SPEAKING WITH VIETNAMESE WOMEN ON THE CONSEQUENCES OF WAR
WRITING AGAINST SILENCE AND FORGETTING

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Note: The following article, based on interviews conducted in the north, center, and south of Viet Nam, is reprinted with permission and minor revisions from *Le Viet Nam au Feminin,* Gisele Bousquet and Nora Taylor, eds. (Paris: *Les Indes Savantes)* In the context of this conference on the expectations of those thought to be affected by Agent Orange, it draws attention to the many dimensions of those expectations: hopes for physical and emotional support for the children when the parents' strength is gone; hopes for someone else to help carry the burden these families and their communities have borne alone for 20 to 30 years; hopes for medicine, mobility aids, and rehabilitation; hopes for small loans to repair houses or invest in livestock; hopes for technical training to raise income on the one hand, and to provide a sense of contributing to the community, on the other.

Social and spiritual dimensions of those hopes were mentioned by many families: a longing "to be able to contribute to the society like anyone else", as they often put it; a desire to have their suffering recognized as a sacrificial contribution to the nation, and not as punishment for wrong-doing; a request that we listen, and then make these stories heard, put into the pages of history in all their dignity and complexity.

These families, then, wanted to be heard, recognized, and helped by the community in order to be able in turn to contribute to that community. But that was not all. Many families raised another expectation, another hope: "Responsibility," as one man put it. "The word in Vietnamese is responsibility." Responsibility for actions taken in war, and responsibility towards those who, suffering themselves, have nonetheless been acting responsibly for several decades, to the end of their strength.

At stake in our response to these expectations is their suffering, and our own humanity.

Mrs. Hồng: "I met you, a person—that is, a woman. Although you are from another country far away but, forgive me, you are still in the same plight. We are both women, the contact between us is easy, and it's easy to talk openly with each other. I want to express and share some sweet and bitter things that we have received from the past. There is the bitter...like the hardship. That is how we won the unity of our country for ourselves, won a sweeter future....could stand up, could be our own masters of our own land. The country is one country because of the courage, the fearlessness of our women, who are not just weak-legged with soft hands. Weak legs and soft hands still had to fight, still had to stand firm, still had to advance right beside the men."

Interviewer: "Yes...well... and do you think this is a story that should be told to everyone so they know, or should it be forgotten?"

Mrs. Hồng: "You must tell it, must put it into the pages of history, it must get into the pages of the history of our country, our generation, of the world, to understand that the country of Vietnam has people—men as well as women, old as well as young—all of them living a life like this. Before, it was like [I have told you], and now there are lives of struggle like this. Let them see everything."

Introduction

What Mrs. Hồng wanted written into history were the stories she had told me of the war, of her illnesses, of what she had learned, as well as the "much, much more" she still had to say. The interview excerpted for this chapter, then, is a fragment: a fragment of the stories Mrs. Hồng remembers and would like to tell, a fragment limited by constraints that include time, place, manner, memory, language, and the imagined purposes and uses of our meeting. The interview is a fragment of another sort as well, part of a longer essay that will bring a mosaic of 38 such interviews to bear on political and scientific debates over the long-term consequences of war, and specifically of Agent Orange, taken both as a chemical and a metaphor.

From 1961-1971, the United States sprayed 21 million gallons of chemical herbicides and defoliants in Vietnam, roughly 2/3 of which were contaminated by dioxin.[1] "Agent Orange," nicknamed for the orange identification stripe painted around its storage barrel, became the most well-known of the chemicals; its name sometimes serves as a generic reference to all the chemicals used. Accounts of environmental destruction vary, but a figure often given is that of approximately five million acres defoliated, with an additional half-million acres of cropland destroyed. The Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars quotes Air Force statistics that report nearly 10% of all arable land had been sprayed by 1969. Differing sources report from 33% to nearly 50% of all upland forests as having been sprayed more than once. Air Force statistics record 36% of the salt-water mangroves as having been destroyed (for discussion see Buckingham 1982, Cecil 1986, Harnly 1988, Lewy 1978, Stellman 3003, Võ Qúy 1992, Westing 1984, Young 1988.)

