selfish refusal to witness what has taken her all day to get up the nerve to show. She wants us to witness the wound. But at the same time, looking

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67 I need to make a critical distinction between what I am calling the inheritance of wounds (the inheritance of responsibility) and what LaCapra and others call “wound culture” or the “dubious ideas that everyone (including perpetrators or collaborators) is a victim, that all history is trauma, or that we all share a pathological public sphere or a ‘wound culture’” where “‘violence makes victims of all of us’” (“Absence” 712). I agree with LaCapra that this generalizing victimization is dangerous and makes unethical comparisons. My use of wounds and wounding in terms of witnessing is not meant to collapse differences between survivors of violence and secondary witnesses, but rather expresses the transposition, produced through dialogic listening and learning, of a radically different kind of wound into the body of the witness. The potential wounds of witnessing are not “the approximation or even conflation of absence and loss induc[ing] a melancholic or impossibly mournful response to the closure of metaphysics, a generalized ‘hauntology’” (715). I mean to speak of wounds as specific ways to “resist narrative closure” as an “act of fidelity” where the “secondary witness . . . resists full identification,” relativizing empathy, and “dubious appropriation” of victimhood (717, 715). Wounding, as I am constructing it, is a way of resisting “definitive closure” on the one hand, and endless, repetitious “melancholia,” inaction, or despair on the other (717). Inheriting wounds can be understood as a wound of responsibility, which does not victimize, but rather inspires the witness to actively move toward increasing justice/just relations. Wounding, in this sense, can be a way to counter: 1) empathetic over-identification, 2) apathy, and 3) overt refusal of responsibility/answerability by secondary witnesses of individual, structural, or historical trauma.
at the scar feels invasive. We only met a few weeks ago. The wound itself, and its particular placement on her body, is exceedingly personal. Seeing it is too much and not enough. Witnessing the wound, recognizing what it signifies to co Dinh, while acknowledging our inability to understand all that it means to her, requires more than seeing with our eyes. In an attempt to open the spectacular scene of the bullet wound toward co-subjective recognition beyond objectifying sight, we enter a “process of witnessing that connects us through the tissues,” a process composed of cross-embodied “language and gestures,” as co Dinh tells the scar’s ruptured story (Oliver 223).

“This is why I walk with a limp,” co Dinh answers starkly, though I have not asked a question. Earlier in the day, co Dinh shyly deflected my inquiry when I asked if we could schedule a time to meet for an interview. Maybe some other time, she had said, you should hear the stories of co Lien, co Le, co Thanh and the other ladies gathered here at co Linh’s brother’s house. But now she answers. Her words are like darts, compelling us to listen. Co Dinh barely spoke a word all day. She nodded in agreement from her place in a nearby chair, jumping up periodically to cut more fruit and pour more tea, every once in a while adding a word here or there, repeatedly directing me to “pay attention to this very important woman” as her friends told their stories.

Co Dinh kept quiet about her own life but I could tell she had something to say. Later on, I came to realize that co Dinh’s deference to certain other women in the group has much to do with her feeling that, as more educated and renowned revolutionary figures, her friends are better suited than she for the important role of historical representative for an international audience. As she begins telling the story of her bullet wound, I do not know why she has not previously spoken or why she has suddenly chosen to divulge now. All I
know is that something is burning inside co Dinh. From the day we first met at the performance group rehearsal, the sad edges of her deep-set eyes, her spindly black-clothed body, sincere friendliness, and the silent yet fiery bursts in her faraway looks, made me want to hear more about her life.

**Remembering in Good Company**

Co Dinh enjoys remembering in the company of other close friends. This social urge is so deeply embodied for co Dinh that it seems as if she almost cannot tell her past unaccompanied. To co Dinh, the past is a shared history of struggle, survival, and success that should rightly be told in concert with other voices. Her participation in “national reunification” was not a solitary commitment. Her suffering, even under torture, was not just personal. Still a good communist comrade, she often defers her personal story altogether, or uses it to tell a social history of collectively created and experienced revolution. By collectively rendering even her personal life story, co Dinh is participating in the proper socialist style of history-making and collective memory–telling. As with the other performance group veterans, co Dinh expresses a social history in the service of present-day social (and therefore also governmental) causes.

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**68** Starting with the dramatic revealing of her bullet wound on this first day of scheduled interviews, and throughout the proceeding months, co Dinh gradually came to tell me and Nhina more about her past. Luckily for us, co Dinh’s desire to make sure that Nhina and I properly understand the veterans’ lives often overcame her initial hesitance to speak about herself. Unlike most of the other women Nhina and I talked with, co Dinh never sat down alone with us with the intent of telling us her personal story. She never related anything like an encompassing, chronological life narrative. Nhina and I tried to arrange several meetings with co Dinh to specifically talk about her past, but each time we arrived at her house we found that she had invited other friends to share their stories along with hers. It was not that she was unwilling to talk. It is more that she did not feel right about talking solely about herself when so many of her friends have shared sentiments from similar hardships they experienced. For co Dinh, in a more pronounced way than with other veterans, telling stories about the past is a social practice: not only do her stories tell a shared history, but because of their social nature, the tellings themselves should be co-created.

**69** Most of the conversations Nhina and I had alone with co Dinh were unplanned. The stories I did hear were non-sequential, narrative bits, often begun in the form of an offhand comment arising from questions about
Conversations with co Dinh and her friends often took place in her home, as we prepared and ate a meal together. These exchanges were topic-driven rather than chronologically organized. We spoke about torture, early childhood memories, postwar struggles, the performance group, the women’s children, and their ailing health. Talk arose organically, with ease and openness, despite the heaviness of the subjects. Discussions about torture, or physical ailments were often interspersed with silly or darkly humorous jokes, such as comparing the Con Dao prisons to a five star hotel: no one ever lets you do anything for yourself and all meals are prepared for you! However just as often, though there was surprising lightness and resilience in the women’s commentary, a discreet teariness to co Dinh’s eyes or a tightening of her lips, expressed the difficulty of retelling the sadness forever bound up in certain memories.

Although I never heard enough about co Dinh’s life, she is the veteran I came to know the best and with whom I share the most intimate friendship. Perhaps this feeling both stems from, and was solidified by, that first shocking day when she called on me and Nhina to witness her bullet wound. I feel a similar ease and depth of closeness with co Xuan, co Dinh’s best friend in the performance group. From the start, I could speak more candidly and less formally with these two women. We became attuned to one another’s nonverbal cues and enjoyed spending time together despite the fact that communicating took extra time and effort. Co Xuan’s easy laughter ripples through the interviews as I listen to the tapes.

other things. For example, a partially-told story about her husband’s death came out over a shared lunch after one of the veterans’ public performances. The story was a response to my comment that it must be difficult raising three daughters as a single parent. But even when co Dinh did respond with a personal narrative, it was rare that I ever felt satiated after hearing one of her stories. I was often left with more questions than clarity, feeling that so much more of the narrative had not been explicitly stated. Co Dinh conveyed the presence, and depth, of some of these narrative gaps through her facial expressions. A knowing glance in silence would beckon us into deeper exchange, with the shared knowledge that some remembrances would be left partial.
Always quick to smile, her laughter has an infectious effect on co Dinh, and anyone else gathered.

Co Dinh’s voice, with her thick Mekong Delta accent, is fast and high-pitched but never shrill. She carefully measures her words, but when she does speak it is with urgency and thoughtful certainty. There is something starkly unpretentious and honest about how co Dinh expresses herself. The intense spontaneity of co Dinh’s speech, and the generosity with which she shared her vulnerabilities, drew us into corresponding on an intimate level, following a mutual desire to listen and learn from one another. We could not always understand each other the first time around, but we both shared a strong determination to communicate and the patience to keep on trying. This intense desire to communicate became the foundation of our closeness. Co Dinh helps me reckon with “the unseen of vision, the unsaid in language,” in order to practice the “response-ability” necessary in witnessing and to feel the sustaining, shared pulse of interdependent subjectivity (Oliver 223). Now miles away from Vietnam and several years after our conversations, co Dinh and co Xuan continue to compel me to think about how to respond to transgenerational and transnational legacies of torture.

Five Performance-Centered Motifs in Memories of Torture

Co Dinh emerged on the side of the victors at the war’s end, and has since benefited from her status as a governmentally respected veteran. However, this does not erase the fact that her life, along with millions of others on all sides of the fighting, was significantly marred by war. Co Dinh survived emotional battery and bodily pain. Surviving, of course, does not mean that damages disappear. As evidenced by the lasting physical ailments from her bullet wound, the irreparably disfigured flesh itself, and the powerful stories it signifies
and performs, the war still lives in co Dinh. Although she is not paralyzed by physical or psychological trauma, past wounds still dramatically affect her present life.

Co Dinh’s thoughts are forever shadowed by memories of violence. Her body is riddled with chronic health problems as a result of being tortured repeatedly, at different times, for over seven years. Positive memories of victories, survival, and comradeship play critical roles in co Dinh’s narratives, but violence—specifically the experience of torture and living with its after-effects—is an overriding force in co Dinh’s remembering. It is what she wanted to tell me about. Consequently, this chapter focusing on co Dinh and co Xuan, is centrally about torture; about the torture co Dinh and the other performance group women experienced, but also about the politics through which torture is performatively remembered and the difficulties, but necessity, of performing ethical witnessing.

Drawing from co Dinh’s and co Xuan’s stories and commentary, this chapter explores six critical motifs within performances of remembering and witnessing torture. The six interconnected motifs engage the performative and performance-centered politics of: 1) as above, narrative eruption and disjunction, 2) specifically gendered traditions of “pain-taking” and its challenges to conventional ideas regarding the relationship between torture, body, self/society, and subjectivity, 3) returning to sites of imprisonment to retell national history, reclaim personal agency, and support social-economic renewal through patriotic tourism, 4) hauntological correspondence with the unburiable, still-wandering ghosts of war, 5) living with psychic traumas and somatic wounds rather than pursuing a “cure” and 6) my own sense of ethical witnessing as a simultaneous process of unlearning privilege (Spivak) and inheriting responsibility for these memories, and the lives they implicate, (re)embody, and perform into present and future vitality.
Keeping Pain Inside

Co Dinh and Co Xuan say that “pain-taking” is a Vietnamese women’s tradition. When I first heard co Dinh and co Xuan talking about pain-taking, I initially judged it a problematic product of internalized sexist hegemony. It seemed to adversely reify the Confucian belief that women innately possess a special ability and duty to self-sacrifice for others, particularly for the men in their family and for causes of “national salvation.” Pain-taking is this and so much more. Pain-taking is a physical and psychological practice of self-discipline, self-sacrifice, community-making, and survival. Pain-taking can operate oppressively, but it can also be used in ways that strengthen women’s subjectivity. For co Dinh, and her veteran comrades, pain-taking is a powerful source of explanation and sustenance.

As a tradition, pain-taking is something one both bears (as something that happens to you) and practices (as something that one makes happen). Part of the tradition of pain-taking involves the practice of keeping pain inside; keeping sorrow or sickness hidden from public view, even from one’s family or close friends. This is a form of performative stoicism, by which keeping pain a secret (keeping it private), connects the stoic to a cultural lineage of strong and virtuous women who have done the same, and who (with some of their secrets publicly spoken) have been remembered for their pain-taking abilities. Performing pain-taking is the internalization of pain, but it is also always understood by the bearer/performer as a social performance, as a shared cultural tradition. Understanding pain-taking as a tradition also tells the bearer/performer why they are experiencing pain: Vietnamese women have always lived pain-filled lives, so this is what you do with it. Thus, the tradition of pain-taking guides, instructs, inspires, connects, and strangely comforts.
Pain is often born privately or in the intimate confidence of other women who are also bearing pain. Pain-taking is performed daily, as part and parcel of everyday life. Pain-taking is a tradition of secrecy, even when it is told. I am reminded of these qualities of pain-taking as I listen to the interview tapes. Sitting at my desk in the U.S., I listen to a recording made in co Dinh’s upstairs bedroom. It is really more of a bedroom luncheon party than a formal interview. Co Dinh, co Xuan, co Duc (a former prison-mate and close friend of co Dinh’s from Nha Trang), Nhina and I, and several other veterans, have gathered in the small yellow room on this humid March afternoon. On the tape, I can hear clinking glasses, whirring fans, and, through the open window, exuberant screams from kids playing in the narrow alleyway.

We are talking about difficult things: cancers and illness, loss of family members, the challenge of supporting their families as single parents, and the relationship between forgetting and forgiveness. After the war, the women were expected to perform as upstanding, emblematic role models in every aspect of their lives. But the reality was that survival was hard, sometimes desperate. There was not enough food. Health care was insufficient. Co Dinh’s and co Duc’s husbands died during this period of postwar struggle. Co Xuan was lucky enough to have her uterine cancer surgery paid for by a French aid agency. The women discuss how hard it is to live with their chronic illnesses, scarce resources, and the need to raise and provide for their children.

The conversation is lively, a mix of seriousness and lighthearted joking. We drink freshly squeezed orange juice and pass slices of pear and mango around the table. When co Dinh remarks that her chronic headaches, for which she is periodically hospitalized, worsen

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70 See Pettus (Between) for an excellent explication and analysis of women’s social responsibilities in postwar Vietnam. Her research and ethnographic study took place primarily in the north with women living in and around Hanoi.
when the dry season turns to the monsoon, co Duc jokes that co Dinh possesses special powers to predict the weather. “Ha, Ha!” cackles co Xuan in her characteristic, frequent belly laugh. Co Xuan’s laughter and co Duc’s joke cause co Dinh, recovering from a week spent in the hospital, to crack a smile. Co Xuan herself must be careful of overexertion because of a chronic postwar “heart condition,” but this never lessens the heartiness of her laughter or her liveliness at rehearsals. Later, during this conversation, she unbuttons her blouse to show me the scars on her chest left from surgery.

In speaking together about their pasts, and their scarred and chronically-ailing bodies, the women agree that they rarely talk to their children or other family members about the specifics of their wartime hardships and continuing struggles. They tell each other, if they tell anyone at all. They do not want to worry their children. Besides, the women say, they continue to have optimism, like they did during wartime, that everything will work out alright. But in the next breath, co Dinh expresses what the others around the table also feel, that they often keep pain inside because they do not want to harm anyone else with the knowledge of their present worries, their damaged pasts, or the personal hardships that still haunt them on an everyday basis. The women do not want their histories to burden anyone but themselves.

**An Organizer and a Fighter**

After rehearsal one night, co Dinh shows me a picture from the performance group’s recent trip back to Con Dao. I ask her if she wouldn’t mind telling me more about the visit. She smiles, nods, and calls co Xuan over “for just a few minutes.” We end up staying longer than expected in the Southern Women’s Museum hallway, talking in the flickering fluorescent light for over an hour and a half, as dusk falls over the city. Co Dinh and co
Xuan talk past the length of the audio tape and the recorder clicks to a stop. I remember wishing that the tape had lasted just a little longer so I could catch co Dinh’s description of the “haunting landscape” of Con Dao. As we part, co Dinh and co Xuan give me the photograph that prompted my questions: in the picture the two of them stand in front of cell room number eight on Con Dao, the very place where they had been held captive over thirty years ago.

Similar to co Dinh and other veterans, Co Xuan describes her revolutionary commitment as stemming from familial loss. Her father was killed fighting the French. She joined the revolution when she was sixteen years old, and was arrested shortly thereafter in 1963 for taking part in the “protest movement against the suppression of Buddhism” by the South Vietnamese government. Co Xuan was arrested for a second time in 1968, and like co Dinh, spent over six years in prison. When I asked her to describe one of her most significant memories from wartime, co Xuan replies that one striking memory is how the women mourned Ho Chi Minh’s death, and commemorated his life, while in prison in 1969. The women prisoners wore white mourning bands around their heads, discussed the significance of Uncle Ho’s teachings, told stories about his life, and sang songs. In a written remembrance she asked, “How can I forget the tears filling up in my friend’s eyes? Whenever the date of Uncle Ho’s death is close [. . .] I remember that far away day in prison, [when we made] a simple funeral ceremony fortified by warmth, affection, and gratitude in our hearts for the great father of our nation.” The guards did not stop the prisoner’s performances, co Xuan speculates, “probably because they were fearful of his ghost.” Co Xuan says that poems, songs, and performances uplifted their spirits in prison, and were
recognized by the women as powerful propaganda that could make an ARVN “soldier drop his arms and join the revolution.”

Co Xuan, co Nhut, and co Kim Dung attended college and are eloquent, prolific writers. Growing up in the countryside, war interrupted co Dinh’s schooling. She is not confident about her writing, and since being tortured, is not physically able to hold a pen without feeling pain and having her hands shake. When I mention this to Nhina, she says that during the war, co Dinh was a fighter, carrying a gun into battle. She was from a peasant family and did not have the chance to receive a good education. Co Xuan was a student, an organizer. Her duty during war was to spread propaganda against the Americans and the southern regime and to gather students together for protests. Co Dinh was a fighter, co Xuan was an organizer. A reprinted propaganda poster I bought from a souvenir store in Ho Chi Minh City speaks to the differences in these roles, especially as stipulated by the nation, or at least the national media. The brightly colored poster depicts a slender woman in traditional ao dai dress raising her hand in a fist, while beneath her, a sturdy woman in army fatigues and cap, with arm muscles rippling, aims an AK-47.

I asked several of the veterans to explain the poster’s intended meaning. Some of the veterans said the women depicted the north and south (with the third woman in the poster, in ethnic minority dress, representing the central region). The veterans identified the northern woman contributing to the war effort as an organizer and/or as military support staff (medical technicians, etc.), while the southern woman, living in the midst of the war’s battle zones, had to take up arms to defend her home. Other women felt the poster showed two forms of patriotic service: one woman as an educated political organizer, and the other, wearing the characteristic white and black checkered scarf of the southern women guerrillas, as a warrior.
Looking at the poster, now hanging over my desk, I cannot help thinking of the two women as co Dinh and co Xuan. As Nhina clarified, co Xuan was an organizer, co Dinh was a fighter. The southern resistance and the young communist nation-state depended on both their abilities, and upon their shared “tradition” of “pain-taking.”

**Actively Taking Pain: An Alternative Agency**

Co Dinh/Nhina: In this bloody, ah,

Bleeding war.

You just hold on,

Hold on,

And stick to such a [determined] mind

I mean, do not utter any word.

“You stick to such a [determined] mind,” co Dinh tells me and Nhina in the Southern Women’s Museum hallway after rehearsal the night I was given the Con Dao picture. Under conditions of torture, you practice “pain-taking,” and give your captors nothing, “do not utter any word.” This is co Dinh’s advice. Co Dinh’s, and the other veteran’s, descriptions of refusing to speak is markedly different form Elaine Scarry’s assertion that torture’s physical and psychological pain is “language-destroying” (19-20). For Scarry, the pain’s destruction of language is beyond control while for co Dinh, silence is a collective choice, a performative tradition of defiance and social loyalty.

In her seminal work on pain and torture, Scarry contends that “[p]hysical pain has no voice” (3). Torture uniquely inflicts an “un-making” of language, communication, and culture, annihilating all social expressibility. She argues that “[p]hysical pain is not only
resistant to language but also actively destroys language, deconstructing it into the pre-language of cries and groans” (19-20; 172). Tortuous pain, by Scarry’s definition, is also distinctly private such that, “when one hears about another person’s physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person’s body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth” (3). Throughout her work, Scarry advances the “unsharability” of self- and culture-destroying pain. The performance group women remember torture in vastly different, if not oppositional, terms (4). The veterans’ reflexive claims on their rights to use and refuse language under torture challenges the underpinnings of Scarry’s universalizing assertion of pain’s subalterity.

According to co Dinh and co Xuan, pain-taking is centrally a women’s tradition that empowers them not only to survive, but also to perform defiance under conditions of torture:

Co Xuan/Nhina: It [pain-taking] is a kind of tradition
For Vietnamese people in general
And Vietnamese ladies
In particular.
[…]
They know for sure,
You will have many challenges.
[…]
But if you have determination,
You will win,
You will win.
Co Dinh/Nhina: When they were beaten [in prison],

[...] they know for sure that some of them may be, be beaten until death, I mean, Probably damaged A lot [...] They are, They were, Eager to face that— And ahm, She would like to confirm that Vietnamese ladies Have the ability at, Pain-taking, At pain-taking.

Rivka: Taking pain?

Co Dinh/Nhina: Yah. It is a tradition.
Co Dinh’s decision, to “not utter any word” that assists her captors, is a personal and collective act of determination. The women explain that bearing and performing pain-taking links them to their national heritage of heroic Vietnamese resistance to oppression.

In contrast to Scarry’s view, refusing language is an active expression of resistance that revives, makes, and connects the women to a social community of mythic forbearers and contemporary comrades in a united struggle for national-cultural survival. The performance of pain-taking, here described as the performative enactment of not speaking under torture (resisting being “beaten” into confession), is precisely what makes the women’s struggles more than personal. As silent defiance under torture, pain-taking is precisely what connects rather than divides them from others historically, culturally, and subjectively. Wanting to hear more, I ask co Dinh and co Xuan to clarify what they mean by the “tradition” of pain-taking:

Rivka: Oh.

What does co Dinh mean by that?

What does it mean
to have the tradition of—
taking pain?

Co Xuan/Nhina: She [co Xuan] talks again about history,

for over four thousand years,

Vietnamese people has,

A great history,

And ah,

They know for sure that,

They do not want any invader,
In their country,
And they have to,
Or they expect,
To fight the invaders.

[...]

Co Xuan mention about tradition,
and the battles of history,
A lot of people in Vietnam,
Lots of ladies,
They passed away,
To fight for liberation
To fight for freedom,
And when you were, are
Oppressed
By someone else,
You will,
Stand up and fight
Against them.
You will.
Sure.

Rivka: And in particular,
There is this tradition,
Of women being able to
Suffer and
Take pain.
So why,
Why women in particular?
Why can women,
In particular,
Take so much pain?

Co Dinh responds to my question by recalling the Trung Sisters’ acts of pain-taking heroism. This familiar mythic narrative segues into a story about a prison hunger strike that co Nhut recounts for me and Nhina: the strike on Con Dao when all the women prisoners volunteered to sacrifice themselves. The difficulty was choosing, from the overwhelming number of volunteers, which women would get to perform self-sacrificial pain-taking on behalf of the others. Co Dinh answers my question of why women in particular can “take so much pain” by noting that Vietnamese women, since the time of the Trung Sisters and perhaps before, have always practiced pain-taking. Eliding mythic history and recent memory in “always,” co Dinh performs the inheritance of this tradition. She universalizes and naturalizes what she otherwise attributes to cultural heritage.

