


RESEARCH ARTICLE

The lived body, everyday and generative powers of war: toward an embodied ontology of war as experience

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(Received 8 August 2019; revised 14 February 2021; accepted 12 May 2021; first published online 7 June 2021)

Abstract

This paper examines the emergence of the corporeal turn in International Relations (IR) research on war. It argues that a lack of a sustained ontological investigation leaves open two theoretical gaps, which impedes the development of an embodied theory of war: (1) the core concept of a body and its linkages with war are underdeveloped, and (2) existing research on the embodiment of war slips into discursivism or empiricism. The paper invites the corporeal turn scholarship to bring ontology to the forefront of IR war research and to expand a pool of theoretical resources for analyzing the corporeality of war by turning to existential phenomenology. With the phenomenological concept of the lived body placed at the heart of war ontology, war is conceived as a complex social institution with the generative powers born out of the capacity of the violent politics of injury to disrupt the lived bodies' sense-making and agential capacities, on the one hand, and the potential of individuals and communities to reclaim their interpretive integrity and agency through embodied everyday practices, on the other.

Keywords: Everyday; existential phenomenology; lived body; ontology; war

Introduction

The powerful presence of war in political modernity has inspired a rich tradition of thought stretching across multiple disciplines, from International Relations (IR) and political thought to sociology, history, anthropology, geography, and ethnography.¹ Although accommodating research on the ethical, political, strategic, experiential, and ontogenetic aspects of war, none of these disciplines has accorded pivotal status to war as the principal object of study. A notable lack of a disciplinary home of its own has subjected the study of war to the vicissitudes of disciplinary trends, often excluding or marginalizing alternative theoretical perspectives, downgrading war to ancillary status, and leaving it under-theorized at the most basic

¹For an overview see Bartelson 2018.

level of ontology.² For instance, in sociology, widespread belief in the increasing irrelevance of war within a pacifist liberal order has turned war into a relatively neglected topic.³ Ostensibly, IR has acted as a more gracious host, recognizing the importance of war to the successive international orders and state-centric ontology of international politics.⁴ Nonetheless, under the prevalent influence of realism, IR has traditionally adopted security as its conceptual center of gravity, treating war as a complementary concept and relegating its examination to the subfield of military-strategic studies (MSS).⁵ Strongly rationalist and materialist in its approach, MSS has scrutinized war in utilitarian terms, situating it within a single dimension of power politics and focusing excessively on the system-level drivers of war. With an explicit nod to Clausewitz, MSS scholarship has underscored fighting as a pivotal military act writ large and treated war narrowly as the instrument of state politics. Disproportionate emphasis on the ongoing rationality and submission of war to the political ends of sovereignty has inadvertently framed war as a phenomenon without a distinct meaning of its own.⁶

This orthodox account of war has come under sustained scrutiny in emergent critical war studies (CWS).⁷ Convinced that an ontological inquiry should be at the forefront of a theoretical discussion, CWS scholars, in a move strikingly similar to MSS, have placed fighting at the core of their ontology of war.⁸ Importantly, they have offered a critical departure from the MSS account of fighting by reading Clausewitz with a Foucauldian bend, that is, through the lens of excess, or the generative powers, and ‘the order of knowing and being war creates’.⁹ On this reading, war has emerged as a productive force that structures modern societies through the changing orders of power/knowledge and a grid of intelligibility against which all power relations should be analyzed.

Although MSS and CWS have offered alternative theoretical accounts of war, their common ontological emphasis on fighting has generated and sustained a deceptively misleading image of war as virtuous and disembodied.¹⁰ Yet, as Elaine Scarry has observed, war is ‘the most radically embodying event in which human beings ever collectively participate’.¹¹ Although anthropology, geography, ethnography, literary studies, and sociology have produced a body of scholarship on the lived experiences of war,¹² IR has largely remained silent on the issue. Recently, however, a growing cohort of scholars in feminist security studies (FSS) has challenged the invisibility of the bodies in the study of war, working strenuously to recalibrate analytical attention to people’s experiences as essential to

²Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 127.

³See McSorley 2013, 2014; Joas 2003; Tiryakian 1999.

⁴See Gilpin 1981; Mearsheimer 2003.

⁵Many important debates in IR have traditionally evolved around the concept of security. For an overview see Buzan and Hansen 2009.

⁶Reid 2006b, 277.