The statistics for the impact on human health are even more elusive, given the numbers who have already died, the numbers who continue to be born, the long lead time for the development of some of the illnesses, the dispersal and subsequent movement of the populations affected, the movement of chemicals in the soil and water and through the food chain,[2] and the lack of agreement on which diseases and conditions may be linked to the chemicals used and their unwanted component, dioxin. Evidence continues to accumulate, however, from dioxin research and hundreds of studies of U.S. veterans and other populations: today the U.S. National Institute of Health names 10 diseases, or sets of diseases, and two birth defects as possibly linked to exposure to chemicals used during wartime in Vietnam: chloracne, Hodgkins disease, multiple myeloma, non-Hodgkins lymphoma, acute and subacute peripheral neuropathy, porphyria cuanea tarda, prostate cancer, respiratory cancers, soft-tissue sarcomas, type 2 diabetes, spina bifida, and, in

[1] These figures reflect new findings from a team commissioned by the U.S. National Academy of Sciences that revise old estimates upward by 10%, based on access to fuller documentation. The study also conservatively estimates that the quantity of TCDD dioxin was at least twice that previously thought, or 366 kg. These figures refer only to chemicals sprayed from fixed-wing aircraft (see note 2). (Stellman, 2003)

[2] See again Stellman's recent painstaking work on exposures. Based on hamlet census counts coordinated with records of spraying missions, at least 2.1 million but perhaps as many as 4.8 million people would have been present during the spraying of 3,181 hamlets. For another 1,430 hamlets sprayed, it was not possible to estimate population. These figures do not take into account those who may have been contaminated from discarded drums, emergency dumps, or from the hand-held spraying of the perimeters of military bases, the spraying done from naval vessels, or that from helicopters, or by the Republic of Vietnam, or again, from post-spraying displacement of chemicals. (At the time of the spraying, the population of the area sprayed, known then as South Vietnam, was 17 million.)

the children of women veterans, other birth defects.

The director of the experimental toxicology division of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has named TCDD, the form of dioxin that was unintentionally produced as a by-product of the manufacturing process of Agent Orange and certain other chemicals used during the war, as producing the following effects on humans: "cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, porphyria, endometriosis, decreased testosterone, chloracne; developmental effects on the thyroid status, immune status, neurobehavior, cognition, dentition; [and an] altered sex ratio".(Birnbaum 2002)

While scientific debate continues over many of these conclusions, in popular usage "Agent Orange" has taken on other layers of meaning, at times becoming the name of a disease, or a metaphor for the consequences of war,[3] or for the irresponsibility of government. In 2002, at the first scientific conference jointly sponsored by the U.S. and Vietnamese governments on the consequences of Agent Orange, the U.S. ambassador called the legacy of Agent Orange "the one significant ghost" remaining from the war, while the Vietnamese vice-minister for Science, Technology, and the Environment called it "chemical warfare".

Interviews

In the springs of 2000 and 2001 I conducted 38 interviews with women and families in a dozen villages and three towns in the north, center, and south of Việt Nam. With one exception, the women interviewed were all mothers of disabled children. Many had husbands who were also disabled to varying degrees; in a few cases, the woman herself was disabled. Five of the women were heads of single-parent households; one woman lived alone. Some of the women had fought for a revolution; some had joined the Advanced Youth Brigades; some were wives of soldiers who fought for the Saigon regime; some had cleared land in New Economic Zones; and some had helped rebuild homes in villages and towns that were razed and abandoned for years during the war. Thirty-one now lived in villages, and the other seven in provincial capitals.

Thirty of the interviews were conducted in Ha Nam, Thua Thien Hue, and Dong Nai provinces, made possible by the Vietnamese Red Cross and the International Federation of the Red Cross, during preparations for a program for 'the disabled poor, including those thought to be affected by Agent Orange'. The first eight interviews were conducted thanks to the help of the Committee for the Protection and Care of Children, in Thai Binh province.

Five broad topics were raised with interviewees for exploration: family situation

[3] The damage from Agent Orange is but one small portion of the damage done to the physical and social infrastructure of Việt Nam. For example: approximately 15 to 29 million bomb craters* pocked the country, which is just slightly larger in area than half of France. By 1998, 38,000 people had died since the end of the war from encounters with unexploded ordnance, and each month the casualties continue to mount. Bridges, roads, rail lines, hospitals, and schools were bombed; numerous cities and hundreds of villages were completely razed; millions of internal refugees were created, with many coerced into camps known by such names as "strategic hamlets". More work is needed to draw up an accurate inventory of the damage, to the extent that is possible. (*15 million is the approximate figure often given if the American phase of the war is taken separately; 29 million if the French phase is included).