Vietnamese studies scholars offer different readings on the manufacture of “national traditions” like pain-taking, focusing on the production and inculcation of wartime ideologies. During the French and American War periods, some of the leading Vietnamese communists were engaged in what Shaun Malarney describes as “articulating the new virtue” of devotional self-sacrifice for the modern nation (“Fatherland” 49). Ashley Pettus explains that, for women, this meant that, “[d]uring the early and most patriotic years of the war, from 1965 to 1968, a compelling model of national womanhood emerged that

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71 According to Malarney, “[t]he critical element in the construction of the new virtue was the transcendence of self-interest and the selfless devotion to the collectivity. As Le Duan declared, ‘The revolutionary differs from the nonrevolutionary in that he knows to forget himself for the service of the collectivity, for the common interest. Before all else he always thinks of the Revolution and the collectivity. He always knows to place the interest of the fatherland, the interests of the collectivity, above the interests of the individual.’ ‘To relentlessly think of one’s self, of one’s family,’ the general secretary commented on another occasion, ‘is inadequate, selfish.’” (“Fatherland” 49)
effectively combined socialist ideas of progress with the domestic feminine qualities of self-sacrifice, nuturance and devotion” (45). The Party skillfully rearticulated older forms of Vietnamese traditional practice to serve the needs of revolution and reunification. As Malarney asserts:

One of the most explicit moves in the ideological realm was the creation and elaboration of a new set of definitions for noble and virtuous actions. Prior to the Revolution, official ideology had deemphasized the Confucian virtues of devotion to the emperor and the mandarinate. In the Communist state, the act of devotion remained salient; only the objects changed. According to the new definition, the objects of virtuous action became the fatherland (to quoc), the people (nhan dan), the party (dang), and the Revolution (cach mang). (49)

Malarney and Pettus’ keen analysis of the Party’s ideological machine, and its gendered directives, clarify the veterans’ narrative claims on pain-taking and national devotion. The veterans’ narratives do express and promote virtuous “self sacrifice, nuturance and devotion” in the service of “the fatherland,” “the people,” “the party,” “the Revolution” (Pettus 45; Malarney, “Fatherland” 49). The Party did self-consciously adapt pre-communist mythic pasts, like the Trung Sister’s, into Vietnam’s official national history and the veterans do tell their pasts in accordance with those state terms.

Malarney and Pettus’ analysis helps describe and historicize the nationalist, communist performativities in which the veterans and their narratives participate. In this ideological context, however, the war veterans perform strategic decisions that far exceed anything we might think of as gendered national “sacrifice.” Accordingly, co Xuan corrects my use of the word “hope.” Xuan says, “it is not a hope, it is belief in victory, sooner or later.” She always held a “belief, a strong belief, and you need to stick to that goal if you want to win.” Co Xuan adds:
Co Xuan/Nhina: It is reasonable,

Understandable,

That if you live in,

Poverty,

Our country,

At that moment,

Was really poor,

And we,

We were supposed to try hard,

To improve our country,

To do anything that is needed.

That is an example of

Pain-taking.

[...]

It is the root,

Rivka: The root?

Co Dinh/Nhina: The root,

It is the traditional,

Rivka: The tradition—

Co Dinh/Nhina: Yah.

The tradition,

Of pain-taking.
For co Dinh, “there are a lot of instance[s], from Vietnam’s long history up to the [present] moment that [. . .] make you think a lot, to chose a way for yourself, to solve a problem for yourself, in your conscience, for what you have seen in your life.” Emphasizing poverty, inequality, and conscience, co Dinh expresses her commitment to pain-taking, and her devotion to the communist cause, as an ethical choice. It is the ethical “root” of Vietnamese tradition. Nhina and co Dinh continue:

Co Dinh/Nhina: What nurtured this determination
And pain-taking
Habit
To her,
Is that every day,
She did experienced that
Bad treatment
That evil treatment,
[By] foreigners,
Like they kill Vietnamese people,
Some of them,
Damage your body,
Tear them apart,
She was aware that,
As a member [of society]
You, you have to do something.

Her relatives,
Were killed by Americans
And were damaged,
Their bodies,
Were tear apart,
By those [foreigners],
And she felt responsible
For that case,
She just felt responsible[…]
[…]
And she say hers,
It is just a small story
Among lots of other
Stories in Vietnam.
Just an instance.
[…]

Hers is “just a small story among lots of other stories in Vietnam.” Co Dinh felt responsible. She felt she had to actively do something about the social inequities she was witnessing and experiencing. “As a member [of society] you, you have to do something.” So she and others began dissenting and “chose a way,” entering into a deep tradition of Vietnamese “resistance against foreign aggressors” and domination. Her subsequent performances of resistance, in the form of simultaneously bearing and performing pain-taking, may be “just an instance,” as co Dinh says, but they (along with others’ performances of that “tradition”) changed history and remade society. Eventual survival and victory proved, at least for a particular segment of Vietnamese society, the interdependent power of the singular and the social act.

Co Dinh’s and co Xuan’s performances of pain-taking offer a powerful corrective to Scarry. Scarry asserts that “physical pain—unlike any other state of consciousness—has no
referential content. It is not of or for anything.” Unequivocally countering this assertion, co Dinh and co Xuan’s description of the tradition of pain-taking makes pain-bearing and -performing of and for everything that matters most. Pain’s “referential content” becomes social and national, making and connecting the bearer/performer to community, particularly to a gendered community of patriotic women. Performing the performativity of pain-taking as tradition empowers co Dinh and co Xuan, generating agency that breaks through, and overcomes, their oppressors force. Performing pain-taking makes and focuses the veterans’ power over their material circumstances, vitally contributing to the success of their individual survival and shared national cause. The power produced in pain-taking is covalent: the social energizing the individual, and the individual actualizing the social.

Instead of “[p]ain’s triumph” being the “absolute split between one’s sense of one’s own reality and the reality of other persons,” the women’s bearing and performing becomes their triumph through pain, derived from and producing a powerful, intimate sociality with others (Scarry 4). For Co Dinh, co Xuan, and the performance group women, pain is not the antithesis of culture (as it is arguably increasingly becoming in the west) but part of a core set of cultural rituals, where the powers of particular performances and performativities of tradition are conjoined, connecting individuals’ agency with that of social transformation. In light of co Dinh and co Xuan’s self-theories of pain-taking, I would like to stipulate three points for further consideration throughout this chapter: 1) that pain-taking is a radical self-, society-, and culture-making activity, 2) that participating in its gendered performances and performative traditions empower the women who practice it as bearers/performers, and 3) that this practice is grounded in a spectral politics of remembrance and prospective social activism.
Return to Con Dao: Performing as Survivor-Tourist

As our conversation continues, co Dinh and co Xuan tell of “living the return” (rather than the repetition) to spaces of personal and national historical significance on Con Dao (Auge 89). For the country’s celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Vietnamese Communist Party, and corresponding with the season of honoring the dead during the Tet holiday, the performance group women traveled to Con Dao to participate in a nationally televised show at Hang Duong Cemetery (*Nghia Trang Hang Duong*). Official speeches were made, pictures were taken, and magazine articles were written describing the historic event for the general public. It was a governmentally planned and publicized commemoration: dedicated to honoring the state’s living veterans and martyred heroes while pedagogically-oriented toward the postwar generations. The event was designed help reify Party support by ceremonially recalling and valorizing the official national past. The performance group women were there to perform patriotic songs and dances in front of the cemetery’s war martyr monument, just a short walk from the tomb of Vo Thi Sau, and down the road from the eroding “tiger cage” prison cells where the veterans were once held captive.

For the veterans, the return to Con Dao was significant for its public and private dimensions. The Con Dao performance gave them the chance to continue carrying out their national service as well as the honor of receiving public recognition for their sacrifices, successes, and commitments. When “off-stage,” the veterans toured the prisons and cemetery together, individually and collectively remembering the time they spent on Con Dao during the war. They exchanged stories and recollections, sat quietly by themselves in
the prison courtyard, offered incense and prayer at the graves of martyrs like Vo Thi Sau, and took pictures of each other at these historic sites.

This is only the second time the women have returned to Con Dao since their release in 1974. When the women were taken to the notorious island jail system as prisoners, co Dinh explains, prison guards used “a ah, tear gas, until you collapsed [. . .] even [my friend who was] pregnant [] experience[d] tear gas.” Reciting its well-worn epithet, co Dinh and the other ladies often remind me that Con Dao is “a place of hell on earth.” Providing further evidence of Con Dao’s legacies of extreme violence, co Dinh explains “After independence day, they dig a hole and find over forty dead bodies,” which, she says “happened all around Con Dao.” When I ask, “What did it feel like to go there again?” co Dinh answers:

Co Dinh/Nhina: Memories,
    Deep,
    Memories were recalled.
    And she did go inside the
    Cage [cell] to take photos.

    [We all smile and laugh.]

With humor and seriousness, Co Dinh and co Xuan remark on the stark difference between their first, forced trip to Con Dao and their voluntary, comparatively luxurious, return with tickets, government invitation, and airline seats. They return as guests of doubled honor: both part of the reason for celebration/commemoration and the performers of these events. When the women first came as prisoners they were gassed, loaded onto the plane, and then beaten upon their arrival to the island, “until they collapse.” In an effort to protect
the older women in the group, the younger women “surrounded the older ladies to try to prevent them from being beaten.” While it is difficult to come back to this place, the women say it also fills them with a sense of thankful empowerment at having survived.

The veterans return to Con Dao as both survivors and tourists. As survivor-tourists, co Dinh and co Xuan, “did go inside the cage [prison cells] to take photos.” We all laugh after this comment, recognizing the playful dimensions of touristic picture-taking in jarring contrast with the women’s prior, sobering descriptions. Later that year, when I accompany a group of veterans on a separate, Saigontourist reunion tour of Con Dao, I learn that taking pictures at the island’s historic sites is a common practice. I will come back to the strangeness and significance of taking pictures, and tourism on Con Dao in general, shortly.

Co Xuan explains, and Nhina translates, that this time when they “set foot on Con Dao,” the women “try to control, I mean, They didn’t want to tears, to cry. They did control [their tears], but the feeling was, beyond words.” Co Dinh says “It turns her nervous, and also scared” to come back and as they landed, she noticed her body became covered with goose bumps. She describes coming back with her fellow veterans as “a mixture of joy and sorrow.” Joy because “it is amazing to her that she have [sic] the opportunity to come back to Con Dao, not in wartime, but in peace” but it also “hurts her” to step off the plane because she remembers making this journey in 1969. On that occasion, she and the other women were “beaten immediately, from head to bottom and then tied up.” These are some of the “deep memories,” that come back to the women on Con Dao. The women’s sense of national pride and devotion is refreshed as these “deep memories” stir the deep beliefs they held, and still hold, in the power of their traditions of pain-taking and optimism, their duty of
remembering and honoring lost comrades, and their continuing work of “promoting our country” by educating younger generations of Vietnamese about this important history.

During the Con Dao performance, co Dinh says that she cried when they performed “Nhung Canh Hoa Nguoc Dong” (“Flower Petals Against the Stream”) because in the cemetery, so close to the tomb of Vo Thi Sau, the “landscape moved her.” She confesses that “even now she is trying not to cry, just thinking about it.” I ask her, “at what point in the song did you cry?” Co Dinh cried “when the song said, ‘someone did pass away’” because it caused her to remember her friends, buried in the unmarked graves stretching out as far as the eye can see around the makeshift stage:

Co Dinh/Nhina: She felt pity for all her friends
That did pass away in the
Wartime.
[…]
They pass away without
Seeing peace,
Of victory,
And forever,
They may not see it.
[…]

[Nhina listens to co Dinh and co Xuan and then paraphrases.]

Even though Con Dao has changed a lot
And is in peace right now,
Wherever they go,
Around Con Dao,
They still remember their friends,
And their times in prison,
And the beatings
They did experience in war times.

Returning to this place of great personal suffering is difficult. It conjures memories, rousing sadness, tears, nervousness, and gratitude. Perhaps co Dinh, co Xuan, and the other performance group women pose for pictures in the cages and in front of the prison doorways in order to recognize and placate these strong feelings. In the pictures, groups of ladies stand together—sometimes smiling other times with calm expressions—in the cemetery, next to the war martyr’s monument, beside the tomb of Vo Thi Sau, in the prison courtyards, and even inside the barred cells. Their hair is fixed; they wear dressy polyester pantsuits. Co Xuan is wearing red lipstick. What is the significance of taking pictures on Con Dao for co Dinh and co Xuan? What does this act do or mark for them? As co Dinh mentions twice in the course of this conversation:

Co Dinh/Nhina: She would like to emphasize the
Contrast,
The contrast between
The visit to Con Dao,
And when they are in prison.

Taking commemorative pictures in the cemetery and at the prisons is a pervasive, appropriate, and expected part of returning to Con Dao for veterans. In accordance with the
veterans’ mixed, sometimes ambivalent status as survivors-tourists, taking pictures performs multiple functions. The pictures mark the critical differences between this return to Con Dao and the veteran’s experience as prisoners. It is obvious that these “visits” to Con Dao are distinct, but the picture-as-verification of the veterans’ survival, success, and freedom, affirms that history is not repeating by (re)citing/sighting that difference. They are living the return to Con Dao, not the repetition.

The pictures, and the act of taking them, are also reclamations of the personal agency the veterans once lacked as prisoners. By taking their own pictures, the veterans retake the “scene” of torture and imprisonment in a double sense: they reclaim the prison itself as the victors of war and they restage pictures of their free selves in the prison on their own terms. Their prison experience, marked by the spectacularity of constant surveillance, is a “scene” of power imposition, and in this case, torture. In prison, the women were forced to take mug shots and other photos against their will. In silent defiance, many of them closed their eyes, refusing to be documented, compliant, and “seen.” The women were also ordered to give juridical testimony as participants in the NLF and to perform as “eye” witnesses to their secrets. Instead of giving testimony the women refused to speak, which often led to increased punishments. Now, one of the ways the women testify to their inhumane treatment and survival is through the production of their own pictorial “evidence.”

In addition, and not insignificantly, picture taking is also a part of modern, middle-class tourism culture. It is part of “what you do on vacation,” in leisure time. Picture-taking and vacationing, even at this historic site for a reunion tour or government sponsored event, signifies that the veterans have achieved a certain measure of comfort in their lives. On the tour I participated in, family pictures taken at the cemetery, prisons, tombs, and memorial
ceremonies were interspersed with photos of grandkids in the hotel pool, friends sitting on
the beach, and smiling faces ringed around dish-laden dinner tables in the large dining
room. The pictures, and the performance of taking them, helps the veterans remember
national and personal histories with each other and their families, retake the scene of
imprisonment and reclaim personal agency, mark the critical differences between this
touristic return and their involuntary incarceration, and signify their enjoyment of leisure
time and travel together. “Thanks to the victory, liberation,” explains Nhina, now “they can
acknowledge the beauty, they can enjoy the beauty—like on Con Dao—of the country.”

“Con Dao has changed a lot” co Dinh says. Middle-class leisure activities and
vacationing is new to Vietnam. In recent years, the economy has picked up throughout the
country and allowed more middle-class Vietnamese to live beyond mere subsistence. During
this time Con Dao has become a kind of Mecca for communist veterans and their families as
well as other local vacationers, mostly from the urban areas in and around Ho Chi Minh City.
Today, Con Dao is trying on a new image, posing as both a destination for national, historical
pilgrimage and a burgeoning vacation spot with empty beaches, a quaint village, and a new
crop of comfortable seaside hotels aimed at attracting the growing Vietnamese tourism
market. But the land is haunted, as every resident and visitor to Con Dao knows.

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72 On the tour I took to Con Dao (consisting of a large group of about seventy-five people and including only a
few women from the performance group and their families), one man took what seemed like continuous video
footage of everything we did. At the end of the trip, in the hotel dining room, he showed the video. Everyone
gathered around the screen and watched the whole thing twice! I believe he made copies of the film for all the
veterans.
Feeling Haunted on Con Dao

In markedly different ways, each person who sets foot on Con Dao, feels the “seething presence” of ghosts within the sinister-serene landscape (Gordon 195). Co Dinh describes the palpable presence of the island’s violent, mournful, and “magical” past:

Co Dinh/Nhina: To Vietnamese people,  
Around a land where lots of people die,  
[There exist] lots of stories,  
A lot of pain happen,  
In that land,  
[...]  
It has this power,  
I mean,  
The land,  
It is a bit magical,  
I don’t know how to explain—  
But, kind of magical.  
[...]  
For instance,  
When she was guided around the prisons system  
And outside,  
They carried out preparation for the show  
[In the] meantime,  
She stood on the soil  
Where lots of people passed away,  
Her relatives,  
Her friends,
And develop a
Strange feeling to her.

The “strange feeling” co Dinh describes having as she stands on the soil “where lots of people passed away,” is what Avery Gordon might call a sensation of haunting. Co Dinh remembers, and re-senses in her body, “the persistent and troubling ghosts,” “who are not simply [] dead or missing person[s], but [] social figure[s],” and personal friends, whose spirits still wander Con Dao, even though the island is now “in peace” (8):

Co Dinh/Nhina: Yah,
In the prison,
The memories were recalled,
As she was walking there.
The way they protest against the regime,
The way they sacrificed themselves—
[...] She is happy to say,
She visited Con Dao
In the air of peace,
In peace—

[The tape runs out.]

During my own research-tourist trip to Con Dao, a few months after this conversation, I felt myself haunted by the veterans’ stories. Their descriptions of feeling Con Dao’s haunted landscape, especially co Dinh’s, invaded my perceptual field. I found myself
troubled by others’ ghostly pasts and realized that I had inherited—feeling them in my own distinct, different way—the veterans’ haunting histories. Gordon explains that haunting “is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening” that “draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition” (8). The transformative recognition Gordon describes is not a feeling of complete understanding, but a heightened kinesthetic and imagined sensing, a palpable realization that there is more out there that is and is not seen.

Co Dinh and co Xuan were the primary conveyers, or mediators, of my experience on Con Dao. Their stories animated my imagination in this frightful-tranquil place and motivated my willingness to recognize and listen to the ghosts of Con Dao. Even though they were not there with me, co Dinh and co Xuan’s experiences and stories moved me to sense the traces of personal pasts and “social memory,” that “is not just history, but haunting; not just context, but animated worldliness; not just the hard ground of infrastructural matters, but of the shadowy grip of ghostly matters” (165-66). On Con Dao, I felt the palpable sensations of walking amidst others’ pasts, “bumping into rememory” in every place we toured (Gordon elaborating on Toni Morrison’s terminology, 164).

Walking through the Con Dao prisons, I hear the women’s voices softly singing “Flower Petals Against the Stream.” Their voices blend with the wind whispering through the barred windows. Pausing with the veterans in darkened cells, I see shadowy figures huddled in the dank corners, as cameras flash and families pose with the cement statues of shackled prisoners staged in dioramas ringing the room. These sensuous apparitions, bumping up against and mingling with visitors and cement statues, are “rememor[ies] that
belong[] to somebody else,” but with which I am now in active relation. As Toni Morrison expresses in her novel *Beloved*, “[s]ome things just stay. [. . .] If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world” (qtd. in Gordon, 164-5). *Some rememories are out there in the world.* As Gordon elaborates, “[t]he possibility of a collectively animated worldly memory is articulated here in that extraordinary moment in which you—who was never there in that real place—can *bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else*” (166). This is a “moment of enchantment when you are remembering something in the world, or something in the world is remembering you.” Some forms of sociality are “out there in the world” (166). *Some things just stay.* The presence of unmarked graves, crumbling prison walls, and wandering spirits on Con Dao *just stay.*

On Con Dao, and in other places in Vietnam, I feel the commanding pull of haunting, of being “grasped and hurtled into the maelstrom of the powerful and material forces that lay claim to you whether you claim them as yours or not” (Gordon 166). This is partly why I *feel* I need somehow to become answerable to co Dinh, the performance group veterans, and so many others I have met (and not met) in Vietnam. Later in the evening, walking at sunset on the island’s litter-strewn beaches, I see children splashing in the waves. The conical limpet shells interspersed in the sand look like traditional Vietnamese sunhats. I pick up a few faded white and red shells, putting them in my pocket, while remembering Pierre Nora’s description of “*lieux de memoires,*” as “moments of history torn away from the movements of history, then returned; *no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded*” (emphasis added, “Between” 7). Each limpet shell evokes a person who suffered here.
Further out, along the wharf, amidst the brightly colored, blue- and green-painted fishing boats, I see a military craft unloading shackled prisoners. Dogs bark and guards raise their clubs, about to strike. I hear the clink, clink of chains mixing with the children’s laughter. Glancing over my shoulder, I see the new government-run hotel where our tour group is staying. It looks a little less glamorous than in the advertisements. On the old military ship we took to the island, now used for tourist transport, a poster advertising the hotel hung on the wall above our seats. “Con Dao Hotel, Your ideal stopping place” (“Nha Nghi, Noi dung chan ly tuong cua ban”), it enticingly proclaimed, showing the hotel grounds with people frolicking in the pool and relaxing under umbrellas on the beach. I took a picture of the poster because it seemed strangely in and out of place. Yes, co Dinh is right, “Con Dao has changed a lot.” But still, some things just stay.

The mixing of tourism with various forms of religious and historical pilgrimage is an emerging, popular phenomenon in Vietnam.73 As thoughts of achieving economic prosperity in the new market-economy begin overshadowing state histories and older communist values, the state and the individuals who shaped these official narratives, turn to touristic pilgrimage as a way of revitalizing the national past. Arguably, making historic sites into tourist destinations invites positive associations that validate and strengthen the state’s authority: the reason you are able to enjoy leisure time, greater prosperity, and freedom is because of the wartime generation’s sacrifices and the Party’s dedication to the people. With the crumbling prison blocks just across the street from several beachfront hotels, it is hard to ignore the presence of history on the island. For the Vietnamese veterans, mixing tourism with politics and history does not present a problem. You can come to Con Dao for a prison tour and a rest on the beach without reproach.

73 See, especially, Taylor (Goddess) for further reading on the subject of pilgrimage and tourism.
That Con Dao is now becoming a tourist destination, for those seeking empty beaches or those wishing to remember their past (and those who want both), is not disturbing to the veterans. Tourism on Con Dao and elsewhere in Vietnam is viewed less and less as a frivolous, capitalist (Western), “waste of time” reserved exclusively for the wealthy. Tourism, especially the sort practiced by the veterans, is not seen as an embarrassing bourgeois indulgence, but as a means of developing, enriching, and celebrating the country. The simultaneous, entwined cultural performances of tourism and national commemoration on Con Dao celebrate peace and greater prosperity, amidst the haunting ruins of war and their ghostly inhabitants.