⁷See Dillon and Reid 2001; Reid 2003, 2006a; Hardt and Negri 2004; Bousquet 2009; Barkawi and Brighton 2011; Nordin and Öberg 2015.

⁸Not all CWS scholars subscribe to an ontology of war as fighting. For instance, Nordin and Öberg (2015, 392) develop an ontology of war as reiterative processing. Still, their overview of the recent CWS debates confirms a ‘surprising level of agreement’ on an ontology of war as fighting in the military-strategic thought and critical war studies.

⁹Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 135.

¹⁰Der Derian 2009.

¹¹Scarry 1985, 71.

¹²See Gregory 2018, 2015; Wool 2015; Hockey 2013; MacLeish 2013; Scarry 1985; McSorley 2013, 2014, 2020.

understanding war.¹³ Albeit sporadic and still in its ‘infancy’,¹⁴ this scholarship has marked an important shift away from apprehending war exclusively in terms of fighting. Inspired by the FSS research on the experiential nature of war, Sylvester has proposed the inauguration of feminist IR war studies, signaling the advent of the corporeal turn in IR war research that focuses centrally on the incarnate nature of war experienced in and through the body.¹⁵

In what follows, I argue that although the nascent corporeal turn in IR research on war has produced some critical insights, a sustained ontological investigation of war as embodied experience has been lacking. This creates two interrelated theoretical gaps in an otherwise commendable endeavor to apprehend war in terms of distinctly corporeal experiences. First, the core concept of a body and its linkages with the generative powers of war has received little systematic attention. Second, discussions of the corporeality of war have strayed toward discursivism or empiricism, neither of which allows us to treat *embodied* experiences as the ontological pivot of war. Discursivism foregrounds the workings of disembodied discourse, rather than a body, in shaping the generative powers and meaning of war. Meanwhile, empiricism casts doubt on the very possibility of an ontology of war, embodied or otherwise, by presenting war as too historically specific and changeable, that is, war has no essence of its own and no ontology to unearth. I argue that for the corporeal turn to deliver its full potential, the ontological questions about the embodied nature of war must be addressed. Indeed, Sylvester acknowledges the need for a careful ontological examination of war, noting that the linkages between the embodied ways, means, and subjects of war ‘*must be theorized rather than assumed*’.¹⁶

This paper supports the corporeal turn scholarship in IR and seeks to contribute to the development of an embodied theory of war by focusing on the heretofore neglected ontological dimension of the corporeality of war. More specifically, it expands a pool of theoretical resources for analyzing war, addresses the aforementioned theoretical problems, and maps an ontology of war anchored directly in embodied experiences. With Robert Cox, it maintains that ‘[o]ntology lies at the beginning of any inquiry’.¹⁷ Therefore, taking the task of theorizing embodied experiences of war seriously means that we must treat the core concept of a body as the ontological starting point for understanding the relationship between corporeal experiences and war. To do so, we need a theoretical perspective that would allow us to retain the ontological centrality of a body in theorizing war without slipping into discursivism or empiricism. This paper suggests that the existential phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty offers such a perspective.¹⁸

¹³See Sylvester 2011, 2013, 2015; Parashar 2013, 2014; Cohn 2013; Sjoberg 2013; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013; Sjoberg and Via 2010; Alison 2009; Enloe 2010.

¹⁴Sylvester 2013, 60.

¹⁵Sylvester 2011, 2013, 2015; see also Parashar 2013, 2014.

¹⁶Sylvester 2013, 3 (emphasis added); see also Parashar 2014.

¹⁷Cox 1996, 144.

¹⁸The proposed theoretical grounding is not a mere exercise in abstract speculations. Analytically, this article fills the gaps created by inadequate attention to matters of ontology in the existing IR research on war as experience. More importantly, it reminds the readers that ontology and politics are closely interrelated as different ontologies generate and sustain distinct ethical and political inclusions and exclusions. Therefore, the ontological questions of war command scholarly attention because they are directly implicated in the creation of distinct socio-political realities (see Wight 2006, 2).

