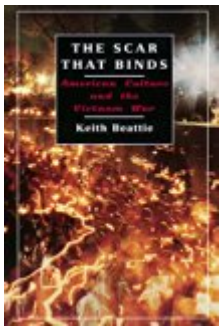
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences




**Keith Beattie.** *The Scar That Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War.* New York: New York University Press, 1998. ix + 230 pp. $40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-1326-6.

**Reviewed by** Mark Bradley

**Published on** H-Pol (January, 1999)

Keith Beattie's *The Scar That Binds* explores the contours of collective memory and contemporary American cultural politics in the wake of the Vietnam war. Combining a close reading of an unusually wide scope of primary texts with the rigorous and effective use of cultural theory, Beattie argues the postwar period gave rise to a homogenizing discourse of national unity that worked to make invisible the racial, class, and gendered divides that characterized the American experience in Vietnam. "[T]he reworking of American identity within the history of the operation of ideological strategies of unity," Beattie contends, "is the devastating outcome of American involvement in the Vietnam War." Devastating, he suggests, because the ahistorical unity that emerged in literary and mass media portrayals of the war and in the conservative and nostalgic rhetoric of the Reagan era "denied the painful divisions and differences exposed by the war" in ways that continue to frame and distort public discourse (pp. 156, 154). While Beattie's powerful assessment of the politics of remembering and forgetting the war in Vietnam easily transcends and surpasses most of the existing works on the meanings Americans ascribe to the Vietnam experience, his central assertion that the ideology of national unity fully shapes American memories of the war is not ultimately a fully persuasive one.

Examining popular films, television programs, written and oral histories, literature, journalism, and political orations on Vietnam between 1969 and 1989, Beattie organizes his work around three overarching metaphors--the wound, the voice and the home--to examine the processes by which a homogenizing national unity came to shape American memories of Vietnam and served to blunt and erase the historical divisions and differences the war produced in American society. The image of Vietnam as a wound, he suggests, is perhaps the most prevalent of the three metaphors, whether expressed in the paraplegia or impotence of returning veterans in many war films and novels or in the "stab in the back" thesis that blames various domestic groups for the military's inability to achieve victory. But rather than prompting a critical interrogation of American aims and policies in Vietnam, he argues, the dominant cultural and political idioms reacted with a

historical amnesia that aimed to heal the national wounds of war by asserting the essential innocence and nobility of American actions in Vietnam.

Beattie uses the metaphors of voice and home to more carefully unpack these claims. He suggests that early portrayals of the veteran often rendered him as "an inarticulate psychopath incapable of effective communication, and hence functionally 'silent'" (p. 7). Over time, however, he suggests the veteran became a valorized role model whose personal experiences made him the only authentic spokesperson for the real meaning of the war. But, Beattie suggests, the truths he could speak in most dominant cultural texts remained severely circumscribed and designed to advance the agenda of a healing national unity. Finally, he discusses the transformations of the notion of home, from the efforts of antiwar protesters to bring the war, with all its domestic divisions, "home" to the idea of a consensual and convivial home during the 1980s in which the therapeutic family healed, or for Beattie were made to erase, the individual pain and societal divisiveness of the war.

Along with his analysis of the cultural forces shaping American memories of Vietnam, another particular strength of Beattie's work is his discussion of often neglected contrapuntal works that challenge these dominant interpretations. One such work is *Ashes and Embers*, a little known 1982 film which explores the deteriorating psyche of a black veteran as a result of racial and economic conditions at home and which calls for political action rather than cultural conformity as form of resolution for veteran's problems with postwar readjustment. Another is David Rabe's play *Sticks and Bones* which explores the relationship between a returning veteran and his family in particularly complex ways. If historians are to more fully understand the difficult emotional history of the war, these and other non-canonical works Beattie examines deserve far greater attention, as do the works by Vietnamese novelists and film makers he briefly mentions that seek to challenge the Vietnamese state's own heroic constructions of the war.