**Living With Memory: Beyond Cyclical Remembering or Negligent Forgetting**

Co Dinh’s narratives of pain-taking refuse both cyclical and linear logics of mourning, healing, and narrative closure. The women describe pain-taking implicitly and explicitly as: an explanation for survival; a fact of life as a Vietnamese woman; a means of living-on with hardships, illness, and loss; the performed link between the veterans and the greater Vietnamese pantheon of female ancestors; a way of translating personal acts into socially- and nationally-oriented goals. Pain-taking is a way of understanding and creating the self as a cultural-historical subject, an activity of making relationships between individuals and a larger, shared community, and, through these self/social dynamics, a powerful means of mobilizing materialist possibilities for change. In all formulations, pain-taking is a necessary ethical undertaking, an activity of responsibility between self and others. Co Dinh’s stories of “pain-taking” are themselves acts of pain-taking. They are performances that tell the secret of surviving suffering by describing the practice (as useful information to be shared), rather than valorizing personal details of struggle. Witnessing the
veterans’ performances of pain-taking cause listeners, like me and Nhina, to marvel at the women’s strength and compels us to reckon with the human wreckage left by war’s shattering violence.

Perceptions of the past may change with time. Lost events and lives may potentially be “recovered” by memory. But, at least for co Dinh, repair is impossible, even undesirable. History-telling as “pain-taking” gathers up and conveys direct corporeal and social pain. As co Dinh suggests in the coming sections, time does not, and perhaps should not, heal all wounds. With this in mind, what are Nhina’s and my roles as listeners? How do we respond to, or redress, co Dinh’s continuing losses and unhealed wounds?

The decision to “be done” with the past and to move on is enticing, but in some cases it is unethical, if not impossible. It is a decision based on a binary view of memory: that we either remember or forget, hold on too tightly or let go altogether. This limited choice is often accompanied by two-dimensional views of history: that it linearly progresses and/or cyclically repeats.

Left with these unappealing binarisms, what other choices are possible? How can living-on with memory—forgetting and remembering—be practiced as a processual activity? How can living with memory be performed in personally and socially viable ways that resist living exclusively within or for any one temporal formation, be it past, future, or present? Instead, how can living with memory be practiced trans-temporally, across and through cultures and material geographies, in the pursuit of living more justly with others? Derrida, Oliver, Gordon, and others suggest this form of living-on requires one to become responsible to others, including specters, everyone within and beyond the living present. But how does
one perform this endless responsibility? What does practicing responsibility to justice, and answerability to others, entail?

The *pursuit* of responsibility to justice, and hauntological answerability, for me, involves memory and performance. The veterans teach me this with their stories and by the way they choose to live. Becoming responsible and answerable to the veterans requires memory-centered, co-responsive performance: it necessitates co-respondence. Co-respondence implies multi-valent interdependence and a performative process that is always becoming.

**Performing Co-Responsence Instead of Closure**

I found my way into the living politics of memory, with all of its radical contingency, by touching the shards of other’s memories. These broken shards left their mark in me. Even from far away, memories of the veterans and their stories affect the ways I think and act. While the performance group women do not have “the answers,” they know about survival, how to decide what matters, about maintaining flexibility in the face of extreme trial and change, how to reckon with continuing pain and loss, and how to respond to past damages in socially meaningful and responsible ways. They teach me about the process and performance of living with memory in the pursuit of creating better understanding between people. The veterans demonstrate how performances of co-memoration, co-respondence, and responsibility are unending, active processes rather than finite endpoints or achievements. Consequently, instead of peace and forgiveness, I use terminology such as recognition and responsibility to describe what I feel we mutually seek in our exchanges, because peace and forgiveness are often misrepresented as political endpoints rather than continual, infinite processes.
Recognition and responsibility may encompass practices of peace-making and forgiving, and should be understood as active processes of doing. Too often, however, forgiveness and peaceful reparation are considered part of finding “closure” in order to “put the past to rest.” But what about the problem that the past’s turmoil rarely stays contained in “history,” and instead un-rests, sometimes arrests, the present and future? What then?

When remembering pasts marred by warfare’s extreme violence and injustice, such as the losses expressed by co Dinh, it is necessary to reappraise, and perhaps also to refigure, taken-for-granted notions of mourning, reparation, and forgiveness. It seems necessary for co Dinh to reinvigorate wounds that have not healed, re-witness the bodies disfigured by cruelty and injustice, and as Derrida suggests, un-bury the dead to “speak to the specter, to speak with it” so that past violence and injustice—that is not past, and just stays—continues to unsettle, disturb, and problematize the living present (Specters 11). Co Dinh’s sudden exposure of her bullet wound, and her direct, jolting correlation of her body and our work of remembering, raised numerous questions for me, questions that connect the specificity of co Dinh’s pain and losses with issues of how to witness and respond to social injustice.

The Problem of Ethical Witness

The bullet wound embedded forever in co Dinh’s body, affecting her every step, is more than a tangible metaphor for the impossibility fully repairing the past. It is the everyday reality of living with memory, a deeply embodied daily witnessing, of pasts that just stay.

If not to repair or to close a wound, then what is it we strive toward in remembering damaged pasts? The veterans’ aims, in remembering and making friendship with me and Nhina, are not to heal wounds or to repair history. Remembering may serve as a kind of
salve, but it offers no magic cure. The veterans know this. Co Dinh is not seeking apology, reparations, or reconciliation in any traditional sense. She does not want to close off, even out, or finish up past injustices. “Settling the score,” is not possible, nor is it desirable. Likewise, co Dinh is not interested in harboring grudges or simply nursing old wounds. However, she is equally unwilling to “put the past to rest.” What options does this leave? Why does co Dinh feel compelled to tell? What responsibility do I have to co Dinh, co Xuan, and the other veterans, now that they have given me their stories?

I ask these questions of myself because of the queries the veterans pose to me. Without fail, at some point during nearly each meeting, co Dinh, co Xuan, co Kim Dung, and co Nhut all ask me to answer-back after listening to their stories. They ask such questions as: What do you think about all these things we have told you? What do you think about how I threw a grenade into the Majestic Theater? What do you have to say about this story or this historical event? What do you think about the use of torture on Con Dao and America’s use of torture at Guantanamo? What will you say to students and friends who ask you what you have learned in Vietnam? Implicitly, in asking for my response they were always somehow inquiring: Have our histories changed you? Do they matter to you? How are you thinking about our pasts in relation to the present? What will you do now that you know?

They were urging me, and in different ways Nhina, to keep living with their pasts, and the pasts of others. Their stories should keep troubling us, keep stirring up our thoughts, unsettling our comforts, and disturbing complacency. Our questions should keep unfolding, causing us to keep remembering. The veterans’ continual questioning-back signaled that they wanted Nhina and me to keep on thinking with and answering to their stories, with the expectation that these queries will never be solved. Rather than being something
momentarily unsettling that can be “figured out,” “dealt with,” and/or “gotten over,” reckoning with the veterans’ pasts requires an ongoing practice of witnessing. Witnessing performed as and through co-respondence embodies mutual willingness, joint-creation, and an endless process of recognition and responsibility. Witnessing as co-respondence shows the process as “[co-]constitutive,” and not “reduced to the testimony to trauma” (Oliver 7). Witnessing the veterans’ lives, through performing co-respondent remembering with them, is a necessarily unending activity, an “infinite encounter” necessitating “infinite responsibility” (90), as Kelly Oliver (elaborating on Holocaust scholar Shoshana Felman) argues:

in order to reestablish subjectivity and in order to demand justice, it is necessary to bear witness to the inarticulate experience of the inside. This is not the finite task of comprehending it; this is the infinite task of encountering it (268). It is the tension between finite understanding linked to historical facts and historically determined subject positions, and the infinite encounter linked to psychoanalysis and the infinite responsibility of subjectivity that produces a sense of agency. Such an encounter necessarily takes us beyond recognition and brings with it ethical obligation.

We are obligated to witness beyond recognition, to testify and to listen to testimony—to encounter each other—because subjectivity and humanity are the result of witnessing. That is to say, subjectivity and humanity are the result of response-ability. (emphasis added, 90)

Oliver makes several critical points: ethical witness may require an infinite encounter with what is knowable and unknowable in another’s life; witnessing is an unending process that carries ethical obligations for both teller and listener; the ethical call of witnessing consequently emerges as response-ability. For Oliver, “response-ability is the founding possibility of subjectivity and its most fundamental obligation” (91). Subjectivity, humanity,
and justice require no less than infinite encounters and infinite response-ability from all of us.\footnote{As previously discussed, the veterans’ stories offer a corrective to Scarry’s claims on torture. The women I spoke with did not lose their own sense of themselves as subjects through torture. Their way of resisting their inhumane treatment preserved, and may have even strengthened, their sense of themselves as individuals and a group. Luckily, as the veterans tell it, they did not need their captors to recognize them as subjects in order to retain their subjectivity. The women seem to have sustained their subjectivity, and agency, through small acts of resistance, and they were able to witness each other, even in absence. However, it is still true that “subordination, oppression, and subjectification undermine the possibility of subjectivity” (Oliver 7). As Oliver states, “[a]t the extreme, torture and enslavement can destroy the essential parts of subjectivity that must be revived or reconstructed in order for the survivor to be able to act as an agent” (7). In the veterans’ case, the fact that their captors viewed them as others and objects rather than subjects undermined the torturers’ subjectivity and destroyed the possibility of co-constituting subjectivity formations and equitable human relations.}

With the veterans, witnessing through co-respondent remembering does not result in gaining anything like complete understanding. As I will discuss later on, somewhat paradoxically, what I “gain” from listening to the veterans is a better awareness of the expansiveness of that which I do not, and often cannot, know. Oliver, Derrida, Gordon and others address the necessity of witnessing toward absence (rather than fullness or certitude in the possession of knowledge), beyond the comprehensible, outside the visible, past the edges of certainty, into the space beyond the knowable in order to become aware of, and break, “patholog[ies] of oppression” (Oliver 3). For Oliver, “[w]itnessing has the double sense of testifying to something that you have seen with your own eyes and bearing witness to something that you cannot see” (18). As a central thesis, Oliver argues, “those othered by dominant culture,” such as “[t]he victims of oppression, slavery, and torture are not merely seeking visibility and recognition, but they are also seeking witnesses to horrors beyond recognition” (8).

That which is beyond recognition, but requires bearing witness, is “[w]hat we could call the psychoanalytic truth, or the truth of performance, [that] cannot be captured in
historical facts” (92). She continues to describe forms of truth that are not accessible through historical facts in terms of performance:

It is the *performance* of testimony, not merely that which is said, that makes it effective in bringing to life a repetition of an event, not a repetition of the facts of the event, or the structure of the event, but the silences and the blindness inherent in the event that, at bottom, also make eyewitness testimony impossible. In other words, what makes testimony powerful is its dramatization of the impossibility of testifying to the event. What makes witnessing possible is its performance of the impossibility of ever witnessing the event. (86)

Oliver’s characterization, of the necessity yet *impossibility of testifying*, makes at least two interconnected performance-centered points of critical relevance for listening witnesses. Witnessing beyond recognition means: 1) opening to forms of truth in excess of empirical fact and 2) recognizing that such witnessing will never be total. Caruth’s call to performance applies the postmodern performance ethics Elin Diamond describes as “an epistemology grounded not on the distinction between truthful models and fictional representations but on different ways of knowing and doing that are constitutively heterogeneous, contingent, and risky” (1). The performative truth in what exists outside historical facts, together with the inescapable partiality of witnessing itself, compels the ethical “[n]ecessity and [i]mpossibility of [w]itnessing” beyond recognition (Oliver 85).

Oliver’s description of the critical truths beyond recognition that performance can convey is similar to Trinh T. Minh-Ha’s political poetics of story-truth. For Trinh, performing a story can make the imagined real; the way of telling speaks truth beyond known history not necessarily by telling what did happen, but by conjuring *what might have happened and what is happening in an unspecified time and place*. Gesturing to silences and
blindness, Oliver implies witnessing also entails reckoning with the impossibility of ever fully recognizing the extent of others’ absences and losses. However, it is still critical to witness the impossible-to-witness, to reckon with what you realize you do not fully comprehend, recognizing at best that one can never encompass the extent of even one person’s loss.

Oliver’s call to practice ethical witnessing beyond recognition resonates with the socio-historical politics in Gordon’s attention to ghostly matters and Jacques Derrida’s invitational conversation with specters. I join these theorists, the performance group women, and many others, in asking: “how can we bear witness to oppression, domination, subordination, enslavement, and torture in ways that open up the possibility of a more humane and ethical future beyond violence” (18)? Implicit, but underdeveloped, in all of these scholars’ calls for responsibility and witness is a deeply embodied, intersubjective force which the veterans consciously harness, and that I would like to make central in analyses of memory practices: the political, poetic, kinetic power of performance as that which conjoins the individual and the social. Taken together (and infused with theory from performance studies scholars such as Pollock, Madison, and Conquergood), Gordon, Oliver, and Derrida offer a way of understanding the veterans’ memory practices as a performative politics of hauntological remembering and responsibility. Before elaborating on this in more detail, I want to consider how Derrida’s spectral politics can inform Oliver’s call to witness beyond recognition.

**Beyond Recognition: Responsibility to Justice Within & Beyond the Living Present**

Oliver introduces the necessity of performing witnessing in excess of empirical truth and beyond total understanding. By including the different sort of beyondness, and
undeniable presence, of ghosts into the practice of ethical living and the pursuit of social
justice, Derrida suggests an historical and prospective consciousness that must inform our
everyday actions. His hauntology can be understood as a call to historical witnessing as an
ethical practice of everyday life. Both Oliver and Derrida stipulate what is at stake in
ethically witnessing memory, history, and others’ lives: subjectivity, justice, and the
possibility for transforming ourselves and society. Who inhabits the beyondness that Gordon
feels as a seething presence? Derrida and Gordon explain that beyond the present, and in the
present, there are specters who are willing, and wanting, to correspond with the living. We
must become hospitable hosts for these ghosts, specters, and spirits. They are beyond our
full recognition, beyond our complete knowing, but they are there, and speaking with them,
reckoning with what they have to say, is essential to the pursuit of justice.

Derrida expands Oliver’s focus on the living survivor with a radical, historical and
performative, human interdependence that is not just dependent on co-respondence with the
living. We must “learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or
the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts” Derrida expresses, in the
correspondence with the living as well as with the “ghosts of those who are not yet born or
who are already dead be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist,
racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of experimentations, victims of the oppressions of
capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism” (Specters xix).

In the following section, co Dinh calls forth, or is called forth by, such a ghostly
victim of violent, nationalist, colonialist, racist war: the wandering spirit of her older brother
who was brutally killed during the war. He is beckoned through the explosive narrative of co
Dinh’s bullet wound and her dramatic exposure of its scar. Following Derrida and Oliver, I
call the form of political consciousness compelled through witnessing both ghosts and the living a historical, spectral consciousness: a performative politics of hauntological remembering. Practicing co-respondent witnessing and hauntological consciousness with co Dinh obliges me to make performance-based responses to ghosts, to co Dinh, the veterans, and still others.

Accordingly, *witnessing beyond recognition* entails entering into conversation with ghosts as well as with the living. Co Dinh and the veterans know this. Rather than viewing memory’s contingency and partiality as marking an inherent failure in communication, we witness toward beyondness as a necessary, ethical component of forging co-created subjectivity.

Speaking with specters can make a vital difference in the living present. If witnessed through the ethical practice Oliver describes, ghosts help inspire the living to become response-able to others. Hauntological consciousness, “this being-with specters” in remembering and becoming response-able is “a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations.” What I gain from co Dinh, the veterans, and the ghosts I encountered in Vietnam is the gift of memory, an inheritance, that is and is not mine to *have*, but my responsibility to perform and *pass on*. Witnessing co Dinh, co Xuan, and the ghosts they speak into presence, Nhina and I inherit responsibility to others within and beyond the living present. This process of inheriting memory and responsibility makes hauntological consciousness a transcultural, inter-generational co-respondent practice with social imperatives. Witnessing the living and the spectral suggests a radical interdependence within and between subjectivities, informed but not limited by nation, culture, temporality, age, geography or any other distinguishing feature. Co Dinh witnesses the spectral beyond
recognition when she remembers her brother and his death. She teaches me a different politics of commemorative remembering that moves beyond normative views on mourning, reparations, and the desire to heal wounded pasts.

**Familial Disintegration**

Co Dinh still clutches her pant leg in her hands. Nhina and I still feel stunned by what is happening. As we look at the bullet wound, the scar sears itself into our memory. The bullet wound occurred during a Tet Offensive street fight in 1968, Nhina explains, when Co Dinh was “eighteen or nineteen” years old. The gunfight and co Dinh’s subsequent torture happened just a few blocks from where we sit remembering these stories. “Yes, close to here” co Dinh tells Nhina and me, “Yes, close to your house now.” Co Dinh’s gun battle, in the infamous Tet Offensive, happened thirty-seven years ago at an intersection located right down the street from my apartment. This historic event is suddenly made personal. It is no longer something that happened over there and back then. It is right here. No wonder the Saigon streets seem to seethe with ghosts as much as they roar with motorbike traffic.

Prior to her injury and incarceration, as a teenager co Dinh carried out secret insurgency missions, created public disturbances, “recruited other students” to the communist cause, and was “expected to spread information about the bad treatment from the American’s regime” by “hand[ing] out leaflets,” and “writing messages on the walls” around Saigon. As the other women I interviewed also expressed, to carry out these covert tasks they had to mask their identities and political aims by wearing costumes and taking on different personas. Co Dinh “disguised herself,” as “a laborer, a vendor [. . .] and a builder [. . .] things like that.” She proudly recalls coming up with a way to fashion a turnip into a fake grenade. Co Dinh and her friends would hang these faux turnip-grenades from signs,
doorways, and light posts around town to make general confusion, fear, and commotion, to cause streets and buildings to be evacuated, and to “give a signal” and “warning” that “there is [sic] some communists here.”

Gradually rolling down her pant leg after showing us her scar, Co Dinh continues telling me and Nhina about her early childhood. The central focus of her narrative becomes the devastating loss of her brother:

Co Dinh/Nhina: She [co Dinh] lived in a small town in the Mekong Delta,

And many of her family members

Were shot down by soldiers [supporting the southern Republic of Vietnam]

It was a bad memory for her.

An uncle,

And some relatives,

Died.

Died.

And her brother.

You know

Her older brother

Was shot down.

[...]

They [the ARVN soldiers] fasten a string around his legs

And just

Link it [his body] into a van

And,

Drive around the streets—

So, without clothes.
And he died already,
Because he was shot down.

Rivka: Oh.
Oh—terrible.

[Responding in Vietnamese to co Dinh and Nhina.]

This is terrible.
And co Dinh saw this?

Co Dinh/Nhina: They [co Dinh and her family members] follow.
They follow
Because that is her own brother
And they ask for the, the dead body
But they [the soldiers] denied.

All the family
Her own parents
Had to go to the jungle with some communists
Because a couple of months before,
Their house were burned down.

And she follows the communists also.
Around the age of 13 and 14.

In the jungle
She was taught there
And ah,
She joined some activities since then.

Rivka: How old was she when her brother was shot?

Co Dinh/Nhina: Ah, ah, around 15 years old.
And she was sent to the jungle with [the] communists [when co Dinh was]
Around 17 years old.

Co Dinh does not lose composure or cry when speaking about her brother’s brutal killing but her brows are knotted and her neck strains. Answering my questions about her bullet wound and contextualizing the street fight of 1968 requires co Dinh to come back to the founding scenes of familial loss during her childhood, particularly to the memory of her brother’s killing and public mutilation. This account of familial losses—her home, her uncle, her brother—emerges from, and is entwined with, the fragmented story of her bullet wound. In some ways her childhood story of compounding losses explains how and why co Dinh came to join the NLF, and why she found herself in the middle of a firestorm in the streets of Saigon. These childhood memories are also a testimony of deep losses that gradually become a commemorative, conjuring performance for her brother’s wandering spirit.

The two stories—the street fight and her brother’s death—are inseparably tied together in pain, necessity, and loving devotion. Co Dinh was already “follow[ing] the communists” at age thirteen or fourteen, but the way she tells her story implies that her brother’s death compelled her to go “to the jungle with [the] communists,” increasing her active commitment to the NLF and putting her into direct armed conflict. Her brother is shot. “They fasten a string around his legs [. . .] link it into a van and, drive around the streets.”
The rope that binds his legs also knots these two stories together within co Dinh’s remembering. Her brother’s ghost is called forth by remembering the gunfight because it is he who inspired her to fight.

Her brother’s body, naked and “without clothes,” is ground into the concrete, nearly beyond recognition. His “bodily integrity has been replaced by pieces, fragments, folds,[] immense wounds that are difficult to close” all in order “to keep before the eyes of the victim[s],” co Dinh’s family as well as the others gathered in this public and protracted execution, “the morbid spectacle of severing” (Mbembe 35). Through performing this story, co Dinh re-collects her brother’s dis-membered body. He is in pieces. He is rubbed into rocks. How can he be re-membered? Co Dinh re-members her brother by retelling the story of how he was torn apart. Co Dinh lovingly gathers and reconstitutes him in haunting narrative, paying tribute to his life by telling me and Nhina that he once existed, that his spirit still inhabits her body, imbues her remembering and inspires her civic work. She takes each step, and each breath, with him, and with other loved ones she has lost.

Co Dinh gathers, carries, honors, and revitalizes her brother by narratively re-presenting him into the world. He, in turn, infuses her life with meaning, in wartime and in peace, reminding her in no uncertain terms, how and why the past still matters within the present. As he lingers in the shadows of her mind’s eye, he reminds co Dinh that time can be shattered, memory is tattered, ghosts have material presence, and that the lives of those in the present, past, and future are connected and dependent upon one another in a mutual desire for survival. Co Dinh’s brother may be a ghost, but he lives in co Dinh’s body and through her remembering. His ghost haunts co Dinh in ways that have material consequence: in the past, his spectral presence inspired her to deepen her commitment to the NLF; in the present he
compels her to speak with ghosts and motivates her dedication to public service, in the pursuit of living justly with memory, rather than putting his spirit, and other haunting pasts “to rest.”

**Living in a Death-World**

During the war, Co Dinh spoke and lived with ghosts because the conditions under which she was forced to live were in such close, and constant, proximity to death. She was inescapably close to the death of loved ones, and knowingly close to her own death, because her environment was so lethal. She was always near death materially and psychically. Co Dinh explains that during this time she felt “there is nothing to lose.” What does she mean by this? What about her own life? But, she says again stubbornly, looking straight at me, “there is nothing to lose.” By the time Co Dinh was sixteen years old, everything sacred was already lost or subject to the conditions of violent extermination. For Co Dinh, deciding to commit herself to sacrifice if necessary in the NLF turns losing one’s life into an active choice rather than a determined condition of the perpetrators. Because of her dire circumstances, choosing to “fight till the end” in self-sacrifice becomes an act of agency.