(health, economic); war experience (including possible exposure to Agent Orange); help they have received; help they would find useful; and reflections or questions they would like to transmit through me to an international audience. The depth of discussion depended on my reading of the family's eagerness to talk, and on time constraints. While some families volunteered medical documents to corroborate their accounts, for the most part such corroboration came from the health care workers who accompanied me. What was important to me was the narrative itself, selected 25 years after the end of war to recount to an American, myself, who several of the interviewees mistook to be a representative of the U.S. government.

I was prompted to begin the work by a chance encounter on the streets of Hue, a city of great beauty and great tragedy in the center of Vietnam. One day in 1997, while I was standing talking to one of my students, I received a sharp blow to my shoulder. "Why," my interlocutor challenged me, "isn't your government doing anything to help the people it hurt during the war?" She was thinking particularly about those still suffering the effects of Agent Orange, she said. For the past seven years I had been living and working half-time in Vietnam, with mostly Vietnamese colleagues; this encounter was unique, and ran counter to the easy conclusions I had heard offered by visiting Americans about the gentleness of Vietnamese women and lack of rancor towards the U.S. As a first response, I interviewed a doctor at the Hue Medical School who was researching the effects of Agent Orange on birth defects, and wrote a feature story for *Việt Nam News*, based on what he had told me and on visits we had made to families.

I was at first very hesitant to do the work, not wanting to stir up painful memories or raise false hopes. The Vietnamese doctors and social workers I met told me most people would be eager to talk longer than we had time to listen. It turned out they were right: over and again I was thanked for my visits, and often told, when I apologized for having only small gifts to share, that the recognition and attention I gave—the recognition and attention of the American people—were "precious gifts for the spirit," as a pharmacist put it. I treasured this remark for a long time. It was only later, in working through the translations of the transcripts, that another theme became clear as well: "We don't need your respect," as one man put it, "we need help."

I came to think of my early hesitation as misplaced, or even as a tool that helped keep in place the uncomfortable distances between our worlds, helped mask imbalances of power and privilege. The families were for the most part articulate, and grateful to be heard. (see Farmer 1997, Asad 1986, Ong 1995, Patai 1991, Abu-Lughod 1991.)

In the context of this conference, the interview recounted here serves to highlight ways women describe the consequences of war that linger in their post-war lives. Though I have edited the interview for coherence, I have tried to remain faithful to the musing, sometimes halting and repetitive flow of the conversation, as it reflects our tentative steps towards understanding each other.

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I met Mrs. Hồng at her home in Biên Hòa, a mushrooming, rapidly industrializing city that lies across the Dong Nai River from Saigon, or

Hồ Chí Minh City. Formerly, Bien Hoa was the site of a large French military base, which was then converted into a major American Air Force base, one of the main centers of operation for the "Ranch Hand" program[4], charged with aerial spraying of chemicals from 1962 to 1971. The base was the site of a large chemical spill that researchers are investigating as a possible source of an increased incidence of cancers, neural disorders, and birth defects in the immediate vicinity of a lake that is fed by run-off from its grounds.[5]

Mrs. Hồng's house lies off one of the busy main arteries of the city, down a path that leads between two shops, back to a row of cement-walled, sheet-metal-roofed houses. We sit on a vinyl couch and chairs placed beside a simple glass-front cabinet that doubles as the ancestral altar. A 16-stringed zither is suspended in one corner of the room, above a second altar that is placed on the floor. A small white teapot and set of cups, ornamented with a rose decal, sit on a low table that is the room's other main furnishing. As our conversation proceeds, Mrs. Hồng and I realize we are both the same age, both with first children, daughters, born the same year—similarities that link us and underscore our differences.

"You want to know about my family's situation, about our lives, about the reality—why we are still in this situation," Mrs. Hồng began. "Let me remind you that in Việt Nam, the Vietnamese people have been through so many wars—and so my family...my family's life is extremely hard. We have struggled and lived on this piece of earth that is our homeland [ ] From my own grandfathers right down to myself, we are all people who participated in...we call it... ("protecting the country" the Red Cross doctor interjects into the pause[6])...protecting the country. That is... from the generation of my father and the generation of my mother and then my older brothers and sisters, all of them, the whole family participated in protecting the country.