But while Beattie usefully recovers these fascinating cultural texts on the war and their significance for understanding its discordant meanings, his focus on texts and the cultural politics of national healing tends to obscure how individuals, families and local communities have mediated the American experience in Vietnam. A key question which Beattie leaves largely unexplored is the degree to which the hegemonic unity he detects at the national level affects the lived experience of local memory. The relationship may be more ambiguous than Beattie is willing to admit. For instance, he points to the common practice of many visitors to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. of touching the engraved names on the wall, making rubbings of them, or leaving mementos at its base. Central to his consideration of these practices are their appropriation by the media as a symbol of healing. "The intervention of the media transforms the personal into the national," he argues, conflating the personal "with the nation's apparent desire to be healed" and the pervasive power of the Reagan era political rhetoric of the wall "as a symbol of national rejuvenation and vigor" (pp. 46, 45). Yet Beattie's approach renders opaque the meanings of what he admits were initially personal acts. How do the tens of thousands of visitors who engage in the ritualized practices he describes view the meaning of their own actions and the significance of the Wall, particularly those whose family ties or other associative bonds may have meant they experienced the sorrows of the war directly?

Recent scholarship on European memory and war, which is often more theoretically sophisticated and broadly conceived than work on American war memory, suggests the efficacy of an approach more attuned to the local. Adrian Gregory's recent *The Silence of Memory*, which explores the mean-

ings given to the two minutes of silence that became a part of the state memorializing practices in Great Britain in the wake of World War One, persuasively documents how the silence was used by veterans, families of soldiers killed in battle, and other social groups in ways that either reversed or remained apart from the official national and patriotic meanings the state ascribed to the silence.[1]

A variety of cultural sites from the post-Vietnam era that might reveal the more private and local textures of memory await the careful examination of scholars. The recent controversy over exhuming the remains of the Vietnam era unknown soldier at Arlington National Cemetery for DNA testing is one such case. Here the two families whose sons' remains might have been buried at Arlington initially viewed the prospect of identifying the body in differing ways. One embraced the DNA tests while the other initially refused, believing the identification of their son's remains was less important than maintaining the sanctity and symbolism of the tomb itself. They later acceded to the other family's wishes. Other local sites of remembrance and meaning also demand attention from cultural historians, including the prevalence of pow wows on Veteran's Day that honor Native-American veterans of the war and the planning and erection of local memorials to the war throughout the country that have often brought together politicians, historians, veterans, and their families in simultaneously divisive and harmonious dialogue. Without a fuller appreciation of the local, it remains difficult to assess how deep the totalizing aspirations of unity Beattie describes have permeated into American society or the contours of memory that shape contemporary perceptions of the war in Vietnam.

The simultaneous impeachment proceedings against President Clinton in the House of Representatives and the President's decision to launch Operation Desert Fox against Iraq several weeks ago, which framed my reading of *The Scar That Binds*, usefully reveal both the potentialities and limitations in Beattie's imaginatively conceived and theoretically sophisticated work. Significantly, the disturbing consequences he attributes to official discourse on Vietnam were powerfully reinforced by recent reaction to Operation Desert Fox. The virtual unanimity of public support, the sharply voiced, and largely accepted, remonstrances to those who publicly criticized the President's decision and the absence of any sustained discussion of the rationale or human toll of American policy clearly illustrate the hegemonic power of a post-Vietnam ideology of national unity and its perversion of informed public debate. But public reaction to impeachment suggests many of the societal fissures produced by the Vietnam war remain impervious to the willed erasures of would-be hegemonic elites. In this case, the vote for impeachment in part became a symbolic means for Republicans to reassert a conservative vision of moral unity by purging the nation of the immoralities and divisions of the Vietnam era they associated with President Clinton. And yet public opinion--persistently, resolutely, and overwhelming--opposed the action of the House. Here, belying Beattie's contentions, the totalizing aspirations of hegemonic unity appear to remain frustrated. Not only do the contested processes of remembering, and forgetting, the American experience in Vietnam continue, but one can hope that an understanding of the multiplicity of local memories will continue to move us toward both a deeper analysis of the sorrows of the war and a contemporary public discourse that acknowledges their profound implications for the future.

Notes:

[1]. Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919-1946*. Oxford: Berg, 1994. See also Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

This review was commissioned for H-Pol by Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol

**Citation:** Mark Bradley. Review of Beattie, Keith. *The Scar That Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War.* H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.

**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2623