Co Dinh had nothing to lose because she was living so close to death-by-oppression. Co Dinh’s home is burnt to the ground. Her brother, uncle, friends, and the man she would have married, are brutally killed. As a young girl, Co Dinh’s lifeworld is awash with violence. Co Dinh’s reflective descriptions of living through war resonate with Achille Mbembe’s discussion of “necropolitics,” and in the context of her childhood, his description of “death-worlds” is particularly relevant (39-40). Mbembe proposes that some forms of contemporary daily violence, in which “weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons” condition the emergence of “death-worlds” which are “new and
unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*” (40). Living within the altered logics of a prolonged, inescapable *death-world* causes co Dinh to feel “there is nothing to lose” in death, and even something to gain, if she devotes herself to fighting the enemy.

During the war, co Dinh felt her life could be rendered most valuable and meaningful through willingly and entirely devoting herself, sacrificing herself if necessary, to the communist national cause. If she does not resist her oppression, it is likely she will just die. Worse yet, if she lives or dies, she will be giving up her agency to those who have destroyed, and are still destroying, everything of value to her. If she joins the guerillas it is probable that she will die, but it will be fighting for something she values that is greater than her self. She can renew the meaning that is vanishing in her life through performing selfless commitment to the nation. With family, home, village, and land in ruins, “reunifying” and “saving” the nation becomes a collective cause worthy of self-sacrifice.

Within the broader context of the ideological warfare of the time, the northern communist government and the NLF harnessed, valorized, and mandated these sacrificial sentiments in their cadre. As Malarney claims:

> [sacrifice was [] the test of true revolutionary mettle and integrity. ‘Without the virtuous willingness for sacrifice,’ Le Duan [Indochinese Communist Party co-founder, leading revolutionary, and former Party general secretary] argued, ‘one is not an authentic revolutionary. If you want to realize the revolutionary ideal, but will not dare to sacrifice yourself, then you are only speaking empty words.’ The greatest revolutionary virtue could only be achieved in death and sacrifice for the common good. (“Fatherland” 50)

The veterans followed this call, proudly recognizing themselves as part of a larger movement of determined comrades-in-sacrifice. Their willingness to self-sacrifice and take death for
the nation is a form of virtuous pain-taking for the veterans. Pain-taking does not necessarily mean a way of surviving; it can also be a way of dying.

**A Ghostly Matter of Ethics: Un-Burying the Dead**

Co Dinh’s disjointed story of losing her brother periodically erupts into and out of her other narratives. It cuts its way into other stories with the smallest reference. *Remember my brother, or like my brother’s case,* is all she has to say. The story itself is like a persistent ghost determined to find a way of making its presence felt. The conditions of her brother’s death: his killing, brutal dismemberment, and the spiritual anguish of denying the family his body, means that this story, his life, and death can find no resolution. Co Dinh chases after the military van, but it keeps going, taking her brother further and further away from her. This image will not leave, find resolution, or fade away. This memory will not come to a close. It remains volatile and disruptive. It takes her by surprise, simultaneously ripping through her and always remaining away from her. Out of grasp. Beyond repair.

It was not possible to give co Dinh’s brother a proper burial. He has not been “laid to rest.” His soul was not properly installed into his family’s ancestral altar and his body was not buried on their land as traditional Vietnamese spiritual practices require. He is a wandering soul. His life, his body, and consequently his spiritual afterlife, were literally taken out of his family’s reach. Having died a “bad death,” traumatically, too early, childless, physically mutilated, and without proper burial, he is now destined to be an unsettled, wandering spirit, always searching and never satiated (Malarney, “Fatherland” 59). As Malarney explains, wartime consequences like these “create the dangerous possibility that the soul will be unable to make its passage to the otherworld to become a benevolent, cared-
for ancestor” (59). The fate of co Dinh’s brother’s soul is bleak. Because of the conditions of his death, his spirit:

will become a malevolent, wandering, hungry ghost (con ma) that is doomed to eternally roam the earth. Each of the different forms of [bad] death poses its own obstacles to making the passage. [. . .] Dying in a violent manner frightens and angers a spirit, making it more inclined to take its anger out on the living. [. . .] a corpse that is missing parts or is otherwise incomplete is theoretically barred from ever making the transition and therefore is doomed to forever roam the earth and never cross to the otherworld. For those who die a bad death, chances are high that they can never cross to the otherworld to become a benevolent ancestor. (60)

Whether or not co Dinh and her family strictly live by these traditional Vietnamese beliefs regarding afterlife, this structure of belief is nonetheless a significant part of the cultural context in which her brother died, and one of the ways through which his death will be understood.75 With his wandering spirit in mind, co Dinh does what she can and what is right: she retells the unendingness of his death and spectral suffering as an act of ethical remembering.

Is co Dinh not mourning properly? Is co Dinh “stuck” in a traumatic past? To be stuck in the past is to become a specter to yourself, rather than a self choosing to correspond with specters. Co Dinh does not “remain haunted” in the negative sense of only “remain[ing] partial to the dead or the deadly and not to the living” (Gordon 182). Her mourning and remembering is for her brother’s ever-wandering spirit and for those in the living present. In continuing to mourn the loss of her brother’s life and peaceful afterlife, co Dinh is not

75 See Malarney’s “The Fatherland Remembers Your Sacrifice” in Tai’s Country of Memory for an account of Vietnamese traditional beliefs regarding death and the spirit world, as well as the problems protracted war brought to family and social practices, ancestral/cosmological structures, and the communists’ war and nation-building efforts. In particular, this essay discusses the state’s desire, and performance-centered attempts, to shift spirit beliefs and death rituals toward the communist government’s nationalist forms of commemoration.
being/becoming specter to herself, but opening into conversation other specters, living with ghosts from the past who are still here, still un-rested, and still speaking.

Co Dinh’s remembering is a contemporaneous transaction with her brother’s (un)living spirit. Moving from the spectacularity of her brother’s violent killing to spectral co-respondence, co Dinh witnesses well beyond recognition, practicing remembrance as interaction without re/solution.

Co Dinh’s critical move from the spectacular to the spectral follows what I take to be Derrida’s call to de-“localize” the dead. It may be necessary to figuratively un-bury the dead, allow them unpredictable uncontrollable vitality in our lives and in practices of mourning, so that we can learn to listen and speak with them (Specters 9). Derrida contends there are “Three things,” that “decompose” the vivacity of a “spirit, or specter,” and lay it to rest: “localizing the dead;” not “speak[ing] of generations;” and not allowing the ghost to “work” when the “‘spirit of the spirit’ is work,” is its very “power of transformation” (9). Localizing the dead, in particular, impinges on the latter two needs of the ghost (speaking of generations and working for transformation), which are also critical to justice and any form of good conscience. Mourning, as it is commonly conceived and practiced in Western traditions, operates by burying the dead and “ontologizing remains [. . .] identifying the bodily remains and by localizing the dead” (9). “One has to know,” Derrida says, one “has to know whose body it really is and what place it occupies—for it must stay in its place” in order for mourning to be practiced properly (9).

Uncertainty, vagrancy, unpredictability are threats to forms of mourning that wish to lay the past to rest in order to move on. In modern economies of death and mourning, we tend to commodify remains in the process of laying them to rest. I do not wish to just
condemn contemporary, Western mourning practices but to suggest, with Derrida, that perhaps in the way we economize death we de-compose possibilities for the ghost to remain vital, to impress upon the living, and to assist in making change. Fixing the dead, localizing them so that they can be remembered in a safe, predictable, manageable way, is not conducive to the kind of justice possible when specters speak.

In Vietnam, spirits speak, move, and transact with the living as a matter of course. Co Dinh’s spectral correspondent shares these un-rested, sometimes arresting, practices. He does not remain localized, has no remains, but his absence remains relentlessly present. So she speaks with him, remembers him, in a different form of processual mourning. In this way, co Dinh practices her own form of what Derrida might understand as “hauntology,” the “staging for the end of history,” or the end of history in its common conception, as that which is no longer present. The end of stuck pasts and “dated” histories occurs when it is recognized that what is often called repetition is in fact what makes each thing distinct, “since the singularity of any first time makes it also a last time” and the first time itself is rendered through recitation (Specters 4, 10). Speaking with specters reveals the vital intersection of performance and performativity, for “the specter is always a revenant” that “begins by coming back,” and in so doing displays the power of citation and alteration in making the critical differences in the history-living of the present (10).

Continuing to mourn with her brother’s wandering soul, rather than at the site of his remains, offers an alternative practice to normative Western performances of mourning. Co Dinh’s practices and aims also counter certain assumptions in discourses of reparation. She and the ghost’s correspondence is not a redressive performance of mourning, in the sense of healing wounds or repairing past damages. It is a processual and prospective ethical practice
of living with memory, of actively co-making an as-yet unseen, perhaps unrecognizable, life and society with the living and with the dead who are not gone.

**Associative Remembering: Living with Incompleteness and Partial Bodies**

After being wounded and caught in the street fight, “very close to here,” where we talk and where I live in district three, co Dinh was taken by jeep to a military detention center where she was tortured for the first time:

Co Dinh/Nhina: [While transporting her] in the car,  
They tried to kick her out.  
How do you say…like this?

[Co Dinh and Nhina hold out their crossed hands. Nhina moves her hand around co Dinh’s crossed fists in order to show how that her hands were tied together.]

Rivka: When her hands were bound?

Co Dinh/Nhina: Ah, yes, her hands were bound.  
And the, the car stop before the, the military base  
Where she would be tortured.  
And ah, and then—

[Co Dinh continues speaking as she takes off her shoe.]

They didn’t open the door for [her] to step outside.  
But they just kicked her.  
And that is the reason why she lost a toe here.
Co Dinh shows us her foot. Her toe is gone. The scar tissue forms a smooth finish, rounding out the tip of bone where her toe once was. This smoothness belies the jagged brutality through which her toe was ripped away. “This is why I walk with a limp.” Co Dinh’s narratives are tangled, torn, and exhumed from her battle-worn body. She is dragged out of the military jeep, still bleeding from the bullet wound in her thigh. As her toe catches on a jagged piece of metal and is torn from her foot, her thoughts flash to the sight of her brother’s body dis-integrating as he is dragged down the street. This war is tearing her body, her family, her community, her culture, her country, the land, and now in its aftermath her story, apart bit by bit, toe by toe, cut by cut. How can anything living survive this death-world intact? What is it to be “intact”? What will it mean to “survive”? 

For co Dinh, life and death are not opposites. While it is sometimes critical to maintain the difference, death and living are not always totalizing states of being. Death and the “deceased” can dwell in, ignite, devour, and propel the living. Death can be a life-giving, generative force. Likewise, as Mbembe suggests, life and the living can become organized around economies of death in which death is not simply a negation of life or solely a biological phenomenon.  

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76 By “economies of death,” I mean, for example, the way Mbembe articulates, rearticulates and extends, Hegel’s and Bataille’s different theorizations regarding the relationship “between death, sovereignty, and the subject” (15). I follow Mbembe within Bataille’s understanding of sovereign, self-sacrificial death as an act of “absolute expenditure,” so that “death is therefore the point at which destruction, suppression, and sacrifice constitute so irreversible and radical an expenditure—an expenditure without reserve—that they can no longer be determined as negativity” and thus participate in an “anti-economy” (15). For more on Mbembe’s theorization of the alternative economy or anti-economy of the necropolitical see especially pages 14-20, 25-30, and 35-40 in “Necropolitics.”
ambivalent play of life and death in being and in body—in no veteran more strongly than co Dinh.

In each breath, co Dinh enlivens the spirit of her brother, while he energizes her pulse and inspires her thoughts. She carries him in the quiver of her arm, the dull ache in her hip, and in the ever-deepening recessions beneath her eyes. Perhaps his ghost comes to her as she prepares *pho* in the morning, *his favorite way, with an egg, few noodles, and lots of lime and chili*. *She would bring him a steaming bowl for breakfast each morning. As she pours the broth over the noodles, co Dinh remembers the way his eyes lit up as he took the warm bowl from her hands, careful not to spill on their mother’s clean floor.* Now his eyes, and the memory of his flashing looks, are embedded in co Dinh’s imploing gaze. Maybe this is why her eyes are so dark, and her stare pierces so deeply—because of all the other spirits who reside within her, using her eyes, at once burdening her and lightening her step, replenishing her will to *live-on* and propel (what I describe in my field notes as) her “urgent need” to retell the past.

Co Dinh’s narratives of her violence-filled past emerge out of bodily association rather than in linear sequence. She is not as concerned about conveying what happened first, about what caused the final blow, or about reconstructing logical progressions of causality and reaction. Instead, through their narrative disjunction and in the violence they recount, her remembering *shows* and *tells* how brutality pierced her body and about how pain feels as it lingers. Loss, and the painful process of losing, became a state of normative being. With each loss and death, co Dinh’s life became increasingly weighted with the responsibility of bearing and remembering the spirits of those who perished, even as her own body’s strength was sapped through injury, torture, and imprisonment.
In every sense her life became riddled with loss and losing. Even her body became partial, and partially-functional, with scars, physical disability, internal wounds, and missing pieces. But for co Dinh and the other veterans, living with memory is more about remaking the terms of what constitutes bodily integrity than maintaining physical completeness or functionality. Similarly, remembering is less about keeping temporal continuity as much as it is about conveying the most critical meanings that often exist somewhere in the shadows beyond or between empirical facts. Memory is in pieces. It will never be whole or complete. Memory is always already doubly partial: always missing parts and always incorporatively made personal with each telling. What matters is what one does with these partial pieces of memory.

Re-Materializing the Past from the Site of the Wounded Body

After showing us her bullet wound scar and its stories, co Dinh begins narrating the other wounds and bodily illnesses caused by her nearly seven years of incarceration and periodic torture. Her stories of torture emerge, in a seemingly endless litany. First they beat me with bamboo sticks. Then they hung me by my arms. Then they forced me to swallow soapy water and beat me again until I threw up everything. Then they used electric shocks . . . then, then, then . . . Her body itself is a chronicle of torture. She candidly describes ways in which she still feels haunted, or traumatized, citing sensory perceptions—smells, sounds, touches, and tastes—that involuntarily trigger memories and uncontrollable visceral reactions.

In this section of narrative, temporal references are elusive. Particular occurrences blur into a long list of associatively recollected forms of physical and psychological abuse. One bout of torture bleeds into the next, day to day, month to month, year to year. Her
Nhina’s captors could enter her cell “any time of day they want. One a.m. or two a.m., any time” Nhina explains. Because the temporal dimension of co Dinh’s torture was “in others’ hands,” time as she had known it before, became disordered and often irrelevant. Accordingly, her narratives perform this temporal disintegration, making it unclear when co Dinh experienced the tortures she describes.

Instead, co Dinh’s account emphasizes the magnitude of force employed; the diverse array of forms used; the character of torture as insidious, efficiently practiced technique; and her successful resistance. She takes the pain and keeps silent. Co Dinh explains that “they failed” to get any information from her because she “is determined, and she make up her mind not to tell anything, not to utter a word.” Co Dinh said nothing because “if you give up then, ah, other innocent people [will suffer] [. . .] and it will help the enemy to kill more and more innocent people.” Co Dinh’s ability to keep quiet, and her reasons for doing so, are socially motivated and co-constituting: she kept quiet because others would be hurt if she divulged, likewise she was able to maintain her vow of silence because of the deep connection she felt, and feels, to her nation and to the experience of suffering she knowingly shares with her comrades. Co Dinh remembers her refusal to speak as a form of pain-taking, making this versatile category of resistance practices one of her most consistent themes.

Bleeding from her foot and thigh, co Dinh’s captors dragged her into a room, kicked her in the mouth, and then tore off her clothes, “to make her feel humiliation,” as they began the interrogations. Co Dinh recalls that on the day of the street fight she was having her period. When the guards stripped off her clothes, they took away her sanitary pad, “shredding it into pieces” just in case she was trying to hide a secret message or document in it. Throughout her descriptions of torture, co Dinh is animated, using bold gestures across
her body to illustrate what she is saying. She wants to make sure Nhina and I receive a
detailed account. “They wanted to know who is the leader of her association [sic],” Nhina
explains, “so they hit her.” Co Dinh traces a long pole in the air and uses it to “hit” her arms,
chest, and back:

Co Dinh/Nhina: So they do like this

[Nhina refers to co Dinh’s “hitting” gestures.]

With a bamboo stick.
And they [hit] your breasts.
With the bamboo.
[...]
[After a while] she, she collapsed.
She collapsed.

[Co Dinh drops back into the couch to show her collapse.]
[...]
When they revived her
How do say—
They do it again
Try to get some information.

Co Dinh’s experience of torture after the street fight bleeds into an ongoing
description of violence without date or year references. She does generalize time by
deflecting specificity from herself to an unspecified collective (“They [hit] your breasts”) and
by referring to the reiterative nature of the torture (“How do say—they do it again”).
Consequently, all Nhina and I know is that she experienced these “treatments” at some time(s) during her years of incarceration. After torture at the base, co Dinh is taken to Tu Duc prison where she is “chained to the wall” in a “very small and narrow room.” Co Dinh expresses the pervasiveness of violence by saying that what she is telling us is “a common kind of story, of all women communists at that moment” and that many people, including her friends, “received bad treatment, even worse, much worse than hers.” According to the veterans, some women purportedly died from eating poisoned food (filled with toxins or glass shards), were tortured by having nails driven into their palms, and were forced into enclosures filled with excrement for extra punishment. Using stark imagery, co Dinh explains that the torture’s “aim is to beat you until you, you have no energy to even shoo away a butterfly, and cannot get marriage” because your body is damaged beyond basic function and sexual desirability. As if this is not enough, co Dinh continues that her captors also used:

Co Dinh/Nhina: Electric torture

Rivka: Oh, I can’t believe—

[...] She had all of this?

[I begin describing out loud what co Dinh is showing with her body. Her pace quickening, co Dinh describes the torture as she gestures.]

Ok, she is spreading her hands—

Showing—

They attached her to electric shocks
Without clothes
And they are men doing this?

Co Dinh/Nhina: Men.
And also they
Put some electric [wires]
Into her,
Here—

[Nhina points between her legs.]

And after a few minutes of that you collapse.
They also try to hang her.
[…]
By her hands.
And, behind her back.
I think they had a kind of [pulley] device.
[…]

Nhina: I cannot imagine.

Rivka: No, I cannot imagine either.

“I cannot imagine” Nhina says, recognizing that these experiences are so far beyond her lived reality that she, as a matter of ethics and respect, cannot claim to fully recognize the extent of co Dinh’s pain. “No, I cannot imagine either,” I say, agreeing with Nhina, both of us noting where some forms of empathic identification would like to rush in and close off the
gap of incommensurability. Co Dinh’s experience is *beyond recognition* for us. At the same time, it feels essential to keep remembering with co Dinh, beyond my lived experience, following her deeper into these painful memories to better comprehend what is being told, while attending to the way she is making meaning and trying hard to communicate something of the abyssal depth and gravity of these experiences, in spite of our subjective limitations. Despite Nhina’s and my stated inability to imagine, I keep on asking myself what could it have been like for co Dinh to live through torture, while simultaneously recognizing the limits of my ability to “know” in any complete sense. As much as it is necessary to reckon with the borders of our understanding, it is equally necessary to remember and imagine with co Dinh into the very beyondness of her experience, pursuing better (not total) recognition just over the edge of what is knowable and thinkable in my life.

In so doing, I participate in the process by which scholars of trauma and memory studies claim subjectivity is achieved. As Oliver argues, “testifying [to an outside other] that the victim comes to know his or her own experience, which is all the more reason why the process of witnessing is one of joint responsibility, for the very possibility of experience itself comes only through representation, elaboration, and interpretation” with others and with ourselves (paraphrasing Felman and Laub, 92-3). Ethical witnessing beyond recognition entails reflexivity, differently practiced by tellers and listeners, as a form of critical double-seeing and self-seeing that is always more than indexical reflection and paradoxically less than empathic identification.77

77 In comparison to more marginalized individuals and groups in Vietnam, the performance group veterans (in important ways, though not in every way or in equal ways) have received some meaningful forms of external public acknowledgment for their extreme suffering and sacrifice. However, it is questionable if any of these forms meet Oliver’s description of ethical witnessing beyond recognition. Firstly, in terms of having their own experiences validated by others, the performance group women have made their own social group and are also part of a larger community of veterans who are officially state-recognized and honored. The various communities of veterans, to which the women feel a sense of belonging, are comprised of people who share
Somatic Haunting and the Aftershocks of Torture

Each day co Dinh walks a fine line between health and illness. She survived torture, but it left her body with mysterious, chronic problems that strike her without warning. In my field notes, I describe how co Dinh simultaneously manifests strength and fragility:

similar (yet still in some ways incommensurable) experiences as members of the wartime generation who successfully fought for the communists. By having these communities and friends, the veterans have, in some regards, been able to be witnesses for each other. By witnesses, I mean here that the veterans are able to talk with each other about their past in ways that reflexively help them come to know their experiences. Among the performance group women, I also noticed a deep sense of unspoken shared knowing, as a result, among other things, of being together in prison and continuing their close friendships thereafter. In important spoken and unspoken ways, the performance group women are able to externally confirm the reality of each other’s shared and individual wartime experiences.

Secondly, and interrelated with the first point, as the victors of war, the veterans’ experiences are also publicly legitimized by the state and thus also by important segments of popular culture. The veterans’ national sacrifice is authenticated by the Party such that they are given the title of national heroines. Through various forms of public ceremony and publicity (in school textbooks, state-published biographies, museum displays, framed plaques, national ceremonies, and commemorative monuments, etc.), the performance group women, and other veterans and citizens (like “Heroic Mothers”) whom the state deems to have made significant national sacrifice, are given official public thanks for their sufferings and losses (see Pettus 3-7, for a longer discussion of “Heroic Mothers”). As Pettus critically outlines, these state recognitions are often severely lacking in meaningful substance (such as economic assistance) and are instead full of politicized pomp and circumstance that nationalize and flatten out the specificities of individuals’ experiences (3-24). However, at least in the cases of the veterans I spoke with, the little state attention they received, particularly in the immediate postwar years, did serve to give them some needed social and economic assistance that others with less state-validated histories were not afforded.

In contrast to the performance group women, people still living in Vietnam who fought for the anti-communist Republic of Vietnam do not even get to hold the status of veteran or equal citizen, let alone receive external state and/or public confirmation of their sufferings and losses. Their histories and personal pains are unspoken, mocked, derided, and/or abjected from public discourse. Without a legitimized community, and often having suffered intense forms of social and economic marginalization after the war (including incarceration in forced labor camps), these (non)veterans may struggle just to find other people with whom they can safely express their painful memories. These individuals are not allowed to form veteran organizations like the performance group women, and it is only in the last ten years or so that they (and their families) are beginning to be given more equal rights as citizens.