"The war to protect the country had some things that were good and some that were bad for me myself, and in the end I myself have some illnesses and my own family is among those handicapped and this is because of the consequences of war. For example, my father-in-law is in pain and has a weak appetite and is paralyzed, and all my younger siblings have died of diseases—all. Only I am still alive, living here.... and that's thanks to the help, and the concern, and the care of the party and the

[4] Initially known as "Operation Hades", the program's name was changed to "Ranch Hand" early on; it's radio call signal, "Cowboy", was later changed to "Hades". The Ranch Handers, whose slow, low-flying missions made them particularly vulnerable targets, were known for their bravery and bravado. The motto of the group was "Only You Can Prevent Forests"—a wry play on a US Forestry Service fire-prevention slogan.

[5] According to the briefing given by the Red Cross of the district of Bien Hoa where the lake is located, the incidence of cancer there is 49 times higher than that in the district of the city that has the least incidence of cancer. I have no way of corroborating this statement, but it certainly calls out for study.

[6] This war is often referred to as "a resistance war against the Americans to save the country". Given Mrs. Hồng's later expression of delicacy towards what she imagines may be my sensibilities as an American, one possibility is that her hesitation comes from a reluctance to offend. It also points to the difficulty of finding a common language. Such linguistic hesitations would be worth a study in themselves.

country and the people...if not I would have been gone long ago.

"In '92 there was a medical program, and after the check-up I discovered that I had internal illnesses. Well, the first disease that was discovered was my liver... our government took care of me and then complications set in with my spleen—it was inflamed, contaminated, and it turned out they cut it out." Then she developed stomach ulcers and myelitis, then troubles with her entire digestive tract, high blood pressure, and a condition that caused her feet to turn pale from time to time. She had lost the hearing in one ear due to the explosions of bombs and artillery, and her vision was now blurry. "As for my physical condition," she continued, "that's how it is. Every month I have to go to the hospital for treatment, every month, and buy medicine. That's how my health is.

"As for my economic situation... I'll explain it to you like this. In the past I worked for the government. Then our disabilities caused us to retire and live on our pension, at home. I lost my hand, but I still have to struggle to embroider, and sew, and sell a few sundries. We do whatever we can to earn a living. If we want to live, we have to take care of ourselves. Here" she says, turning to her husband, "show her what I make to sell." He brings out a basket of bright pieces of cloth. "I join these small scraps of cloth together to make into material to make a curtain, or a quilt....make decorative things. And," she continues, "I still don't have a stable place to live, we're still renting. Wherever the rent is lowest, we move to the place where it's lowest. We run from this place to that: wherever a low price shows up, then we go there to live."

When I ask how many children she has, she says "It's a lot, if you are talking about the pregnancies." But only four survived, all girls. The first was born in 1970, in the jungle, in the war zone. Her second, born in 1976, is sickly. She can only work for a time and then suffers exhaustion; each time she goes for a check-up, she has a fever. Her third child, born in 1979, has congenital heart trouble. The fourth, born in 1984, has headaches due to a nervous disorder. "When the sun is hot and bright like this," Mrs. Hồng explains, "she can't do anything at all."

"Forgive me," I say, "but how did you lose your hand? Was it the war?"

"This hand was because in 19... 1971 I went out..." Mrs. Hồng pauses. "Sorry—can I use the word "American"?—and I was shot by the Americans... yes... and was wounded. I'm a wounded soldier of Vietnam, a veteran and wounded soldier of Vietnam. I went on assignment and Americans shot; they shot, and now I've become a wounded soldier of Vietnam."

"When you were...when you were hurt like this...." I ask, "where did you find the strength to overcome?"

"In general, in life you have to have something to believe in..." she replies. "That is, I ... I still have my country, still, still have my country, still have my government, still have my homeland, my father and mother, my ancestors, my children, my comrades, my fellow soldiers—I have to push myself, struggle, overcome... that means, overcome all the disabilities, try to struggle to overcome by myself in order to create a life for myself, and I can't just depend on others, but I myself must struggle. Generally speaking, that's what the war gave—in war, I myself had to fight, and for the illnesses, I myself have to have the mental strength, thanks

to a belief, a belief in my country. I must try to overcome.... For example, I have to think for myself in order to arrange everything, so that it's good. Because I still have a family, have my children, have all my friends. I can't say 'Well, I'm this way, because of my illnesses, because of whatever situation, so I must bear it, must resign myself.' No, I'm strong of heart, steadfast. That's more or less it.