As a philosophy of experience that conceives of a body as incarnate consciousness, existential phenomenology directs analytical attention to embodied experiences. It underscores the critical importance of the lived body, or 'our being-in-the-world' (*être au monde*), in disclosing the meaning and shaping socially generative powers of war. A phenomenological perspective emphasizes the centrality of the violent politics of bodily injury to sustaining the transformative force of war by revealing the potential of war to upend the individual and collective lived bodies. Viewed through the lens of existential phenomenology, war emerges as a complex social institution with the enormous power to transform essential elements of socio-political life by disrupting, through the violent politics of injury, the sense-making and agential capacities of the lived bodies, generating the loss of meanings, and disrupting pre-war social identities and roles. As we shall see, through embodied everyday practices, individuals and communities can counter the alienating effects of the politics of war injury and reclaim their interpretive integrity and agency. Thus, the generative force of war is born out of the dialectical relationship between the power of the politics of injury to disrupt individual and collective being-in-the-world and the potential of embodied everyday practices to undo pernicious effects of the politics of war injury, restoring to the lived bodies their sense-making capacities, personhood, and agency.

The argument is developed through a series of steps. The first section demonstrates the strong influences of FSS and CWS on the emergent corporeal turn in IR research on war and a lack of an ontological inquiry into war as experience. The second section highlights two theoretical gaps in the current corporeal turn scholarship in IR that must be closed to develop a stronger theoretical foundation for analyzing embodied experiences of war. The third section highlights the potential of a phenomenological perspective to give greater analytical clout to the corporeality of war. The final section introduces existential phenomenology and maps an ontology of war grounded in the phenomenological notion of the lived body.

The corporeal turn in IR war research: theoretical influences of CWS and FSS

The corporeal turn in IR research on war challenges an entrenched ontology of war as fighting by according analytical primacy to bodily experiences of war. Although an important and innovative contribution, so far it has paid insufficient attention to the ontological questions of war as embodied experience. This section demonstrates that the corporeal turn in IR is closely conversant with CWS and FSS. The theoretical influences emanating from these two subfields sustain antithetical ontological commitments, give precedence to epistemological and methodological matters of experience over those of ontology, encourage inclusive pluralism in conceptualizing a body, and steer the corporeal turn strongly toward a poststructuralist perspective. These tendencies divert analytical attention from a sustained ontological inquiry into the corporeality of war, thus hindering the development of a coherent theory of war grounded in embodied experiences.

Among many points of reference in the study of war across different disciplines, the corporeal turn in IR maintains a close dialog with CWS and FSS, sharing some of the core aspects of its perspective on war with these subfields. With CWS, the

corporeal turn adopts the Foucauldian analytics whereby war is apprehended as the productive principle that shapes the political organization of modern societies through the changing orders of power/knowledge. The presence of war in the whole complex of social relations underscores its ontological significance for politics and society.¹⁹ For example, Sylvester conceives of war as a transhistorical and transcultural social institution that functions as a regime of truth activated and sustained by a series of discursive practices, including 'heroic myths and stories about battles for freedom and tragic losses; memories of war passed from generation to generation; [...] the production of war-accepting or -glorifying masculinities; [...] and aspects of global popular culture – films, video games, TV shows, advertisements, pop songs, and fashion design – that tacitly support activities of violence politics by mimicking or modeling their elements in everyday circumstances'.²⁰ Falling back on one of the key CWS arguments that war contains, through fighting, inherent potential for social differentiation, Sylvester maintains that war destabilizes pre-war meanings, reshapes social relations, and sharpens social divisions between friends and foes.²¹ On this account, socially generative powers of war are intricately connected to prevalent discourse and a wider regime of authoritative truth it sustains.

Contra CWS, however, and in line with the FSS focus on gender-specific impacts of war on ordinary people,²² the corporeal turn breaks unapologetically with a disembodied ontology of war as fighting and seeks to underscore the centrality of bodily violence in the political contestation and physical execution of war. Thus, Sylvester openly contests a bodiless ontology of war by repopulating abstract macro-categories, that is, the state, the international, the political, and so on, with the embodied subjects who, through their diverse experiences from everyday locations in homes, streets, villages, and battlefields, challenge state-centric discourses and practices of war in a variety of ways.²³ Cognizant that different ontologies generate distinct ethical and political exclusions, she purposely seeks to unearth that which has been ignored in an entrenched ontology of war as fighting, that is, physical, emotional, and social experiences. Without dismissing the importance of fighting in war, Sylvester cautions against its instrumental understanding as the means to sovereign ends. Instead, she proposes to apprehend fighting as the crux of the broader 'politics of injury'.²⁴ On this account, war is a complex experiential process in which bodily injury epitomizes its very essence, objectives, and technologies.²⁵ If we are to understand war's socially generative force, we must turn to embodied experiences of war.