Though they may not have experienced ethical state or public recognition in Oliver’s definition, co Dinh and the other veterans have benefited from the fact that their present and past lives are seen as legitimate and honorable by the state. It seems likely that the performance group women would have experienced more psychic distress and material struggle in their lives if they had unrecognized, politically abject pasts. As national heroes, their voices and suffering receive national validation by the state, where others with politically unfavorable pasts have not received official legitimization, let alone any other form of basic public recognition of their struggles and pain. This raises the question: do the women in effect participate in the abjection of others’ histories? By this, I do not mean to imply that the women actively participate in marginalizing others. However, the public honor they receive and the performances they stage may indeed be seen as part of the state’s practice of historical hegemony and social inequity.

In a basic public sense, though perhaps not in terms of Oliver’s reformulation of witnessing, co Dinh, co Xuan, and the other performance group women have, at least as a group, had some chance to testify and to be heard in Vietnam. But, as the veterans know, testifying to, witnessing, and responding to the horrors of human cruelty must be enacted through a multiplicity of ongoing processes, for recognition and remembrance, like justice, are never achieved once and for all.
Co Dinh is as thin as anyone can be. Her face is long and narrow. Her cheekbones stand high and pointed—chiseled sharp with the painful experiences of war. She is tall and lanky with wobbly elbows and knees. At rehearsals, I see her falter. On the performance stage, I see her take great care in each step. She is one of the younger ladies [still in her fifties], but her body is worn and scarred from being brutally battered. She often stumbles, but always catches herself. Her body’s angularity protrudes from inside her characteristic black pantsuit. Peaked knees. Thin bones. Co Dinh always wears black [. . .]. Black clothes and jet black hair against tanned skin [. . .].

She has a look of unstoppable determination in her eyes [. . .]. Like she can take anything. Despite this limp. Despite the “weak blood” and chronic headaches that sometimes puts her in the dingy rooms in Saigon Hospital on Le Loi Street. I visited her there last week. Those hospital rooms are where you get sicker, not well[. . .] She sat there in the sagging bed with the IV needle falling out of her arm. Pale and too weak to walk. Even thinner than usual. Even then, her smile was broad and bright and her eyes still fierce. Co Dinh is worrisomely frail and exceedingly strong at the same time.

When I visited co Dinh in the Saigon Hospital I brought her three Japanese pears, oranges, and some mangosteen fruit. Sitting on the small counter by her bed, the fruit constituted the only bit of color in the room. Co Dinh spent a week in the dingy, overcrowded, understaffed, undersupplied hospital ward with her good friend, co Duc, at her side. Co Duc was there to make sure co Dinh received proper care, to keep her company, ward away peddlers, bring her bedding from home, and make her food. Co Dinh’s oldest daughter took her mom to the hospital at 5 a.m. because of headaches and vomiting. During one interview, I ask co Dinh what causes these health problems. She answers:

Co Dinh/Nhina: [It is a] price from the war time.

[...] I mean

The consequence of the wartime,

From being tortured too much.
“She got headache most of the time,” says Nhina. During torture, co Dinh was hung upside down and was dropped on her head many times. She thinks this is what caused her headaches, Nhina explains, sympathetically moving from calling co Dinh “she” to an embodied “I” in her translations. “During wartime there is no medicine, so you have to bear it” co Dinh says. There was no choice but to take the pain. Now, though she can go to the hospital to receive some medicine and treatment, in some ways little has changed. She must continue to live with the ongoing effects of torture that periodically overcome her body.
Although many women talked about the brutality they experienced in prison, co Dinh is the most candid. She describes her fears and how her maltreatment continues to affect her mental and physical wellbeing. For co Dinh, and for many of the other veterans, torture’s somatic and psychic wounds have not fully healed. Co Dinh remembers torture by narrating her illnesses and scars as a kind of somatic haunting. Her stories of physical pain conjure more elusive stories concerning the deeply embodied psychological after-effects of torture.

Some ailments are latent for long periods, only to flare up unexpectedly. These startling somatic responses are torture’s aftershocks. They move the body into unwanted, hauntingly familiar states of pain and remembrance. When her nostrils become inflamed and it is hard to breathe, she knows the problem is exacerbated by the fact that her nose was permanently damaged during torture. When her nose hurts in this way, Co Dinh remembers how the interrogation guards forced chilies up her nose for “long periods of time,” so that “it affects [] even now, with some disease in the nose.” Her nose—like her foot, her right hand, and her leg—has never been the same after torture. When her nose aches from infection, she can feel the heat of the chilies burning in her nostrils. Although she does not use such psychoanalytic terminology as “trauma” to describe her disturbing thoughts and sensations, co Dinh does feel certain these continuing ailments derive from her past experiences of violence.

Disturbing, involuntary memories can also be triggered by external sights, sounds, and smells. Rattling keys put her on edge, reminding her of the guard’s key ring clinking in the lock before they would take her to be tortured. And once while we were eating lunch together, co Dinh mentioned her aversion to fish sauce (“nuoc mam”), a pungent culinary staple in Vietnam, added in some proportion to nearly every dish. The potent aroma of nuoc
mam often fills the air in Vietnam. It emanates from large garbage-can-sized vats in the open air markets, and rises from the steaming caldrons of street vendors’ soup pots. Many foreigners find the concentrated sauce’s smell and taste, made from fermented fish, to be overpowering. However, I had never heard anyone Vietnamese express a dislike for nuoc mam. When I asked with some surprise why she does not like it co Dinh replied that the smell brings back visceral memories of torture. It gives her a sickening sensation inside her stomach. In prison, the guards would mix water with fish sauce and/or soap then force it up a prisoner’s nose and mouth. Co Dinh explains this form of torture was fairly common and was often followed by intense beatings and forced vomiting. Co Dinh says she feels “like, a sense, of panic,” nausea, and “gets dizzy even now” when she smells fish sauce. Her involuntary bodily response is expressed physically and mentally.

Echoing the atemporality with which co Dinh described torture, she describes her somatic haunting as a kind of uncontrollable remembering without definitive end or “cure.” Co Dinh recognizes a difference between past and present. But these disturbing somatic memories periodically make multiple temporalities synchronous. The only way she sees to deal with these sensations is to bear them, to live through these layered experiences and their sometimes overpowering bodily sensations. Living with the physical-psychological effects of torture requires immediate as well as prospective pain-taking, knowing that one will never be rid of torture’s somatic reverberations. Through this litany of stories describing both her initial torture and its continuing physical and psychological claims, co Dinh provides a rhetoric for understanding trauma outside of psychoanalytic discourses. Her stories show how traumatic recurrence in and of the body horrifically dissolves distinctions between past and present, yet at the same time makes the present necessarily answerable to the past.
Trauma and the Psychoanalytic Tradition: Performativity Meets Performance

The work of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Kelly Oliver, and other scholars in the psychoanalytic tradition, is particularly helpful in addressing co Dinh’s memories of loss and torture. Their scholarship raises provocative questions and claims regarding remembering, witnessing, and trauma. However, while I take the liberty to borrow and adapt some of their insights and questions, for cultural and contextual reasons, I resist adopting their psychoanalytic frameworks in their entirety. Psychoanalytic theory’s basis in Western philosophical traditions renders it potentially inappropriate as a medical or theoretical diagnostic in Vietnam. At the same time, psychoanalytic theory’s foundations in Western medical and intellectual circles should not automatically preclude it from usefulness in other cultural contexts if it can contribute valuable insight. With cultural and contextual concerns in mind, when I employ the term trauma, I am using it concomitantly with the veterans’ testimony rather than as a totalizing logic.

In the Freudian tradition, trauma “is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind,” “the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind” nor assimilate until the traumatized person works-through the experience, most often through therapy (Caruth, Unclaimed 3, 2). The truth of the initial psychic wound in psychoanalytic trauma exists as an “unassimilated” experience that was “not known in the first instance” and so belatedly “returns to haunt the survivor later on” as a succession of involuntary repetitions (4). To Caruth, the “central Freudian insight into trauma, [is] that the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place and time” (Trauma 9). Although I cannot know if co Dinh’s form of trauma derives from experiences
she was unable to know in their initial occurrence, the notion of a sensorial and psychological event that refuses to be simply located does help to describe her sense of haunting.

Commenting on the particular, contested trauma of PTSD, Caruth asserts, “[t]he pathology consists, [] solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (Trauma 4). While it is clear that co Dinh continues to assimilate her experiences on Con Dao, I resist calling her recurring memories—in body and mind—pathological. With the veterans, trauma can be thought of in less psychologically prognostic ways, as a significant, continuing, sometimes repetitious, physical and/or mental harm emanating from a psychic and/or somatic wound whose “cure” may not limited to the processes or goals set forth by psychoanalytic theory and/or psychiatric medical practice. In particular, co Dinh’s performance of pain-taking is a triumphant, collective, ongoing process that would be diminished by prescriptions for a highly individualized process of working-through.

And yet, I want to reformulate one of Caruth’s contentions into a question. Elaborating on Dori Laub’s theorizations, Caruth asserts the “impossibility of witnessing,” in the sense that one must acknowledge “the impossibility of knowing what first constituted” the individual’s traumatic experience, claiming then that “trauma opens up and challenges us to a new kind of listening, the witnessing, precisely, of impossibility” (Trauma 10). Caruth’s evocation is similar to Oliver’s characterization of that which is beyond recognition, in the sense of the event existing beyond eyewitness testimony and of ethical witnessing being reliant on forms of performance-centered truth and meaning. However, Oliver’s claim encompasses whole landscapes of narrative events while Caruth’s gaze is centrally focused
on the initial psychic damage, the origin of another’s psychic trauma, although, for Caruth, this origin is elusive, even fictive.

Caruth’s formulation of *witnessing impossibility* yields a performative approach to trauma, whereby the inassimilable “origin” emerges, even exists, only in remembering, repetition, the performances of recollection, whether in dream or narrative. Trauma is, for Caruth, performative. As performance, and a form of performativity, trauma also “marks out a unique temporal space that nevertheless contains traces of other now-absent performances, other now-disappeared scenes” (Diamond 1). Trauma lacks a determinative origin, persisting instead in embodied citation. Accordingly, how does the witness perform in turn? How can I, and/or others, answer to the impossibilities bound up in co Dinh’s narratives in ways that are responsive both to the individual and to larger social spheres?

With co Dinh and the other veterans, I heed Caruth’s advice to “*listen to departure*” which means “not only listen[ing] to the event, but to hear[ing] the testimony of the survivor’s departure from it,” in order to address the reflective, transforming dynamics of narrating survival (*Trauma* 10). The veterans witness and perform their own *departures from the sites of trauma*. Most often, they are able to skillfully return to painful pasts rather than repeat them. They are selectively citational. Even when co Dinh describes her involuntary somatic traumas, she understands these temporal collapses as part of a larger process of ongoing pain-taking, of living *with* the past rather than *reliving* or living *in* the past. And, as pain-taking is both a solitary and social-historical practice, she is not alone in her struggles.

The veterans, even in their relationship to trauma, perform the past into the present. They bear the past and actively mobilize it (sometimes with the help of ghosts), rather than
primarily reifying and legitimating it, as a narrowly Butlerian approach might suggest.\textsuperscript{78} They often give their memory away to others as a form of inheritance within a social economy that complicates presumed relationships between use, property, and scarcity. If you save memory for yourself, it withers with you. The more memory is given away through co-respondent remembering, the more is (re)generated. This narrative economy of generosity, plenitude, and social awareness defines the veterans’ politics of living with memory. The political economy of performing memory, for and with the veterans, is characterized by the production of surplus through exchange. That surplus takes the form of (re)new(ed) subjectivity and meaningfulness \textit{beyond} knowledge. It defies capital acquisition of memory while it demands (re)production: repetition beyond recognition and reiteration into emergent, alternative social realities.

Thus, while others have observed a productive dynamics between performativity and performance (Diamond, \textit{Cultural}; Pollock, \textit{Exceptional}; Pollock, “Change”), I want to add four working provisions to our understanding of where performativity meets performance in traumatic memory: 1) some psychoanalytic conclusions prove unstable, 2) the radical contingency of “healing” in non-Western contexts, especially in relation to what I see as co Dinh’s refusal of closure or sealing over living wounds, keeps some forms of trauma open and active, 3) the women with whom I have spoken may not be \textit{caught} in cycles of performativity (Butler) but 4) their very bodies may bespeak possibilities for alternative configurations of living with the past, present, and future. They employ performativity to (re)generate community and connection, to imbue their lives with greater historical meaning, and to assist them in living through and departing from trauma. They activate performance

\textsuperscript{78} For example, Co Dinh’s narratives, traumas, and practices of pain-taking are not performative in the strict Butlerian sense of being “at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established,” in “the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (\textit{Gender} 140).
as a means of citing critical differences between iterations, adapting to different conditions, and making meaningful change. Although the women are skilled at navigating within and beyond traumatic performative recursivity, remembering the past can be painful, even harmful. Sometimes, as co Dinh knows, remembering can make new cuts in old wounds.

Despite the risks of re-wounding herself through retelling her past, co Dinh proceeds. Her decision to tell, despite the possibility of foreseeable and unanticipated pain, is an example of one of the veterans’ most remarkable and admirable qualities. As individuals and as a group, they are brave in the face of change, and willing in times of uncertainty (as young teenagers and still as elder women) to take risks (even insofar as risk-taking may require pain-taking). Instead of recoiling from change, the veterans want to participate in making it. Co Dinh, co Xuan, Nhina and I enter into conversation out of a shared desire to change and be changed, in some small ways, together forging a “contract with possibility” that recalls and remakes the past so that we may imagine and perform together “what might be, could be, or should be” as a “private/public act that uniquely joins historical accounts already shaped by prior conditions, conversations and rehearsals with the prospect of new meanings unfolding across a panorama of reception” (Pollock, Remembering 2-3). The possibility of change, through co-respondent witnessing, is worth the risk of pain.

In the expectant promise of performing (ex)change, co Dinh willingly narrates the troubling stories and psychic wounds that live, and take embodied form, in her scar. In this “heightened encounter with each other and with the past,” as much as we retrospectively envisage history, our co-constructed performances of remembering operates prospectively as we are “called toward a future that suddenly seems to open […] a future […] made in talk, in the mutual embedding of one’s vision of the world in the other’s” (3). In our encounter
with co Dinh, moreover, our generationally and nationally divergent bodies became entangled with hers, even mutually incorporated in the sight/site of the wound.

**Witnessing as Unlearning: Beyond Knowledge Acquisition**

Witnessing the veterans’ lives compels listeners to reckon with a different sort of ontology and phenomenology of knowledge. To the extent that the veterans treat memory and history as something that becomes valuable (and prolific), when it is given away, I must reevaluate the form of knowledge I “gain” in becoming a listening-witness to their lives. In part, these questions of ownership and narrative economy arise from the women’s historical status, narrative style, social ideologies, and political positionality as communist narrators. Some questions that emerge are: 1) What are possible “gains”? 2) What is the social symbolic capital bestowed? 3) What is distinctive about these interviews that compel rethinking gains ostensibly made in other interviews?

Knowledge and understanding are often conceived as content to “gain,” “acquire,” and “possess.” The “more” one has the better. The “more” one culture or nation stockpiles and uses knowledge and “capacity,” the more powerful they will become. Knowledge is power. But knowledge, in this formulation often means not just some amorphous power, but power over someone or something else. To know means to be *in the know*, which suggests that others are *out of the know*, without equitable access to knowledge and power. Colonial and imperial power and domination is founded on such possessive knowledge practices. Correspondingly, following Luce Irigaray’s theorization of the performative speech act “I love you,” to say “I understand you,” subjugates the “you” to the possessive “I.”

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79 See Luce Irigaray’s chapter, “I love to you,” in *I Love to You: Sketch of a Possible Felicity in History* for her argument about the possessive performative utterance “I love you” and her alternative formulation, “I love to you.”
statement tends to limit dialogue, signifying that understanding is something finite that has already been acquired, instead of being an inherently partial, endless process. This does not mean that saying “I will never understand you” is the answer. Rather, knowledge and understanding should be recognized as always partial, shared, and processual, and therefore impossible to hoard, capture, or acquire as one’s own.

The kind of knowledge I “gained” in Vietnam is not certain, settled, or anywhere near total. When listening to the veterans describe their lives, and in particular their experiences of torture, learning “more” consists of learning the contours of absence, of touching and feeling what I do not and cannot ever fully know. What happens when the knowledge one gains is absence or the loss of certainty? Learning becomes a practice of humility and an erosion of certainty, rather than a (con)quest of/by knowledge. I do not know what it was like for co Dinh to witness her brother’s brutal death. The horror, sadness, and loss, is in many ways unfathomable. I do not know what it was like to be shot, hung upside down, or beaten from head to toe. But to say as much is to say that I not only know less, and less for certain, but that I must continue to listen fully to partiality, knowing that what must pass for knowledge emerges in the process.

Learning from the veterans feels more like a wounding, a losing, and a kind of unraveling. Part of witnessing others’ lives involves, as Gayatri Spivak contends, “systematically ‘unlearning’ [] privilege” (“Subaltern” 91). Recognizing my own privilege compels me to refigure knowledge beyond “acquisition” and “possession,” into something more modest. In the greatest sense, as the veterans themselves perform, knowledge “is not

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80 Here, I am thinking with Trinh when she contends that “[k]nowledge leads no more to openings than to closures [. . .] the modernist project of building universal knowledge has indulged itself in such self-gratifying oppositions as civilization/primitivism, progress/backwardness, evolution/stagnation” (40). Trinh calls for “the radical calling into question” of what we take as knowledge (40), so that “[n]o Authority no Order can be safe.
made for understanding; it is made for cutting” and dispersing (Foucault 88). Knowledge is not made for possession, but rather for giving away. The veterans know that for story, knowledge, and memory, “[t]o preserve is to pass on, not to keep for oneself” (Trinh 134). Living justly requires the veterans to continually give themselves away through performances of remembering.

Similarly, Peggy Phelan asks “how can we create [knowledge] for disappearance and loss and not for acquisition and control” (Phelan 173)? Answering, she frankly states: “relations are not, and can no longer be, anchored to the notion of ‘understanding,’” but should “rather [be] founded on the recognition of the impossibility of such ‘true seeing’ [. . .] [with] acceptance of the perpetual failure of in/sight” (174). We should engage in “training careful blindness” with attention toward recognizing “another representational economy” by way of the “generative possibilities of disappearance,” uncertainty, loss, and that which exists beyond knowing (13, 27, 3). To claim full understanding of the veterans’ lives and narratives would be, in a sense, “to destroy the meaning of the lives and deaths behind these tales” and so would “drain[] [] life [. . .] from the living and the dead” (Klima 26).

Witnessing is an “(im)possible” act (Hirsch 16). Although it is impossible to witness fully, it is still each individual’s “infinite responsibility,” in a world of co-constituted subjectivity, to take on the “infinite task of encountering” (“not the infinite task of comprehending”) others,

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81 Gordon writes about absence, knowledge, and justice, stating: “We are left to insist on our need to reckon with haunting as a prerequisite for sensuous knowledge and to ponder the paradox of providing a hospitable memory for ghosts out of a concern for justice” (elaborating Derrida’s notion of spectral justice, 60). “To write a history of the present requires stretching toward the horizon of what cannot be seen with ordinary clarity yet. And to stretch toward and beyond a horizon requires a particular kind of perception where the transparent and the shadowy confront each other. As an ethnographic project, to write the history of the present requires grappling with the form ideological interpolation takes—‘we have already understood’—and with the difficulty of imagining beyond the limits of what is already understandable” (Gordon 195). Gordon claims that “ultimately haunting is about how to transform a shadow of a life into an undiminished life” (208).
For Phelan, performance, love, sight, and subjectivity “become[] [themselves] through disappearance” (146). Performance embodies and practices the ontological uncertainty of being and un-being, presence and absence, here and gone, knowing and unknowing. It recognizes and acts upon the “generative possibilities of disappearance,” loss, absence, and that which exists beyond personal possession. When co Dinh, co Xuan, Nhina, and I performing co-respondent remembering and hauntological witnessing together, we enter into “constellation[s] of haunting,” whole worlds of memory that live as, partially apparent and always disappearing, apparitions within the contingent present (Derrida, *Specters* 174).

“Performance,” Phelan asserts, “can be seen as a model for another representational economy” of generative emergence and disappearance that “saves nothing; [] only spends” (3, 148). In this performance-centered economy, memory, subjectivity, and knowledge become themselves—produce their power, meaning, and plentitude—*through disappearance*. The veterans participate in this form of economy as a matter of ethics: performing remembering toward the dispersal of knowledge beyond personal possession. Recognizing subjectivity as the interdependent “after-effect of disappearance,” the veterans perform interspectral, co-respondent remembering in order to move memory into present vitality in the hope of propelling meaningful change. Through their practice of hauntological remembering they teach me that pasts, and present lives, are made meaningful by giving memory away. Thus, one way to become a responsible witness to the veterans is not just to
bear witness to their haunting, incommensurable pasts, but to join them in performing remembering toward generative disappearance.

**Con Dao Photograph: Survival Souvenir**

In the photograph co Dinh and co Xuan showed me and Nhina, on that balmy evening after rehearsal when we talked about pain-taking and their return to Con Dao, they stand together in front of an open doorway. Set against a pale yellow wall, the door is black with a small barred window. Faded red letters on the sun-bleached green sign above the doorway read, “Phong 8” (“Room 8”). This is the cell room where co Dinh and co Xuan first met nearly forty years ago.

Co Dinh is about six inches taller than co Xuan, and her face is much narrower. Her shoulders are slightly hunched up and forward, and her collar bones visibly protrude from the open neckline of her pale yellow silk blouse. She must have been even gaunter when she was a prisoner. In the photo, co Xuan wears a sky blue linen jacket with silver buttons. Her posture is more at ease. Wisps of her gray and black hair frame her round cheeks. Both of the women are dressed up for their tour of the prisons. Co Xuan wears bright red lipstick. They smile softly for the camera. I imagine that their hands, close to one another and just out of view of the photograph’s frame, are touching.

At first glance, this photograph appears casual and insignificant. It is not evenly framed or artfully composed. The faded and overexposed backdrop is not particularly eye-catching. Knowing who these women are, and where they stand, is what makes this image striking. Several decades ago they lived each day locked behind the corroding bars. On the day the photo was taken, they find themselves in the once unimaginable place of posing in
front of their former cell. It is eerie. Uncanny. They stand, smiling slightly, looking in the direction of the camera.