"For an ordinary person like you, with two hands, then naturally, when you lose a hand then the process is you have to practice. For example, long ago, I couldn't hold a bowl and chopsticks, but now I can lift a bowl like this and eat like everyone else. For another example, when I couldn't hold a needle, I tried to practice to be able to use something to hold it. That is [a process of] self-transformation.

"And this [Red Cross] program," I ask, "how does this program help?"

"Well... in general, if you speak of a need, then I [ ] many things," Mrs. Hồng begins, "but here I'm talking about the spirit of this program—that there must be responsibility. If the means exist to help me stabilize my life, that is, to support me so I have something for medicine, in order to secure my health, and to raise my life a little higher, so that in the society, in the community, I can be at ease—I mean, happy to live in the community."

"And so" I say, not certain whether we have already taken too much of her time, "I'd like to thank you very much for all that you... you have helped us understand and know. Is there anything else you would like to say?"

"Yes, well... there's only this much is all: We Vietnamese, to speak truthfully and frankly—sometimes it's easy to hurt feelings but it's necessary to tell the truth about how it is. The circumstances of war are like this, so now we have things happen like this. So on the one hand I struggle, and on the other hand—speaking generally about...about all the countries that cause war—they must take responsibility, they must give support and help so that our people can, after peace comes, progress with the community to reduce these illnesses and wounds and losses, to share with us. I've been speaking truthfully and frankly, and I hope you will understand... And I'm also afraid...it's easy to offend."

"I think you must speak frankly so that those who hear can have sympathy and understand," I tell her. I thank her for speaking with us, and ask if there is anything that anyone else would like to add.

The doctor from the Red Cross wants to ask about the war. "You were in the jungle, then... before, in the jungle... ?"

Mrs. Hồng answers, "Yes.. I went to fight with the resistance in the jungle... went to join the resistance when I was very young. My father also joined the resistance, and my mother also went to fight..."

"In addition to the bombs and bullets, was there anything else?" the doctor asks.

"Yes, well, there were the toxic chemicals they sprayed," she replies. "For example, in that year, in '64, the year of the first round of spraying that fell...it was like there was not one leaf left, not one leaf of a tree, every last one had fallen. That's how it was. The first day we were exposed we thought it was mist, but afterwards they made it known it was a kind of toxic substance that caused that effect.

"That was in War Zone D, it was right... I don't know what it is called now. In the past it was called Vĩnh Cửu, Đồng Nai province. Now it is reforested... the coastal forest of Đồng Nai province, but then it was still a wasteland, not like now.... It's in the northeast part of Đồng Nai. I remember that year was '64. The year '64 was the year we started to have B-52's, to have the biggest storm of them. The first year was from '63, '64,'65, when there were B-52's, masses of B-52's dropping baby bombs and big bombs and [bom đía]—all those were dumped right on that region, so many that there was not a single leaf left. The vegetation was a mess... all the leaves had fallen. And I remember that the animals no longer had any place to stay. There were some monkeys and birds that no longer had any place for shelter. The leaves of the forests were all gone.

I ask how long she had lived in that region.

"Well... I took part from 1961, when the build-up began, until the day of liberation... until 1975. I lived right there the whole time," she recalls. "I lived right there."

She had come there at age 16, with her mother and father, from their home in Long An. "A land of rice fields in Long An province," she calls it, "a land of rice fields. And because of the war I went to the capital, following the revolution, joined the revolution--at sixteen years old! Sixteen and I had already gone...The whole family...my older and younger siblings, all..."

Again I thank her, and again ask if anyone has any more questions.

This time she asks the Red Cross doctor if I need to know anything about the resistance region.

In place of an answer, he asks whether friends of hers from the war now have illnesses like those of her children.

"Well, they all went back, everyone dispersed, to who knows where," she answers, "but most of them are right here in this city. I can count on my fingers many, many people with serious illnesses like this, just like this. There are those in each office, this workplace and that workplace. But at the beginning of liberation [others?] went back...in 1975 they were already gone, everyone just dispersed to different places. How can I know which diseases they still have?"

The Red Cross doctor muses: "During the war you didn't know anything was wrong, but you've only just learned."