This photograph is not somber, nor is it completely celebratory. It does not show defiance, pride, grief, suffering, or triumph. More than anything, the photograph is a token of proof. It is a representation of themselves for themselves, a tangible means by which they might witness themselves as survivors. As a commemorative memento, this photograph shows co Dinh and co Xuan that they have lived to make the return (rather than the repetition), lived to see the day when they participate in remembering suffering at Con Dao as history. Looking at the photograph together, co Xuan says, “at this moment, when we take the picture, we realize again, we did survive.” As the four of us part ways for the evening, co Dinh slips the picture into my purse. They give it away. “It can be your souvenir,” says co Xuan.
Figure 6 – Co Dinh and co Xuan in front of “Room 8,” Con Dao (January 2005)
CONCLUSION
Answering to Transgenerational Violence:
Prospective Remembering and Radical Performances of Play

Politics of Prospective Remembering

In conclusion, I will reflect on the forward push and pull of the veterans’ memory performances or what I will call “prospective remembering.” Prospective remembering describes how the veterans use memory in ways that propel, even compel, the past into the present and future. Rather than a retrograde gaze or action, the veterans’ remembering performs forward, or beyond, any single performance of memory. Prospective remembering invites memory, as well as its tellers and listeners, to open toward change and new possibility, carrying lives, experiences, and sentiments from the past into renewed vitality. Prospective remembering exists in and through performance. As a culturally contextual, embodied, hauntological practice, prospective remembering is a social, collective endeavor of memory and history-making. For the veterans, prospective remembering carries an ethical, performative mandate: that remembering should entail imagining and enacting more equitable social relations. In other words, the veterans’ feel that in their everyday lives and remembering performances they should do what they tell.

Co Nhut: Remembering Toward Change

The day co Nhut spoke about surviving torture on Con Dao she also talked about her commitment to Agent Orange advocacy as well as to the skills training program she helped to found that is dedicated to assisting orphans and the disabled in Vietnam. Her participation
in the NLF, her survival on Con Dao, and her continuing social actions are linked. After being tortured, she wondered about her own survival: about whether she could survive, if she should survive, and finally how she would live a useful, meaningful life if she became permanently disabled from torture. In her story, co Nhut justifies her own survival, with or without disability, through recommitting herself to national and social service, telling herself that were she to become blind or paralyzed, “I could write, and I could sing.” Her present-day social advocacy and action—with the performance group, as a teacher of women’s studies, as the director of a skills training program for disabled orphans, and as a national and international advocate for people suffering from Agent Orange-related disabilities—is how co Nhut continues to answer, through social action, the question she posed herself in prison.

Co Nhut puts her past experiences into meaningful action in the present. Along with other veterans in the group, while fighting in the southern countryside, she was exposed to dioxin, the highly toxic chemical compound found in Agent Orange. She gave birth to one healthy boy before leaving for the front, but later had five miscarriages. She chose to adopt Phuong, her daughter, after doctors told her that chemical contamination made pregnancy too risky, if not impossible. Co Nhut had intestinal cancer and a growth in her throat that doctors in Vietnam also attribute to the chemicals found in Agent Orange. Wanting to advocate for the many people in Vietnam who have suffered as a result of dioxin contamination, co Nhut became one among the first small group of Vietnamese people to file a lawsuit against American chemical companies for producing Agent Orange. When asked why she chose to participate in the lawsuit and in Agent Orange advocacy campaigns in Vietnam and the U.S. Co Nhut says:
Co Nhut/Nhina: My objective,

My aim is not to gain anything

From the

American government,

To get compensation.

But I just want to stop them,

From doing it one more time,

To another country,

To another people in the world.

It [is] so disastrous.

I don’t want to see one more

People,

Like this.

[…] [I would like to make all the world]

Know about it.

And avoid such a crime.

[…] [To me,]

It is not a question of

Winning or losing the case.

[…] [I can manage my life,]

[…] [But to,]

Millions of people,

In Vietnam,
They,
They are in bitterness,
In hardships,
They work a lot,
They devote themselves to working hard
For [their] disabled children,
For that next generation.

Co Nhut explains that her aim is not to win the lawsuit. Instead, she hopes to raise awareness so that more people may be moved to assist those who are currently struggling from the toxic effects of war in Vietnam. She advocates for Agent Orange awareness in her own country and has traveled to the U.S. to speak about lingering environmental and human health problems resulting from the use of chemical warfare. Although she can “manage [her] life,” she is compelled to remember, witness, and speak on behalf of others whose voices have little or no viable space in public discourse.

Co Nhut emphasizes that one of her overarching intentions is to advocate for the prohibition of chemical warfare worldwide. Her work is for Vietnam, but not just for Vietnam. In this narrative and others, co Nhut practices pragmatic, prospectively-oriented remembering in order to make sense of her past, to be effective as a social advocate, and to make her life meaningful through civic service. She is not speaking to lay blame or, in any

82 As Pettus discusses, the label of “pragmatic” did, and in certain cases likely still does, hold negative connotations in relation to the Party’s condemnation of what it viewed as Western, bourgeois economic pragmatism or self-interested market activity. As Pettus notes, “[i]n party parlance, women who were engaged in the free market were following ‘a pragmatic way of life’ that was incompatible with the revolutionary values of Vietnam’s socialist society. The ‘pragmatic’ person, as one 1981 article in Phu Nu Viet Nam [a popular women’s magazine sponsored by the Women’s Union] explained, ‘holds an indifferent attitude toward class and nationalist interests’ and puts ‘personal gain’ above all else [. . .] [and] undermin[es] the high ideals of the Revolution [. . .] jeopardizing the harmony and happiness of the postwar family” (71). The form of socially oriented, memory-based pragmatism that I describe co Nhut (and other performance group women) to be
simple sense, to testify to her own suffering. Instead, co Nhut ignites a sense of responsibility and spurs listeners into taking action, knowing that small acts can lead to changes on a larger scale. For co Nhut, memory is not for looking back, but for imagining and acting forward “for that next generation.”

**Living with “Whatever They Have”**

The scope of co Nhut’s memory-centered action and advocacy is local and transnational. In a written answer to my query as to what she hopes people in the U.S. will learn from her stories, co Nhut says, “I hope that young Americans, who have never had a chance to experience the Vietnam War will choose not to join in more battlefields, wrapping up other people in misery.” While she holds idealistic, optimistic, broad-scale aspirations, co Dinh also acts within very concrete, specific and local sites of practical need. As director of “The Society for the Support of the Handicapped and Orphaned in Vietnam,” and the “Skills Training Center for Orphans and the Handicapped” (Hoi Bao Tro, Nguoi Tan Tat Vat Re Mo Coi Vietnam, and Trung Tam Day Nghe Nguoi Khuyet Tat va Tre Mo Coi), co Nhut is calling on the national and international community to provide basic support: food, medicine, shelter, clothes, and education. Co Nhut expresses and Nhina translates:

Co Nhut/Nhina: So she is calling for investment,

And aid,

And funds,

Among different organizations in Vietnam,

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practicing should not be confused with the Party’s disapproving view of self-serving economic pragmatism that Pettus describes. Rather than for personal gain, I mean to highlight how co Nhut’s pragmatism is oriented toward social improvement as part of what Tai calls the “ongoing Vietnamese search for usable pasts” (Country 16).
For those children,
For disability,
Disabled children.

[With the skills training course]
She would like to show the children,
How to manage things around them,
With their legs,
With their arms,
With their eyes only,
Whatever they have.

[She shows me some things that the kids at the training center have made: dolls, embroidered napkins and tablecloths, key chains, and wallets.]

She would like to teach
And help the children survive,
And they can sell it on the market,
And help themselves survive.
It is a kind of financial support,
For the children.

In this passage, while speaking about the children, co Nhut conjures her own prison memories. If she is disabled, co Nhut thought to herself after torture, she will do whatever
she can to lessen her burden on her family and participate as a productive member of society. Even if her legs are paralyzed or she stays permanently blind, “I could write, and I could sing.” Similarly, when speaking of the disabled and orphaned children she helps teach at the skills training center, co Nhut believes in their possibility to live meaningful lives “with whatever they have.” They can learn to do things and make things, “[w]ith their legs, with their arms, with their eyes only, whatever they have.”

“We must be active enough to take chances as well as create chances” for meaningful change, “with whatever [we] have.” One must be brave enough to take chances, to risk something, in order to make change. Beyond that, co Nhut states, it is necessary to “create chances” for change. In their remembering performances—in private life-narrative, on the stage, and in the way they live their everyday lives in the past and present—the veterans take risks and create opportunities for meaningful social change. The veterans’ performative politics of hauntological, prospective remembering has transgenerational, transnational, and transcultural intents and implications.

I was reminded of the veterans’ commitment to “action,” in the form of material social change, when I received a package in the mail from Vietnam during the Tet holiday in February, 2006. Although the box was a bit worse for wear on the outside, the contents were intact, having been carefully packed in plastic bags. I opened it to find the package full of gifts “for my parents, family, and friends.” It was from the veterans. There was an embroidered tablecloth for my mother and grandmothers, a tie for my father, and key chains and wallets for my sister, brother, and friends. All of the gifts were made by the children at the skills training center that co Nhut helps to run. On a piece of paper from the veterans, co Nhut had written, “Let’s join hand in hand fighting the war against poverty, diseases,
illiteracy and disasters. Let’s reach the ultimate goal of Equality, Peace and Development.”

For co Nhut, and the other performance group women, memory is not for looking back, but for imagining and acting forward, in anticipation of continuing social transformation, and in order to participate in both imagining and remaking more humane ways of living together.

**Remembering as a “Conscious Political Act”**

Historian Jacquelyn Hall contends, “we are never outside memory, for we cannot experience the present except in light of the past [… ] and remembering, in turn, is an action of the present.” For this reason, and others, “remembering [can be] a conscious political act” (440, 459). The veterans’ prospective use of memory is a conscious enactment of their critical politics, deeply rooted in past national commitments as well their continuing desire to contribute to Vietnamese and global society. The veterans practice a pragmatic, optimistic, memory-centered social advocacy that is, to borrow a phrase from Jacques Derrida, “historical, to be sure, but [] not dated” (emphasis in original, *Specters* 4). Their remembering performances are committed to the past (as a matter of tradition and social ethics), but (re)produced within the present, where the politics of the hauntological and the prospective converge and emerge.

It would be easy for co Nhut, and the other veterans, to claim they have earned the right to quietly retire from public service, but this is not what they choose. The meaning in their lives is generated and sustained by performing beyond their own lives. In some ways, the veterans’ narratives do participate in the reification of hegemonic ideologies in Vietnam. But in other, potentially more powerful ways, their life-narrative performances unsettle dominant beliefs held by many outside Vietnam while providing openings for counter-memories and new kinds of conversations within their country. Rather than foreclosing
discussion, the veterans’ memory performances invite dialogue and action. Their narratives encourage development of increasingly complex reckonings with Vietnam’s past and present as well as recognition of the interdependence and responsibility between nations, communities, and individuals.

The veterans consistently countermand gratuitous sentimentality and solipsism. For the veterans, change is critical. Implicitly, the veterans seem to recognize that “a story is not a story until it changes [. . .] until it changes or until it changes someone else, until it becomes part of the vital histories of change it recounts” (Pollock, “Memory” 93). The veterans recognize that memory “is not merely something of which you happen to be a bearer but something you actively perform” and produce (Bal, xvii). Memory is a social and cultural practice, an embodied exchange between people—those living, no longer living, and yet to be born. It must be given away, transposed into the thoughts, bodies, and actions of others, if it is to survive. Although the views, narratives, and politics of the veterans’ memory performances are significantly shaped by socialist, nationalist ideologies, ultimately they embody a radical openness. They perform their pasts into unmapped social and political terrains, unafraid of remembering toward and into changing visions of the future.

**Inheriting Responsibility**

Roger Simon articulates the essential question that drives both this dissertation and the performances it recounts in this way: “[w]hat forms of remembrance can both give and do justice to violence and its pervasive lethal consequences” (9)? His answer echoes my own concerns for prospective memory, adding to them the “cosmo-political” project of incorporating distant memories into our own. He calls for “remembering otherwise”: 
Simon questions how remembering can meaningfully address the lingering effects of violence. As a form of answer, he offers a directive: we must allow others’ memories to inhabit our own lives so that our previous perceptions may be unsettled and our actions altered in ways consistent with greater social responsiveness. We must learn to live as though the lives of others matter to the sustenance of our own.

Taking up Simon’s question and directive, and what I take to be the veterans’ performative politics of memory as a form of living response, in conclusion I addresses problematics relating to the transgenerational qualities of violence, the lethal and continuing aftershocks of war, through the example of the Lang Hoa Binh (“Peace Village”) children. The children of the Lang Hoa Binh orphanage-hospital are the inheritors of war’s continuing violence. They show the oblique, yet lethal ways violence travels across and through time. Directly and indirectly connected to the veterans’ respective and collective pasts, the kids are living, tangible proof of history’s materiality. The kids and the veterans cause me to ask: what are some of the formations, and qualities, of transgenerational violence resulting from excessively brutal, protracted war in Vietnam? How are violent histories palpably felt by, even rematerialized within, generations of people born long after war is declared “over”? What can be done to address this form of elusive, indirect injustice and the material injuries it continues to cause? And moreover, what forms of remembering are needed to respond
meaningfully to the lingering injustices and prolonged suffering of this kind? The history, social imperatives, and prospective performative politics of remembering I have learned from the veterans leads me to ask further about how to become answerable to them as well as to the Lang Hoa Binh children and the many others bound up in the pervasive lethal consequences of violence—violence that appears to have taken place back then, to them, over there, but nonetheless disturbs entitlement, comfort, and contentment in our lives here, now.

Belated Collateral Damage

Inspired by what I was hearing from the veterans, by my good friend chi Thu’s (a transnational advocate for legal and social reforms in Vietnam-U.S. relations) longtime commitments to Agent Orange advocacy, and by the tension between vital economic development in Vietnam and lasting legacies of poverty, environmental damage, social divisions and inequities, psychological trauma, and rampant physical disability, I decided to volunteer at the Lang Hoa Binh orphanage-hospital twice a week. Working with the kids in the orphanage on a regular basis became a way for me to give back to the veterans by performing the historical and social imperative they teach. Listening to the veterans’ pasts enabled me to gain a better understanding of the historical conditions that shape, very literally, the children and their everyday lives. Speaking with the veterans and working at the hospital also acquainted me with the mundane material effects of the unflattering national politics and reprehensible transnational skirmishes in which the children’s futures are embroiled. Too often, the children’s bodies are held up as the proof of callous aggression on the state while they simultaneously become the new battleground upon which current political contests are fought.
The plight of disabled orphans may seem a separate issue from the wartime remembrances of women veterans. However, through the veterans’ memories and lived experiences, I have come to recognize the Lang Hoa Binh kids as the most recent victims, or perhaps *survivors*, of the war’s oblique, protracted violence. Although born several generations after the war’s official end, in a time of peace and greater national prosperity, the Lang Hoa Binh children are nonetheless the undeserving inheritors of historical violence. They (re)embody the reprehensible, unsightly legacies of war. They bear the marks of their nation’s war-torn past, and evidence of America’s wartime criminality and contemporary (violent) ambivalence in their bodies. The children’s bodies are the sites of an insidious form of belated collateral damage; they reflect the ancillary accidents of war and testify to the boundless degradation of modern warfare.

The veterans’ and the Lang Hoa Binh children are linked, concretely and metaphorically. They are concretely linked because the veterans are the mothers of revolution who were first contaminated by wartime toxins, most notably dioxin, the highly noxious compound found in Agent Orange. The children are the future generations who received those toxins via their parents DNA, breast milk, and/or lingering environmental contamination. The veterans and the kids are linked metaphorically because the damage from dioxin is so oblique, varied, and reliant on memory and anecdotal evidence that medical science alone is not an adequate technique for proving causes and effects. The connection is figurative because the Lang Hoa Binh kids are not the veterans’ own children but they *could have been*. As a rule, and as co Nhut’s story will later perform, everything about Agent Orange is shadowy and inconclusive, while also undeniable.
Many of the Lang Hoa Binh kids are believed to be physically and mentally disabled as a consequence of America’s use of Agent Orange (containing high levels of dioxin) during the war with Vietnam. The kids have been “given” to the hospital because of the social stigma associated with disabled people in Vietnam and because most families cannot afford to provide the necessary medical care that the children require. To my knowledge, none of the children living in the orphanage-hospital are related to the performance group women, although the veterans have themselves suffered many miscarriages, fetal deformities (requiring medical abortion), irregular pregnancies, and permanent infertility. As a population, war veterans in Vietnam have a greater incidence of bearing disabled children. And many women choose to have abortions if their sonograms or ultrasounds show signs of abnormality. As dioxin-related cellular abnormalities can be passed from one generation to another, the children of veterans (and their children) also suffer from abnormally high levels of untenable pregnancy, infertility, irregular births and other health problems. So, even if none of the kids in Lang Hoa Binh are directly related to the performance group veterans, they could have been, and in some ways are, their children.

The veterans were directly exposed to chemical warfare, gunfire, and torture. They experienced war’s direct violence. The Lang Hoa Binh children, born several generations after the war’s declared ending, suffer from war’s lesser known indirect violence: they have been born through violent histories, bearing the material brutalities of war on and in their bodies. The children show, literally, through their bodies and their very existence, how the past bears on, is born and reborn, into present and future generations. They embody Caruth’s performative “belatedness” in the extreme.83

83 The Lang Hoa Binh children stretch Caruth’s theorizations of trauma into new transgenerational and (re)materialized contexts. Resonating with how I have come to understand the lives of the Lang Hoa Binh kids,
The form of indirect violence experienced by the children adds a third formulation of trauma to previous renderings discussed in the dissertation. Thus far we have seen that forms of trauma can derive from 1) “original,” direct experiences of violence (the veterans’ experience of torture), 2) violence relayed and/or translated between people (the different sort of trauma that can result in secondary witnesses), and now 3), violence that is generationally, materially inherited (as in the case of the Lang Hoa Binh children). The elusive origins of this third category of trauma, the obliqueness of its founding violence, necessitates the expansion of traditional psychoanalytic diagnoses and prescriptions; challenges us to come up with better, more ethical and informed practices of redress; and calls for international, transgenerational responses to the living legacies of war’s violence and resulting social injustices.

Bodies of the Past/Bodies of the Present

Cathy Caruth asks, “What do the dying bodies of the past [. . .] have to do with the living bodies of the present” (*Unclaimed* 26)? The Lang Hoa Binh children, together with the veterans, embody diverse, yet interwoven parables concerning the connections between the *dying bodies of the past* and the *living bodies of the present*. The veterans’ life-narratives, practices of hauntological remembering, and prospective social actions embody a life-ethic that takes Caruth’s question as its founding assumption. The *dying bodies of the past* have everything to do with the *living bodies of the present*. So we must remember

Caruth articulates that one of trauma’s central, “peculiar paradox[es]” is that the extreme “immediacy” of the traumatic event “may take the form of belatedness” (*Trauma* 6). “[T]he impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness,” Caruth continues, “in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place and time” (7). Although some Freudian dimensions of trauma may not hold in relation to the Lang Hoa Binh children, the performative rematerialization of trauma beyond or *outside the borders of any single* historically traumatic *time and place* feels particularly salient when addressing certain legacies of wartime violence in Vietnam.
prospectively with specters and with each other. As Derrida observes, in agreement with Simon, learning to live “more justly,” requires “liv[ing] otherwise,” “learn[ing] to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts,” performing a “being-with specters,” that practices “a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” (Specters xviii-xix). Living more justly with others requires living otherwise. Living otherwise entails conversing with and being-with specters. And specters are always conveying messages about inheritance and generations. We must remember beyond what we take to be our own temporal, geographic, and subjective boundaries because death and life, suffering, optimism, and meaningful action in the pursuit of greater justice and equity also defy these borders.

In spite of these borders, I had an unexpected reunion with co Nhut in the United States, which I will describe presently. She brought home, quite literally and practically to my doorstep, the transnational implications of continuing historical violence and calls for transnational co-respondent remembering and social action. Co Nhut’s international actions prompt me to remember “the root,” as the veterans might say, of her social commitments founded within her own, intimately embodied experience with dioxin contamination. Co Nhut’s shadowy miscarriage story leads to my experiences working at the Tu Du Women’s Hospital, where the Lang Hoa Binh children reside on the floors just above the infamous, formaldehyde-preserved, fetal archive. Timeless glass jars of untenable bodies are preserved downstairs while the disabled and orphaned children, many of whom test taken-for-granted assumptions of what it means to be sentient and human, sit in metal cribs or play on the floor upstairs. The kids and the preserved fetuses are eerily coterminous, each haunting the other’s presence.
Spending time with the children, and learning more about the politics of their national and international representation, compels me to address three extreme challenges to their possibilities for more ethical social inclusion and the improvement of their living conditions, namely: 1) subaltern silence, 2) abject bodies and 3) spectacular representation. At the core of these three challenges is what I would call passive performativities of violent sight. Although the odds are stacked against them, the kids are seemingly undaunted. They participate annually in an outing to a Buddhist-Confucian themed amusement park, where their everyday play conjures hope. Through the children’s unspoken, light, and powerful determination to enjoy themselves even in the glare of public scrutiny, I come to understand their performance of everyday play at the theme park as a kind of unassuming, invitational, and socially radical performance. Although not explicitly stated, or probably even recognized as such by anyone present at the park that day, the children embody and perform a historical social ethic that the veterans also practice and believe: that small acts may be radical; they can and do make meaningful differences in others’ lives.

Dis-Locations: The Transnationality of Violence and Responsibility

In the fall of 2005, my friend Chi Thu calls to say that co Nhut will be a part of VAVA’s (Vietnamese Association for the Victims of Agent Orange) first visit to the United States. I am in shock. Co Nhut will be coming here? Yes, chi Thu says, she will be here in two weeks. A small group of Vietnamese Agent Orange activists, who are also plaintiffs in the lawsuit against U.S. chemical companies, are coming to the U.S. for a cross-country Agent Orange awareness tour. In some ways not surprisingly, co Nhut is one of them. The delegation will be stopping in Raleigh for one night. After seeing co Nhut, I write:
Last night I saw you in a church basement in Raleigh. It was startling, even though I knew you were going to be there. Our reunion seemed out of place, and yet also in other ways, so fitting. Co Nhut, do you realize we met almost exactly one year ago to this day, at a veterans’ performance group rehearsal, in Vietnam? It must be strange for you to be here, in the country you fought against for nearly two decades, telling your stories and speaking with American citizens—some of whom are American Vietnam War veterans. I watched you shake their hands.

Last night, when you spoke to the small audience about your five miscarriages, I heard people sucking in their breath and watched them close their eyes. In disbelief. In sadness and bewilderment. It must have been traumatic. To have so many miscarriages. Again. Again. And again. A continuing, rematerializing wound from wartime, belatedly repeating itself into peacetime so that you could not possibly forget [. . .] being tortured, spending 7 years in prison, breathing air full of chemicals as forests burned [. . .] watching your friends die. Then you really shocked the audience. You pointed to the picture on the video screen as it showed the room at Tu Du Hospital with all the dead fetuses floating in their gray-blue formaldehyde bottles. Babies with four arms and conjoined heads. Babies with cancers bulging out of their skin. Babies with no eyes, too many eyes, and every unimaginable, unlivable deformity. You said, “one of those is mine [. . .]”

I cannot know whether or not Co Nhut experiences, or experienced, something akin to what we understand psychoanalytically as “trauma.” I do not know if she experiences or experienced an “accident [. . .] not precisely grasped” or a “figurative dismemberment—a shattering of assumptions, a severing of the past, present, and future, a disruption of memory” (Caruth, Unclaimed 6; Brison 48). I cannot say if co Nhut ever felt “utterly helpless in the face of a force that is perceived to be life-threatening” which caused “an

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84 When I came back to the U.S., I realized something strange about my experience at the orphanage/hospital. As I spoke about it, I began recognizing that going there became harder, not easier, as time passed. Logically, it should have been the opposite. My first few days were difficult, but I “got over” my initial apprehension and became comfortable with the kids. But something happened over time. Each week, I learned more and more about the larger, seemingly intractable patterns of corruption, apathy, and neglect. Time passed at the hospital, but nothing changed. The kids’ lives remained the same, with no real hope of betterment in the future. It became increasingly difficult to go there. It was depressing. When back in the U.S., I realized that the accumulation of my experiences at the hospital had been “kho chiu,” or very difficult to bear. It was not the initial shock of going to the hospital that proved most difficult; it was continuing to go there over time and experiencing so little change that caused me to sometimes feel numb and then, when back in the U.S., experience a kind of belated anguish.
inability to envision the future” (Brison 40, 39). I cannot claim that Co Nhut needs to “work-through” and “tell her story in order to survive” (Laub 63). It is not right to assume that emotional pain and suffering is similarly culturally constructed, linguistically produced, and socially expressed in Vietnam and the United States.85

What I can say is that co Nhut’s life, and so many others’ lives in Vietnam, has been damaged by war. She has suffered. She has unjustly experienced pain. Her suffering is repetitious and continuous; it did not end with the declaration of peace in 1975. And she, of course, is only one of many among those who lived through the war and those born years after the war’s “end.” Beyond any diagnostic claims for “trauma,” what Caruth offers to co Nhut’s bewildering circumstances is the mandate to “listen[] to [] voice[es] that [one] cannot fully know but to which [we must] nonetheless bear[] witness” in the hope of better understanding, not fully understanding or naming (Caruth, Unclaimed 9), which indeed, in itself, may be better. That is, once we get off the track of total knowledge, we cross onto another one defined by processual engagement, embodied revision, and affective, co-subjective investment.

In terms of “historical trauma” and “structural trauma,” Vietnam sometimes seems like a gaping, lingering, open wound, a place where people have been damaged repeatedly

85 If co Nhut experienced trauma, it is doubtful she would tell this to me in language recognizable by psychoanalysis. Instead of saying she is depressed, she might say she was unable to work or concentrate. Instead of telling me a detailed story about how it felt to have five miscarriages, she might describe it all as a “terrible sorrow.” However, even if co Nhut does not express her experiences to me in a way that explicitly marks deep individual damage, this does not mean she did not experience what can be understood as a kind of trauma. In the case of co Nhut, and within Vietnamese contexts in general, the frameworks of psychoanalytic readings of trauma are too limiting, culturally specific, and deterministic. Due to the cultural construction of psychoanalytic trauma, rather than work with it definitively, it seems most ethical to use the term (as well as the terminology and practices it conjures) in figurative, speculative, and associative ways. Working flexibly with notions of trauma need not preclude, negate, or distort important critical politics developed within trauma studies.
for decades (LaCapra 699-700). The damages can feel very raw. I see people in the market whose skin still looks bubbled and melted from napalm. There are still bullet holes on some downtown buildings. There are still lingering undercurrents of resentment, anger and prejudice between northern and southern Vietnamese. There are still areas in Vietnam where the ground is saturated with carcinogenic toxins. People still die from stumbling upon, and inadvertently triggering, bombs dropped over thirty years ago. In this place of immeasurable resilience and continuing trauma it must be asked: “Who says time heals all wounds? [Perhaps] It would be better to say that time heals everything except wounds” (Silverman qtd. in Hirsh, 21). In this sense, witnessing the structural trauma of Vietnam “unravels whatever meaning we’ve found and woven ourselves into, and so listening to survivor’s stories” exists as “an experience in unlearning,” which brings with it recognition of personal implication and the inherited responsibility of addressing past, and continuing, wounds (Brison quoting and expanding Langer’s term, 49).

By telling her life-narratives in the U.S., co Nhut brings Vietnamese histories, traumas, resilience, and suffering back to “American soil” and social consciousness. Co Nhut, those traveling with her, and the many others they represent in Vietnam, rematerialize history and its violent continuations into transnational social issues requiring international awareness and address. Speaking in the church basement with Bhopal activists, American labor union members, and Vietnam Veterans Against the War, co Nhut emphasizes the need for transnational solidarity and action in response to contemporary injustice and suffering in Vietnam and elsewhere. Her aim, as she said to me and Nhina in Vietnam, is not to win the lawsuit. Co Nhut’s intention is to raise international awareness about people suffering from

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86 See LaCapra’s essay “Trauma, Absence, Loss” and his book Writing History, Writing Trauma for an in-depth discussion of “structural” and “historical” traumas.
the aftermath of war in her country so that people here and elsewhere may choose to help by speaking out against war and other forms of violence and by assisting those currently in need. Although her story is about her own miscarriages, co Nhut testifies to the radical interdependence between people and the need for responsible, transnational social action in response to human suffering. She gestures towards what is ethically and practically “better” about partial, performative understanding.

**Regarding Monsters and “Monstrous” Bodies**

Before continuing, it is necessary to address some guiding theorizations of the discursive category of monsters, and those who are deemed “monstrous” by others, in order to help avoid reiterating its stability as a signifier of fear and abjection. In her seminal work on the shifting figure of the monster, Margrit Shildrick explains that human monsters “speak to both the radical otherness that constitutes an outside and to the difference that inhabits identity itself” where “[t]he issue is not so much that monsters threaten to overrun the boundaries of the proper, as that they promise to dissolve them” (11). As “alternately terrifying and fascinating” beings “monstrous other[‘s] [] very presence signals the threat of contamination” in relation to taken-for-granted notions of the autonomous, normal, closed, and contained “clean and proper body” (16; building on Kristeva, 7). In other words, because of their uncanny likeness and extreme excessiveness in comparison to “normal” bodies, the Lang Hoa Binh kids and the monstrous fetuses to which co Nhut refers in her narratives, simultaneously fit within, defiantly exceed, and therefore participate in deconstructing categories of “proper” humanness.

The forms of deconstruction, unraveling, and questioning monsters present is often seen as an immense threat to those invested in patrolling the borders of “natural,” normative
being. “Human monsters,” Shildrick says “both fulfill the necessary function of the binary opposite that confirms the normality and centrality of the acculturated self, and at the same time threaten to disrupt that binary by being all too human” (55). By disrupting carefully maintained boundaries, monsters cause us to reckon with the extreme vulnerability, diversity, and cultural constructedness of “normal” and “proper” human being. Monsters’ consistent presence in social life, however, is evidence of the “contested terrain of a particular historical moment,” but moreover of “the always already problematic ontology of human being” (3).

Rather than seeking a definitive ontology of the monstrous, Shildrick focuses on theorizing the sense of threat and vulnerability people commonly feel and express in relation to the monstrous. Monsters are often rendered categorically deviant through sight, a sense perhaps given too much credibility for its capacity to deliver “unmediated, empirical truth.” “Sight dissect”s and “separates” Walter Ong describes, and too often unselfconsciously “situates the observer on the outside what he [sic] views, at a distance” (72). We are afraid of monsters, and we figure them as separate, and distant, from images of clean and proper bodies as a result of, among other things, a presumed threat of contamination. This sense of threat of contamination-by-proximity is particularly salient in Vietnam where illness and abnormality have been, and often still are, traditionally viewed as the result of karmic wrongdoing in an individual and/or family’s past. The “bad luck” of accidents, illness, disabilities and other “bad fortunes” are viewed as potentially contagious.87 So, best keep away. Keep difference at a distance so that it does not threaten our own carefully maintained sense of physical and spiritual cleanliness, proper being, and social belonging. The central

87 To this issue Malarney writes, “[d]espite the decades of propagation of the state’s secular ideology, many Vietnamese still retain an assortment of ideas which assert that a wide variety of supernatural forces or entities, such as fate, chance, or the activities of spirits, are the cause of human suffering and misfortune” (“Return” 246).
problem, as Schildrick expresses it, is that “monsters are both necessary and feared, and yet effectively have been denied a place in the domain of ethics, except as the passive object of moral regard” (3). As I will discuss later, the project of distancing monsters as *passive objects* subject to *moral regard* and incessant “over-looking” (combined with onlookers’ chosen abstinence from meaningful involvement) poses great problems and disadvantages for the Lang Hoa Binh kids.

While much energy is spent obsessively delineating, and rejecting monstrous otherness, Shildrick shifts our attention to the slippery instability of our “selves” by unmasking claims of innate, “normal” and “natural” being. She reminds us that “the ordinary body is not given,” but rather should be understood as “an achievement” of constant individual and social creation:

> [a]lthough the monstrosity of chronic disease or disability overtly undermines any notion of a securely embodied subject, that ordinary body is not given, but is always an achievement. It is a body that requires constant maintenance and/or modification to hold off the ever-present threat of disruption; extra digits are excised at birth, tongues shortened in Down’s Syndrome children, noses are reshaped, warts removed, prosthetic limbs fitted, ‘healthy’ diets recommended, HRT prescribed. And in such cases, it is the *unmodified* body which is seen as unnatural, in need of ‘corrective’ interventions. In short, the normal body is materialized through a set of reiterative practices that speak to the instability of the singular standard. (55)

In this rendering, the *unmodified* body appears to be the (monstrous) exception. Critically with regard to preceding discussions, Shildrick suggests, “[r]ather than attempting to recuperate the monstrous, might we not refigure it as an alternative, but equally valuable, mode of being, an alterity that throws doubt on the singularity of the human and signals other less restrictive possibilities” so that the monstrous “might be the promising location of a
reconceived ontology, and an ethics centered on a relational economy that has a place for radical difference” (Shildrick 67)? In the case of the Lang Hoa Binh children, what is needed is an ethics, not of tolerance or recuperation, but of open and dialogic lived relation by which we engage together in continually seeking to “answer[] more fully to the multiplicity of embodied difference” and the rights of all human beings no matter what diverse forms they may physically express (2).

Material Legacies of Violence

As I listen to co Nhut in the church basement, I remember the Lang Hoa Binh kids, and think of the day I learned about co Nhut’s personal connections to Agent Orange. Like so many people in Vietnam who lived through the war years, co Nhut has numerous unexplained health problems. She has suffered intestinal cancer and a growth in her throat that doctors in Vietnam attribute to Agent Orange-related dioxin. Experts in Vietnam also attribute her multiple miscarriages to dioxin contamination. At first co Nhut speaks apprehensively, but gradually a fractured, shadowy story about one of her miscarriage emerges:

Co Nhut/Nhina: In 1977,

She was pregnant,

And she was to give birth

[Outside, a pack of dogs are barking so loud I can barely hear. Nhina becomes confused by co Nhut’s story.]

But it was not a human being,
Baby—

Not a baby—

Without bone?

Rivka: To her it was not a human being?

Nhina and I are confused. Nhina asks co Nhut to verify her words.

Nhina: A monster?

[Co Nhut nods in agreement.]

Nhina: Monster.

Rivka: Monster?

Is that what she said?

It that the word for, for, for those

Babies with

Effects from Agent Orange.

In Vietnam,

People call it a monster?

[...]

“A monster?” “Not a baby—” Nhina and I struggle to understand. “Without bone?”

Was it, or was it not “a human being?” We ask co Nhut for an answer but she resists full
clarification. It is vague, so maybe language should not work to make things clear. In this
passage, co Nhut uses the words “quai dang” and “quai di” (meaning “strange appearance,”
“monstrosity,” and “monstrous”) and “thai bi di dang” (“fetus afflicted with a strange/bizarre appearance”) to describe her miscarried fetus.88

The *thai* (“fetus”) was not viable. Co Nhut’s simultaneous attempt to express the circumstances of her pregnancy, while also keeping it swathed in a kind of faithful ambiguity, and Nhina’s and my resulting confusion in trying to follow co Nhut’s story, together conveys the difficulty, then and now, of understanding and naming the (non)fetus, “baby”/“monster,” in her womb. “How to say,” Nhina keeps trying to accurately communicate, “the baby—passed away when it was five months. And to her, it was lucky, because, she cannot imagine how he or she could manage life very well.”

Co Nhut tells us that the nurses and doctors tried to keep the truth about the baby’s apparent monstrosity from her. As Nhina explains, the “Doctors try to keep her, away from the truth [. . .] because it is a kind of bad luck [. . .] yah, and they tried to protect her from depression.” Notably, this is one of the only times that I ever hear depression mentioned by the veterans. And yet, here also, co Nhut does not describe herself as being or becoming depressed. As it was during wartime, depression and lost hope are still disavowed.

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88 Interestingly, Shildrick notes, “[s]pina bifida, cleft palate, and exomphalos, for example, are the result of a lack of material closure, the more serious arising initially from the failure of the infolding primitive streak to establish ever new but securely consolidated boundaries in the increasingly complex organization of the early embryo” (51). Here, I cannot help thinking that the lack of material closure in the bodies of fetuses (or the Lang Hoa Binh kids) signals and is the result of a lack of historical (material) finitude in terms of the war’s continuing legacies of social violence in Vietnam. Shildrick states: “What makes the other monstrous is not so much its morphological difference and unfamiliarity, as the disturbing threat of its return” (81). In Vietnam, the mysterious return, and refiguring, of historical violence in the progeny of successive generations is cause for often quiet, yet widespread, anxiety, such that “[a]lthough the monstrous may provoke both the fascination and horror accorded the absolute other, that response is never unproblematic, but spills over into the anxiety and repulsion which is occasioned by the violation of internal order” (55). In Vietnam, this *disturbing threat of return* and what it bespeaks in relation to the involuntary, often unidentifiable violation of the body’s *internal order* is materially experienced and expressed, in particular by women, through their fears of giving birth to deformed children. These fears may be verbally expressed, carried silently, or externally manifest in social practices such as the inordinately high number of sonograms Vietnamese women undergo during pregnancy. Vietnamese women are having these procedures to identify abnormal pregnancies, presumably so they may choose to have abortions. For research on this subject, see Le and Johansson’s essay “Impact of Chemical Warfare with Agent Orange on Women’s Reproductive Lives in Vietnam: A Pilot Study.”
Co Nhut only had a vague idea, from the nurses’ whispered words, that the hospital kept the “not-a-baby”-fetus-monster. “She was told, by someone else, that probably,” after her surgery, “probably the baby was kept in Tu Du Hospital.” The being that was inside her is categorically elusive and so is its fate. Everything about this story is unclear, shadowy and speculative, except for the very material fact of co Nhut’s pregnancy and the unnamable being.

Nhina continues, explaining that the story is unclear, in part, because co Nhut does not really know what took place. The doctors were trying to protect her by giving vague answers. And, co Nhut says that what was happening was too painful so, to protect herself, “she didn’t want to make it clear.” By sustaining the story’s uncertainty, and the ambiguity of the *thai bi di dang*, co Nhut “explores the possibility of a faithful history in the very indirectness of this telling” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 27). Quietly, Nhina says:

Nhina:    Its not really clear.

      Vague,

      It is very vague.

[. . .]

Co Nhut/Nhina:   It was hard,

      It was so painful to her

      That she didn’t want to make it

      Clear.

      Just,

      Passed away,

      And passed away,

      And she doesn’t want to hear
Any more about it.
[...]

She knew about the truth,
Not exactly,
But she knew about it
A little bit,
From some nurses,
In hospital,
A little bit about the,
The monster,
A little bit.
But she didn’t want—
[...]
The baby was kept in
Secret,
Thanks to Dr. Phuong.
She didn’t know about it,
She didn’t know about it.
Yah,
She [Dr. Phuong] kept the baby,
In secret.
It die already,
Inside.

Co Nhut “knew about the truth,” but only “a little bit.” Together in tenuous translation, co
Nhut and Nhina express the betweenness of what co Nhut knew and did not know, what she
was told and what she willfully kept unclear. Nhina wavers between calling the fetus a “baby” and a “monster.” Neither category seems appropriate, or stable, so she flips back and forth. The story tells uncertainty: about what the fetus is, what happened to it, and why it happened. Nothing is fully discernable. And yet, in this story indiscernability is what brings us closer to what happened, and moreover, the way it felt for co Nhut.

What we finally find out from co Nhut is that the fetus died in her womb. The war was over, but its toxic residue was (and is) silently lingering in co Nhut’s body. When she went to the hospital for a check-up the doctor told her there was no heartbeat. During the surgery to remove the dead fetus the doctors did not tell her the cause of death was dioxin poisoning. During the 1970s Dr. Phuong, then the chief maternal health doctor and now the president of Tu Du Women’s Hospital, was just starting to observe patterns of illness and irregular pregnancies in female war veterans. Later, when co Nhut went to the hospital for surgery in 2002, Dr. Phuong explained dioxin exposure to be the probable cause of co Nhut’s string of illnesses and abnormal miscarriages. At this time, Dr. Phuong also told co Nhut for certain that her thai be di dang, from 1979, was indeed kept by the hospital. Dr. Phuong preserved it, and many others, with the hope that in the future the archive might serve as evidence of dioxin’s destructive legacy.

Co Nhut’s miscarriage is part of the hospital’s haunting archive. It is one specimen among hundreds of other untenable, lifeless bodies floating—sometimes placidly sitting inside their partially opened uteruses, with attached placentas (mis)leading to nowhere—in murky glass jars. “One of those is mine,” co Nhut says in the church basement in Raleigh, as she points to the picture showing shelves full of bottled fetuses on the video screen. One of those is co Nhut’s. But they should haunt us all. Co Nhut’s story, her quai di fetus, and the
hundreds of other bodies sitting on shelves in Tu Du Hospital, show and tell how historical
violence leaves its mark on particular lives, while also defying closure or containment within
any one site, body, or temporality. Violence continues. Violence too, like memory and
responsibility, can be passed from generation to generation. It can be inherited. The bottled
fetuses sit, frozen in time, awaiting the chance to serve as material proof of the ways in
which historical violence continues, and is reproduced, from one generation to the next.

In the case of the untenable fetuses, and those postwar children born with mental and
physical disabilities due to dioxin exposure, historical violence is mobile in the present and
beyond. It may seems strange, and maybe too harsh, to speak of the living children and the
bottled fetuses in one breath. However, the fact is that they live—figuratively and literally—in
stark proximity.

**The Orphanage-Hospital & the Fetal Archive**

After several months of working at the hospital, I am granted permission to see the
fetal archive. Escorted by a nurse, we walk down the tiled hallway and she unlocks the
rickety door. My body is tense and my stomach rumbles with an unsettling mixture of
anticipation and trepidation. The small, dim room is lined with metal shelves, holding a
mismatched array of bottles. There are hundreds of glass jars whose hues run a drab
spectrum from muted yellow to murky blue. The nurse moves to turn on the light, but I tell
her I prefer it kept off. I enter the room with a notepad:

Hit with overwhelming smell of formaldehyde. Murky bottles lining walls.
With identification tags. Some give the patient’s name. Other just say:
“Ovarian Pregnancy.” “Abdominal wall defect.” “Malformation of Head.” [.
. .]
Imagine any, and I mean any, deformity and it is here, in this silent, yellowing time-capsule of a room. Babies in bottles. All sizes and shapes. All ages of infancy. All forms of bodily malignancy. All different postures and partial bodies. Fixed from now until... Just floating in the jars, as if (but not at all) in amniotic fluid. [. . .] Many sets of conjoined twins—one set with the second body coming out of the other’s stomach. Extra legs. Mouths open as if to nurse. Upper half of the head missing—torn away. Tumors open. [. . .] Disintegrating gray flesh. Too many limbs, all twisted. Three eyes, two mouths, two faces, on one head—stretched. Looks of tension in eyes. [. . .] Awful.

Two images that stay the most: a small baby on its back, as big as my hand, in a yellow-brown water jar. Resting, it seemed, in the cracked open shell of its once-mother’s uterus. Almost like it is sleeping. And the other baby, in a blue-gray watery mixture, sitting in a lotus-like position, eyes closed (though many of the others’ eyes are open), hands slightly stretched forward. Surrounded by ripples and layers of blue and gray disintegrating tissue. Label on jar says, “Cancer of the Uterus.”

I observe, but do not linger after making two silent sweeps of the room. Somehow not lingering here might keep my gaze from becoming voyeuristic? I don’t know...
hospital: not enough soap, no toilet seats or toilet paper, inadequate medicine, preventable sickness abounding, few toys, chipping paint on the cribs (containing lead?) . . . the list just goes on.

Minh Hung, a four-year-old boy with spina bifida, near-total paralysis, and other major ailments, turns his head to look at me. His eyes are crusted over with dried fluid. He is sick too. I wipe his face off with a damp washcloth. He cannot move his body, so I gently shift him from the pool of sweat in which he has been lying and wipe him down with the washcloth to cool his fever. The diapers can wait. He gives what I think is a soft sigh of relief. His mouth stays open, as if about to speak, but I know he physically cannot. I have never even heard him cry. I prop up his head so he can breathe more easily. I wish I knew how to help him. How to make him comfortable. How to give him more enjoyment and happiness. I see his bent ribs heaving, and his bony, warped legs give a little shake. Today he wears a shirt that says “Superman” in puffy English lettering and shows the superhero flying with his arms outstretched.

**Three Challenges: Subaltern Silence, Abject Bodies, Spectacular Representation**

The Lang Hoa Binh orphanage-hospital for children with Agent Orange-related disabilities both confines and protects its inhabitants. Although better public understanding of mental and physical disability, and of the deleterious biological effects of dioxin, is on the rise in Vietnam, the kids of Lang Hoa Binh live an annexed life, removed from a society that largely rejects them. The range of their mental and physical disability is extreme. Some kids can learn how to read, write with their feet, and perhaps someday, live on their own. Other kids struggle to put words together, move their bodies, or just breathe. The children have many obstacles, particular and shared, to overcome in their lives. While working with the
kids, I came to realize that 1) for the children to be acknowledged as individuals and part of society and 2) for their needs to be addressed as a matter of social responsibility (by people in Vietnam, the U.S., and elsewhere), the following three overarching challenges must be considered.