"Yes," she replies. "We didn't know anything at all, just thought it was mist, or fog, and then later, with experience, and with our country, with the explanations of our government, the Vietnamese government led us to understand that that was bitter poison, toxic substances carrying very poisonous chemicals that the country over in America brought to release in the war in Việt Nam—they let us know what it was so we could protect ourselves. But how could we completely protect ourselves in such rudimentary conditions—with pieces of cloth, small handkerchiefs? How could they shield, protect us? Those were poisons! But we still fought, and the more we fought, the less we knew fatigue.

"There was a friend... I'll tell you her story," and here Mrs. Hồng turns the conversation in another direction, speaking with such animation and feeling that it is difficult for me to follow. "I had a friend who was captured by the Americans

and taken up in a helicopter and brought back dead. She was captured by the Americans and taken up in a helicopter, and they took turns raping her until she died. I think about it all the time... all the time—will always remember. The pain burns in my heart. It increases my strength for the struggle, increases my strength to fight. And afterwards, I always remembered… remembered her smile, remembered the way she walked, remembered that we had slept together, fought together, lived together, shared sweets with each other. She was so full of love for life, and that young woman was also charming, charming. Her name was Hồng Sinh. She was a reporter working in Quảng Bình. They grabbed her...they grabbed her and took her up in the helicopter.

At first I did not understand all that Mrs. Hồng had said, and apologized, knowing my reactions were not commensurate to the emotion of her story. I explained that I could see she was very moved, but could not understand everything. The Red Cross doctor repeated the story in a simpler fashion, and then we sat silent for a while.

" There's a lot more...there's a lot more, and still more," Mrs. Hồng then continued. "Oh! I tell you, you will never be able to bear witness to all the pain and loss that the Vietnamese people have borne through so many wars. There is still much, much more." It is here that she tells me that we can understand each other because we are women, and that I must go back and write down what she has told me, write it into history. She talks about all the burdens Vietnamese women must shoulder, and says that she can't do it anymore—that her strength is all used up—"it has dried up and turned to ashes."

So then, she asks us, "Do you all have anything else to ask? Is there anything else?"

"Well," I reply, "there is still more—we could stay many days, many weeks, many months to talk more. But there comes a time when we must say good-by."

"All right," she says. "But though we say good-by here, I think that when you are here or when you go back to your country—on your side I think you will certainly remember us Vietnamese women. And I hope that this feeling is a... a relationship. We can sympathize with each other...I hope we will always remember and respect each other. Although you are from a far country, a country that caused us much loss—that's not a reason to lose a friendship. Do you agree? The Vietnamese have this [saying]: 'Add a friend, lose an enemy.' The time of war is passed, so now we can be friends with each other."

"I think that in America, war is a problem of the government, not the people," I respond. "I think ordinary people can have sympathy and understanding for each other and together build a different future."

"What you are saying," she interprets, "is that the policy of the American government is not the ideal of each individual who lives on American soil, that not everyone shares those ideas. They also love peace, really want there to be peace, don't want war."

"Yes," I reply. "When you were in the jungle, I was in the streets, protesting."

The Red Cross doctor mulls it over: "Ah... ah.... protesting the war..."

Mrs. Hồng turns the phrase over and over: "Down into the streets, down in the streets.

There were some who took to the streets even in America, took to the streets even, even took to the streets, even protested the war in Vietnam."

"Everywhere there are ordinary people," the doctor observes.

I explain that I was a student at the time, and that many students protested.

The doctor, who is roughly our same age, muses: "So long.... it stretched out so long—from 1954 to 1975—drawn out interminably. Even one day was dangerous enough, but how many years.... one day was hard enough to bear."[7]

We are again silent for a while. Then I repeat my thank you's, and the doctor makes a presentation on behalf of our small delegation.[8] Mrs. Hồng says she will walk me out. She takes me by the hand, by the stump of her hand, and we walk out. "Don't forget us," she says. "When you are over there, think of the Vietnamese mothers from time to time."

The next day the Red Cross staff, which during my stay there had been intensely busy both with me and with other visitors and meetings, offered to take some time to show me around. When they asked what I would like to do, I said that if they thought it would be possible, would not be a bother, I would like to return to Mrs. Hồng' s to see if she had some quilting pieces she would like to sell, some she might be able to sell without causing problems for her work.

They thought it might be possible, but first they wanted to show me a supermarket—a super-supermarket—that had recently been built near the new industrial zone on the outskirts of the city. It occupied the major portion of an enclosed mall that also featured a popcorn vending machine, an ice-cream shop, and an auto display—all in astonishing, scandalous contrast to the simple and sometimes abject and miserable homes we had been visiting over the past week. We wandered like zombies through the heaps of household goods and sterile aisles of shrink-wrapped produce: our souls were elsewhere. At the sight of two donation boxes, both for the Red Cross, our spirits revived. One was marked for general disaster relief, the other for the victims of Agent Orange. Both were about half full of small bills. The head of the provincial Red Cross explained with enthusiasm that this was a new idea. The boxes generally collected enough money to construct one house per month for the homeless, she said.

When we returned to Mrs. Hồng's, she welcomed us enthusiastically, and greeted my request for quilt pieces with good-natured laughter and puzzlement. What good could unfinished squares be? But if I wanted them, she was happy to let me have them; no, it wouldn't be any trouble. I explained that I wanted them to give to people as a way of making the stories she had told me more concrete, more tangible to those so far away. At first she insisted on giving them to me, but in the end happily accepted the money I slipped into her hand.

"With your work," I observe, "you keep people warm, and create beauty."

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[7] At the start of our visits to families in Đồng Nai this doctor had observed: "There are two things we must do that we cannot do." One was to heal the people we were visiting; the other was to heal the natural environment.

[8] When we were making preparations for our visits, I had asked how to present the small gifts I had brought. As gifts from the Red Cross, the doctor had replied without hesitation, adding: "People here would never accept gifts from an American."

"Yes," she says. "I like to create beautiful things—all women like beauty of course! Sometimes I make *áo dài*. People around here know me, and they come to place their orders. They ask for the woman with the chopped off hand." She laughs and shakes her head, her eyes twinkling.

She would like to make me a pillowcase, so that when I go to sleep "over there" I will remember my younger sister "over here." Once again she walks me out, swinging my arm and laughing. "Remember your younger sister," she reminds me. "Remember that there is a woman like this, with all these stories, and one hand lopped off in the war. But remember too that she loves people, she loves her country, and she loves life."

Conclusion

Those were literally the last words of my last interview, and made a deep impression on me. But Mrs. Hồng's story is not representative; nor is it unique. It is a fragment.

Other women told other stories. While a few women spoke with Mrs. Hồng's resolute and cheerful spirit, others spoke in tears. I heard many stories about the day-to-day tasks of caring for children, many of whom are now in their late 20's and 30's: stories of pre-chewing food for children who could only swallow with difficulty, stories of caring for toileting, feminine hygiene, and bathing needs, and of the difficulty of carrying such large children from place to place for these needs. I heard many stories, as well, about the difficulty of making enough for the family to survive when one of the main income-earners had much of her day absorbed in these tasks. I heard the stories of several women who were the sole support of their families, either because their husband was also disabled, or had died. Many women spoke of fatigue, and of fear for what would happen to their children when their own strength gave out.

Several women spoke of their attempts to make sense of what had happened to them, of their search for meaning through visits to fortunetellers, geomancers, physiognamists, and mediums. One woman, a fellow villager told me, had become a medium herself. Another woman spoke of her belief in science, only in science; the same woman spoke of being directed by a dream to go to the mountains to find a traditional herbalist who would give her medicine to cure her husband, after western medicine had given up on the chances of his recovery. She went, found the medicine, and he recovered.

I was told how generous the neighbors were; I was told of problems. One woman told me she would come home from the fields to find someone had left a bag of rice or some clothes, or a few scraps of plastic she could piece together to make a protective sheet for the bed on which her 17 year-old daughter lay day and night; the same woman also said it was impossible for her to raise pigs or chickens, because they would be stolen while she was in the fields. I was told about neighbor children who would come on festival days to take two boys who could no longer walk out for a ride in a cart; I was also told about neighbor children who would taunt a blind and epileptic girl if she dared go out in her own courtyard.