1. **Challenge: Subaltern Silence**

In the room where I work there is a girl with no eyes. She cannot see, or talk, or hear. She spends her days rocking back and forth, sobbing. I cannot find a way to soothe her. Two babies in the room have heads so swollen and enlarged with “water on the brain” that they are anchored to their cribs, unable to move or shift position. Minh Hung, the partially paralyzed boy in the superman shirt, has shriveled, twisted, unmovable limbs and a concave chest. He is fed through a plastic tube permanently stuck up his nose. Each breath is difficult. He cannot speak or move his body. At first, I thought he had no way to communicate. But one day, I massage his legs and he smiles. His ability to communicate is ever so slight, but he can show me when he is happy. I massage his legs, arms, and head every day.

In a literal sense, some of the children at the orphanage-hospital can speak while others physically cannot. Does this mean that as a mute, mostly paralyzed child, Minh Hung is completely foreclosed? If the subaltern “woman is doubly in shadow” where does this place orphaned, disabled, “third world” children (Spivak, “Subaltern” 84)? Thinking with Gayatri Spivak, I am compelled to ask: Speak what? How? To whom? Can the children speak to their caregivers? Can the children speak to me? Are they ever able to speak to the Vietnamese public, or to the U.S. or international communities? As perhaps the ultra-subaltern, “if given the chance,” can these kids ever “speak and know their conditions” let
alone attain “possibility of full membership in dominant social strata” (78)? I must confess feeling some despair regarding these questions. Some of the kids are able to “speak” to some of their caregivers sometimes. Perhaps hearing them requires a different kind of listening, as with Minh Hung, a kind of listening beyond normative recognition. As long as we are not listening to or hearing their needs, we are participating in a kind of damaging violence. It may not be the overt violence of war, but it is participation (through inaction) in continued suffering.

2. Challenge: Abject Bodies

My first day at Lang Hoa Binh is startling. I have never seen bodies like this, never even imagined these kinds of bodies to be possible. Children with split eyelids, cleft lips, and teeth in the wrong places. Children missing and deformed arms and legs. Children with webbed hands. Domed heads. Shriveled arms. Scaled and peeling skin. Twisted backs. I have heard Vietnamese, Americans, and other foreigners call the children “monsters,” “half-human” and “un-human”—the same kinds of words used to describe the bottled fetuses. I am asked to feed lunch to a child in the “pink room.” She has a swollen head and her eyes bulge. She cannot close her mouth. She is mentally disabled and cannot speak. Of all the children in the room, she makes me the most uncomfortable. Why? She looks the most monstrous. I bring the spoon of rice porridge to her mouth. She eats. Somehow, feeding her relieves my nerves. I can do this. In some ways, she is just a kid.

The children in the orphanage-hospital push the borders of what is commonly taken as human, sentient, and alive. They exist precariously at the “border[] of [their] condition as [] living beings” (Kristeva 231). Their damaged, excessive, or excessively lacking bodies, are material sites of historically inherited violence. They are cross-cut, over-written, and
internally inscribed with a history that precedes their coming into being, their birth. They echo generationally co Nhut’s concern in prison about what she might become or do were she physically disabled (“I could write, and I could sing”). Yet they must carry the burden, live the burden, of others’ monstrous acts. The grotesque violence of the past pre-figured them into embodiments of social abjection. Kristeva’s notion of the abject often tends toward self-abjection. However, the construction of abject existing as “ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” seems particularly apt in describing both the kid’s bodies and their social expulsion, differently articulated, in the U.S. and Vietnam (229).

There is very little, save chance, care, and a few breaths of air, keeping some of the children at Lang Hoa Binh from becoming biologically dead. A lot and very little separates the children from the untenable hybrid, hyper-abject “human” monstrosities that “live,” frozen forever as preserved “proof” of violence, in rows and rows of formaldehyde jars a short distance away from the children’s rooms. As abject and socially abjected bodies, the children are embodiments of “death infecting life” with their “wound[s] [of] blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, not signify[ing] death,” rather signifying life, or life beyond death (Kristeva 232, 231). Though almost always called “victims,” they are more like “survivors.” They are survivors of violence living in/as violence. As abject subalterns, the kids challenge normative notions of subjectivity, which may in turn necessitate different forms of address-ability, response-ability, and witnessing (Oliver 17).

3. Challenge: Spectacular Representation

Today a photographer working on a New York Times Magazine spread came to the hospital to take photos. He is “here to provide the pictures,” he says. Click. Click. Of
children in their beds. Click. Of the children’s naked, deformed bodies getting their baths in the sink. Click. Click. Of feeding time. Puke everywhere. Of the little baby with the oversized head, crying in his crib. Click. Of the open wound above his ear. Click. Pause. Click. Puss and blood ooze out. Click. Click. Of Vy looking out of her crib with the rash all over her body. Click. Pause. Yes, the hydrocephalic children are indeed shocking. Grotesque. Unable to lift their own heads. Bloated. The photographer seems shaken. He tells me he “feels a little uncomfortable” taking the pictures of the kids, “a little voyeuristic.”

Performance can successfully intervene in situations of injustice, it can also be damaging, even violent. Although socially marginalized, the children’s abject, subaltern bodies were often put into situations of spectacular performance. I came to understand their incessant photographic representation as a kind of performativity of violence, a continual recitational practice of being over-seen and over-looked. Calling out for donation, pictures of the kids grace collection cans placed in all Vietnamese “foreigner” hotels. The kids appear in Vietnamese and U.S. newscasts, internet sites, and newspapers. Where they are addressed, there is almost always visible representation. There is a near endless stream of Vietnamese and international visitors coming to the hospital to “see” the kids. Reuters journalists and photographers. Independent columnists. Japanese benefactors. Foreign tourists. Ms. Vietnam and her televised entourage. They all come to “show their support” but also to see the “show” of spectacular bodies.

The kids are also taken to benefit events held outside the hospital as “props” in what a friend accidentally/unselfconsciously called “Agent Orange Shows.” Dressed in their best, even infants and paralyzed kids are taken to these events to provide photo opportunities for

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89 In the future, I would like to more fully address Debord’s theorizations of “mass media,” “naturalness,” and spectacle as “not a collection of images” but “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (19, 12).
journalists with the hope that “pity and fear” will be “purged” by way of cathartic monetary donation (Aristotle 64). These performances are literally on stage and staged. More often than not, photographs of the kids, hospital visitations, and charity events involving flocks of journalists and the exchange of exaggeratedly large checks (in terms of physical size), seem to be damaging performances of spectacular and (passively) violent performativity, serving to evacuate agency rather than to change material conditions.  

A Note on Performativities of Violent Sight

Thinking about racial violence and subjugation in the U.S., Avery Gordon notes that “the highly visible can actually be a type of invisibility” (Gordon remembering Ellison, 17). Too often, she says, “[i]n a culture seemingly ruled by technologies of hypervisibility, we are led to believe not only that everything can be seen, but also that everything is available and accessible for our consumption” (16). Judith Butler’s notion of performativity as “not [] a singular or deliberate “act,” but [] as [a] reiterative and citational practice” of norms, and the “stylized repetition of acts,” describes processes of production and consumption of the kids in/as visual representations (Bodies 2, Gender 140). That is, the kinds of photographs taken of the kids and the ways they are employed and received tend to reinforce social scripts that reify rather than rupture norms.

At the orphanage-hospital the same pictures are taken over and over, “substituting” a numbing “plurality of copies for a unique [human] existence” allowing reproductions of the kids take on their own “exhibition value” (Benjamin 221, 225). “Visibility politics are additive rather than transformational,” they “lead to stultifying ‘me-ism’” [wherein] the

90 In fact there is incentive to keep the conditions at the hospital poor in order that representations and other performances serve to produce monetary donations. Additionally, the distribution of cash and in-kind donations is problematic and corrupt.
spectator can reject the representation as ‘not about me.’ Or worse, the spectator can valorize the representation which fails to reflect her likeness, as one with ‘universal appeal’ or ‘transcendent power’” (Phelan 11). In both cases, spectacular sight leads to passivity, not action. This failure to act is a kind avowal of violence as “refusal to take a moral stance.” The action of inaction “is itself a powerful statement of one’s moral position” (Conquergood, “Moral Act” 8).

Visual representations of the kids, in photographic or other performance, do not tend to hold a “punctum,” or motivating, animating “pierce,” so that the images may “shout, [but] not wound” (Barthes 41). The children’s abject bodies attract hyper-spectacle where “seeing is unbelieving” and moving “into sight” becomes “out of mind.” Visibility, for the “Agent Orange children,” does not correlate with agency or material changes in conditions.91 Therefore, for performances to be socially effective, actively “doing a good cause” rather than just “for a good cause,” they must move beyond reliance on normative productions and receptions of (over)sight. Or, as co Dinh might say, “awareness” of the kids must be “put into [meaningful social] action” or it becomes voyeuristic negligence, a performativity of passive violence. Rather than rendering politics aesthetic, as is to often the case with representations of the kids, Walter Benjamin calls for “politicizing art” (242). In the next section, the kids show me a most subtle way to politicize everyday life through the creative art, and performance, of invitational play.

Small Sites of Radical Performance

After weeks and months of feeling significantly disheartened by what I am experiencing at Lang Hoa Binh, and the way the children are represented in the outside

91 For discussions of visuality and agency, see Phelan (Unmarked 10) and Pollock (Exceptional 6-14).
world, the kids show me a glimmer of hope, or rather, of condition-changing in process. Today the kids are at a Buddhist-Confucian themed amusement park on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City. This trip is only one of two fieldtrips taken outside of the hospital each year. The kids are “out” in public. Everyone is staring. But the kids do not show signs of embarrassment. They behave as they do every day at the hospital. But here, exposed in public, their actions and “being in the world” take on new meaning. Today the kids’ actions are “radical” in a public way.

Phuong, with no legs, climbs up the stairs as people stare at her. She is undaunted. A pile of prosthetic legs and knees lean against a gilded pillar as we take a group photograph. Lien, a teenager with malformed arms helps another child, who cannot feed himself, eat lunch. Meanwhile, the doctors respectfully demand admission into the water park when the officials bar our entry citing that “the kids’ disfigurations will scare other patrons and cause liability.”92 We wait until we are allowed entry. Inside, the kids swim, assist one another in the water, and mix with “normal bodies” in this public space. Their acts are playful and invitational. They are inviting others into a space of transformation of the “public transcript” (Scott 2).93 Their performances are small, everyday acts, but they are socially radical. Today, if just for a moment, the kids are creating new social space.

Jan Cohen-Cruz refers to radical street performance as acts that question or re-envision ingrained social arrangements of power taking place in public by-ways that “draws people” into “a changing script” (1). During the amusement park trip the kids enacted a

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92 It should be noted that this is the only time I can remember ever hearing “liability” employed as a reason that something could not be done in Vietnam.

93 Scott describes the idea of public and private transcripts at length. One “shorthand” definition of the public transcript is “the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate” where the “public [. . .] refers to action that is openly avowed to the other party in the power relationship” (Domination 2).
series of small, radical performance interruptions. In so doing, they broke norms of
amusement park engagement, as well as performativities of their spectacular representation
as immobile, pitiful, extra-human objects. While I cannot assume ideological intentionality,
the kids’ pleasure, and their own ethics of care, broke the citational chains in which they are
generally caught. What was remarkable about the kids’ performances was not that they
boldly “broke the rules,” but that they subtly, steadfastly, and successfully integrated
themselves into belonging in this public space while fully enjoying themselves at the water
park.

The kids acted as they did every day in the confined safety of the hospital, but on this
day they were out in public, “creat[ing] visions of what society might be,” or become,
through actively performing the “possible real” of a more integrated and accepting society (6
Cohen-Cruz; Pollock, Telling 69). Through the movements of their bodies, their play and
laughter, they became human in the eyes of others. They were able, in a sense, to translate
(speak) their lives from private to public space. Their everyday life performances, in this
moment, challenged and overcame their social placement as subaltern, abject, and
spectacularly represented. The public was invited into a place of more “complex seeing” and
sensuously engaged witnessing (Brecht 44).

“Exceeding the norm involves serious risk” (Russo 10). Exceeding norms of proper
containment and concealment by exposing their already excessive bodies in “‘grotesque
performances’” in social space, the kids’ bodies were “on the line” (Russo 22; Madison
2001). In the amusement park, the kids were radically enacting their freedom to live. As
Baz Kershaw describes:
In other words the freedom that ‘radical performance’ invokes is not just freedom from oppression, repression, exploitation—the resistant sense of the radical—but also the freedom to reach beyond existing systems of formalized power, freedom to create currently unimaginable forms of association and action—the transgressive and transcendent sense of the radical. (18)

By way of commonplace acts, the kids were transforming the everyday, by not simply “represent[ing] such freedoms” but “produc[ing] such freedoms” (Kershaw 19). In the water, playing with other ostensibly “normal” children, the kids “opened up” a “new domain for democratic empowerment” creating a site of “democratized performance [. . .] a community of people constructing a sense of identity through the production of a culture that could potentially enhance their collective agency, self-determination, and responsibility to each other” (217). The kids’ small enactments can be seen as “grain[s] of radical creative sand” (220). I take from these granular moments, the notion that small radical performance can “paradoxically [. . .] encompass so much” because their “creative reach” seems “so modest” (220). Minutely radical performances do matter, for “under the appropriate conditions, the accumulation of petty acts can, rather like snowflakes on a steep mountainside, set off an avalanche” (Scott 192).

These small, even intimate, radical performances at the amusement park countered some of my despair at the kids’ status as subaltern, abject, and spectacularly represented bodies, providing hope that “lived relation and the vitality of a collective imaginary [] may turn spectacle inside out into visionary possibilities” (Pollock, “Memory” 88).94 At the theme park, by way of their creative, everyday performances of play, the kids: 1) translated

94 There were many intimate, radical performances at the amusement park that I would like to consider later in greater detail. Pollock’s discussion of “ethical intimacy” is particularly helpful in illuminating both the performances themselves as well as the internalization/externalization of accountability that the performances may inspire (“Memory” 93).
and “spoke” their lives from private to public space, 2) invited dialogue through embodied interaction, 3) interrupted performativities of spectacular representation by enacting possible realities, and 4) encouraged active, subject-to-subject witnessing. The kids’ radical everyday performances at the amusement park were spontaneous, modest, invitational, and affective.95

**Answerability: Prospective Remembering and Small, Radical Acts**

The Lang Hoa Binh kids, together with the veterans, show how to perform strategic, practical, historically-imbued, creative, and socially meaningful “critical interruptions” within taken for granted performativities of cultural norms (Hall, “When Was” 250). The veterans’ performances of hauntological, prospective remembering, and the kids everyday acts of living through adversity “go[] beyond” socially encrusted “power-knowledge field[s] of force,” to do the work of making critical social change (253-4). Through their modest actions, the kids and the veterans “bring imagined worlds into being and becoming, moving performers and audiences alike into palpable recognition of possibilities for change” (Pollock, Remembering 1). As I see it, scholarship and research that witnesses, provisionally names, and theorizes, sites of radical historical remembering and critical interruptions can play an important role in identifying significant cultural acts that might otherwise remain embedded in the everyday flows and embodied practices of social life. Identifying these

95 In the future, I would like to explore the various ways in which the Lang Hoa Binh kids are represented (via independent film, photography exhibit, fundraiser, etc.) in the United States and how these performances might be constructed in ways that encourage increased public action. In particular, visual representations of the children need to be considered carefully. Museums and “exhibits” tend to render their subject matter into specimen-objects that, in turn, allow spectators to react passively. As Pollock expresses, “the ethical, practical, and political dangers at the heart of not recognizing the representational nature of truth” and our abilities to change what we take to be the way things are “are staggering” (Exceptional 14, see also Said’s discussions in Orientalism). How can audiences in the U.S. be inspired to help improve the lives of the Lang Hoa Binh kids? How might small performance interventions at these sites invite more outcry and action in the United States? How might people in the U.S. be compelled to declare: “I’d never have thought it—That’s not the way—That’s extraordinary, hardly believable—It’s got to stop—The sufferings [. . .] appall me, because they are unnecessary” (emphasis added, Brecht 70)!
small, yet critical, ruptures and resistance performances helps make them visible, discussable, and valuable within public discourses, and potentially enables the remaking of these praxes into still more innovative, collaborative possibilities for social change.

As Oliver writes, “subjectivity requires a witness” and “develops through address and address-ability from and to others,” for “without an addressee, without a witness, I [we] cannot exist” (88). In the body of this dissertation, I perform witness to the respective, living histories of the performance group women and the Lang Hoa Binh kids. I have inscribed here their performances possibly participating in what Baz Kershaw calls a “pathology of hope,” a relentless sense of possibility grounded in minute gestures, testimony, embodied archives of violence, and even, as it were, incidental subjectivities (the kids at play) (8). I argue that by performing their transnational, transgenerational politics of spectral and prospective remembering, the veterans put historical experience and awareness into current action. At the amusement park, and through daily interactions at the orphanage-hospital, the Lang Hoa Binh kids tacitly challenge norms of normalcy, exclusion, and repulsion, at least altering the space for a loving rather than an objectifying gaze (Oliver 2001).

Following the kids’ and veterans’ examples, radical change may be refigured in terms of small, modest, intimate interruptions and alterations.96 These modest interventions and remembering performances comprise intersubjectively embodied, creative, everyday arts of living that is also always political. Mikhail Bakhtin articulates the challenge of such an aesthetic as a challenge of answerability: “it is certainly easier to create without answering for life, and easier to live without any consideration of art” (Art 2). And so, against ease, he argues “the individual must [work to] become answerable through and through” (2). That is,

96 Baz Kershaw’s formulation of small radical performances (Radical), as well as Stuart Hall’s call for intellectual modesty (“Theoretical”), and Della Pollock’s reworking of Julia Kristeva’s “intimacy in revolt” (“Memory” 87) are critical to this formulation of radical performance as intimate interruption and alteration.
“if we are selves, and subjects, and have subjectivity and agency by virtue of [our] dialogic relationships with others [. . .] we are by virtue of others,” and must become “infinitely response-able” (Oliver 18,106). “I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in [and through] art,” specifically in and by way of performance, “so that everything I have experienced and understood [will] not remain ineffectual in my life” and the lives of others (Bakhtin, Art 1). For me this means, among other things, witnessing to the variety of performative politics in which the performance group women continue to participate, with the aim of amplifying, clarifying, and mobilizing them for their ends; working with them and their cohorts to articulate Vietnam-America concerns in the purposeful enactment of transnationality, especially in conjunction with NGOs addressing public health and the perspectives of bio-warfare; and tending to the gifts of familial attachment and legacy I have been privileged to receive.

**Coda: For Those Who Surround Us**

A month ago I received two letters from the veterans. One is from co Xuan and the other from co Kim Dung. In each of their letters the two women tell me about recent events in their lives (sickness, the recent death of a friend, a performance at a shrine for famous war heroine); give regards from other women in the group; ask questions about my life; and send wishes of health, good luck, and happiness to my family. In asking about my life, they inquire about the progress of my project, while making a familiar request. Both women ask for the same thing. It is clear and doable. What they are asking for is something I feel I owe the veterans, at very least, for sharing their lives with me. As they have many times before, both women ask me to keep telling other people in the United States about what I learned in Vietnam. They ask me to retell their stories, not as their stories, but as examples of the
“experience of Vietnamese people in general, and Vietnamese women in particular” writes co Kim Dung.

“Do not forget to talk to people in your country about the people of Vietnam,” in the past and the present, co Xuan similarly expresses. Theirs is a familiar reminder. The women repeated it to me numerous times. Co Kim Dung, co Nhut, co Xuan, co Dinh, and many other women in the group asked me to do this each time we met for an interview. Retelling stories of “the experience of women during the war,” and the “lives of people in Vietnam today” is something I can keep doing for the veterans. It is their hope that by having these stories retold, others outside of their country can gain a better understanding of people’s lives in Vietnam, and elsewhere. Those who listen may be moved to assist people who suffer and struggle in Vietnam and in other places, the veterans would often say to me, and it may help inspire them to stand up and reject practices of war, oppression, and violence.

The letters express the veterans’ hopes in a familiar fashion: their wishes are always articulated in specific relation to Vietnam, and accompanied by gestures toward greater, global-scales of increasing social equity. Co Xuan closes her letter saying, “I sincerely hope that we, your aunties [the performance group women], continue to bring you something profound and lasting. We hope we bring you, a memory that is unforgettable, a memory of the whole country of Vietnam; something beautiful, endearing, and enduring.”

Their letters remind me of a visit. I recall sitting with my friends me Tu and chi Thu at their house, in the center of Ho Chi Minh City, with the sound of motorbikes roaring in the background like a waterfall. Me Tu was also part of the communist resistance movement and she is close friends with several of the performance group women. She is the mother of my friend chi Thu, the person who first inspired me to learn about and travel to Vietnam. Stories
about me Tu’s life, told by chi Thu, were the first narratives I heard about Vietnam. They were the stories that compelled me to listen and learn more.

Me Thu’s husband, chi Thu’s father, died while fighting in 1968, during the Tet offensive. As we talk about me Thu’s childhood and her work for the communist front, over cool glasses of sugar cane juice, she takes out letters, pictures, and artifacts from her past. A courtship letter from chi Thu’s father. A black and white picture of me Tu and her husband on their wedding day in 1954. A box of unopened candies that he sent to her via secret courier. Looking around the room, I realize me Tu’s tiny apartment has become a carefully tended archive to her husband; its collections of keepsakes stand in dedicated, loving memory of his life. After showing me the shirt, still in its original package, that she planned to give her husband over forty years ago just before he died, me Tu turns to me and chi Thu and says, with lightness in her voice and distant eyes, “despite the sufferings and losses” in life, “we have to live on, and to make a better life for those who, surrounds us.”

In me Tu’s home, we remember chi Thu’s father, conjuring his spirit “not in order to chase away the ghosts, but [. . .] to grant them the right, [. . .] to [] a hospitable memory or promise [. . .] out of a concern for justice” (Derrida, Specters 175). The material archive-shrine of me Tu’s home, and the living archive of her embodied remembering, reminds me that “the archive is not, [. . .] a question of the past [. . .] [i]t is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow” (Derrida, Archive 36). We must learn to correspond with others, the spectral and the presently living, allowing our perceptions, beliefs, and actions to be changed in the name of prospective change. This is what co Nhut, co Kim Dung, co Xuan, co Dinh, the performance group women, and the Lang Hoa Binh kids teach through the ways they live
their lives every day. Me Thu’s phrase, eloquently doubled and translated to me through her
daughter’s voice, becomes a transnational, transcultural, and intergenerational utterance,
imperting an inheritance of responsibility.

Me Thu’s and chi Thu’s words embody the founding desires, beliefs, and actions of
living hauntologically and prospectively with memory: we must remember together toward
making more equitable social relations, allowing the memories of others—whether they seem
near to our own lives or appear geographically, temporally, or culturally removed—into our
lives, knowing that they vitally matter to the sustenance and justness of our own existence.

* * *
Figure 7 – Veterans at rehearsal, Southern Women’s Museum (July 2006)
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