I met a woman whose husband, after her fourth stillbirth, blamed himself and the effects of war and urged her to leave him to make a better life for herself; she refused, and later bore him two disabled sons, now in their late 20's. I met a former soldier on the Hồ Chí Minh Trail

who had had two miscarriages, two children who died in infancy, and then three severely retarded children; she called herself lucky to have been able to marry at all. Another woman, who developed painful complications when she went to be sterilized after bearing a monstrously deformed fetus, a retarded boy, and an epileptic girl, said it was all for her husband, all for her children, so she tried to overcome the difficulties. "Such a hard situation," she said, "but I still have to look after my husband, after my children. I know that my life is deeply entwined with his. I link my whole life with my husband and with my children, to 'carry the rivers and the mountains' to my last breath, and only because of war."[9]

There were long silences, and torrents of words. I remember thoughtful reflections, quiet fortitude, protests against an unjust fate, and angry outbursts against "the former American government." The word "responsibility" came up often, as did the word "exhausted": many women spoke of how exhausted they were after 20 to 30 years of caring for disabled children and husbands who had lost their health in the war. They hoped someone else would now also shoulder some of the responsibility for the consequences of the war. Another word that came up often was *động viên*, translated in dictionaries as "motivate, mobilize, involve, enlist the efforts". As it was used in the conversations I had it seemed to also bear some connotations of "encourage" or "offer spiritual support". I was often told how various groups—the Red Cross, the Women's Union, the Veterans' Association, the Party—would come to "*động viên*" the families, sometimes bringing small gifts, but often, especially in the destitute years following the war, bringing information about new techniques and programs to help the family raise its production, or simply offering moral support and letting them know they had not been forgotten.[10]

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Not forgotten. Conveyed, told, related. Put into the pages, as Mrs. Hồng put it, "of the history of our country, of our generation, of the world." These scraps of Mrs. Hồng 's story, which I have quilted together here into a narrative, are fragments of yet another larger narrative as well: fragments of the collective human trauma, the collective human memory of war and its disastrous consequences that persist for generations, in all parts of the globe. Mrs. Hồng's stories serve not as a conclusion, then, but an introduction. To quote her again: "You will never be able to bear witness to all the pain and loss that the Vietnamese people have borne

[9] Such stories do not fit easily into the narratives of western feminists. For an introduction to some of the points of difference, see the introductory chapters of Karen Turner's and Phan Thanh Hảo's, *Even the Women Must Fight*.

[10] When I remarked that this network of agencies seemed to let no one in need remain unnoticed, Dr Lê Cao Đài, then head of the Red Cross' Agent Orange Victims Fund, thanked me. "This is something few Americans understand, even now," he said, explaining: "That is one of the ways Vietnamese society is profoundly different from Western society. Through Buddhism we learn to take care of each other, to care about our neighbors." That combination of care and organization is how Vietnam won the war, he suggested; it was a suggestion I heard more than once. I came to think of it as "Zen Communism". My editor at *Việt Nam News* was surprised I found the combination remarkable: "There is no contradiction," he assured me.

through so many wars." The Vietnamese people, the Cambodians, the Lao, the Congolese, the Algerians, the Irish, the Jews, the Palestinians, the Bosnians, the Serbs, the Colombians, the Afghans, the Iraqis: even this very short, very incomplete list is far too long.

Bearing witness is one part of the work of breaking silence, of tearing down what Pablo Richard calls the wall between rich and poor, a wall that obliges the poor "to die in the silence of history"[11] Another part of the work is to recognize that human agency, a human decision-making process, initiated the use of chemicals in Vietnam, and to call for human responsibility for the consequences of that process. Despite ambiguity and all that is yet unknown and may never be known, there is also much that is known. Acknowledging and taking responsibility for the past may help dispel the ghosts of Vietnam more effectively, and in a manner less devastating and costly of life and materiel, than the ever-escalating deployment of ever-deadlier force in ever-multiplying parts of the world.

[11] Cited in Farmer 1997, p. 280. "Can the subaltern speak?" post-colonial critic Gayatri Spivak 1988 queries in a widely-quoted article by the same name. More specifically, can the subaltern *woman* speak while she is enmeshed as Object in discourses of tradition and development, Spivak goes on to ask. "The subaltern is always speaking," Indonesian scholar Laurie Sears replies in *Shadows of Empire*. "The problem for post-colonial intellectuals—whether they have inherited the subject position of the colonizer or the colonized—is how to listen when the subaltern speaks." Another problem for intellectuals is how to make those voices be heard and be taken seriously into account by those in distant places who have the power to affect their lives for generations.

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The Ho Chi Minh road in A Luoi district

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