It is worth noting that the actual ontological investigations of the corporeality of war within FSS have been rather limited. Analytically, although agreeing that the meaning and causes of war are complex and changing, FSS war scholars have

¹⁹See Dillon and Reid 2001; Reid 2003, 2006a; Barkawi and Brighton 2011.

²⁰Sylvester 2013, 4.

²¹Ibid., 50.

²²The FSS research agenda on war includes, but is not limited to, gendered violence in war, disproportionate effects of war-time violence on women, women's agency in executing political violence, and the centrality of gendered constructions in justifying and explaining wars. See Wilcox 2015; Parashar 2013, 2014; Cohn 2013; Sjöberg 2013, 2016; Managhan 2012; Skjelsbæk 2011; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013; Sjöberg and Via 2010; Alison 2009; Hutchings 2008; Enloe 2010, 2014.

²³Sylvester 2013, 2015; see also Parashar 2014.

²⁴Sylvester 2013, 3; see also Parashar 2014.

²⁵Ibid., 4, 66–67.

employed gender – variously understood as a variable/stable descriptor of identity or logic that sustains unequal power relations – as the principal category for apprehending war. Epistemologically, much of FSS war scholarship has embraced the concept of experience, which suggests the possibility of direct access to the everyday lives of ordinary people by enabling the marginalized war subjects to speak and be heard in their voices. Inevitably, privileging an epistemology of experience has led to a preference for individual-oriented interpretive methodologies, such as interviews, storytelling, and the like.²⁶

Foregrounding the analytical category of gender and epistemology of experience has enabled FSS war scholars to unearth the myriad war experiences but with a little nuanced discussion of what war is or what the ontological implications of adopting a particular conception of a body for theorizing war are. That is, giving precedence to matters of epistemology and methodology over those of ontology has inadvertently sidelined a systematic ontological examination of that which is experienced and gendered, that is, war. The majority of FSS war scholars note that modern wars exhibit complex dynamics which transgresses spatial, agential, and gender boundaries set by an ontology of war as fighting. They demonstrate that war and gender are locked in a mutually constitutive relationship so that ‘gendering is a key cause of war, as well as a key impact’.²⁷ War is defined liberally to include ‘armed insurgencies, communal riots and genocide, terrorism and militant resistance, and any other organised people’s movements that rely on political violence, among other methods, to achieve their political objectives’.²⁸ What emerges from FSS is a broad vision of war as an essentially masculine terrain and a manifestation of omnipresent militarism sustained by the universal, albeit always culturally and historically specific, logic of gender.

Equally important, an endeavor to theorize war as embodied experience calls for a careful investigation of a body and its linkages with war. However, when it comes to conceptualizing a body, FSS scholarship on war shares a broader FSS commitment to inclusive pluralism, effectively embracing a wide range of often incompatible notions of a body. Thus, FSS scholars studying war experiences from a standpoint perspective emphasize the invisibility of women in war, calling for a detailed empirical examination of women’s everyday war experiences and gender-specific threats they face.²⁹ This perspective conceptualizes the bodies as sensing material entities that affect and are affected by war. However, by equating the bodies with ‘women’ a standpoint perspective slips into gender essentialism that reproduces double reification of (1) women as a homogenous collective subject whose war experiences are qualitatively different from those of men; and (2) the links between femininity, women, and peace. It misleadingly posits the existence of distinct *women’s* war experiences, obscuring a full range of such experiences beyond the boundaries of normative femininity, including women’s active participation in militant activities as perpetrators of war-time violence. A standpoint perspective also disregards the fact that the subjects of war and their experiences are always already gendered.³⁰

To correct the problems of essentialism and reification, some FSS war scholars have adopted intersectionality. Intersectional analysis has enabled feminist

²⁶see Skjelsbæk 2011; Alison 2009; for an overview of FSS see Buzan and Hansen 2009, 209.

²⁷Sjoberg 2013, 6.

²⁸Parashar 2014, 5.

²⁹See Enloe 2010, 2014.

³⁰See Sjoberg 2016.

researchers to account for war experiences informed not only by gender but also race, class, ethnicity, religion, age, and so on.³¹ Acknowledging simultaneous effects of multiple identity markers on the corporeal experiences of war has opened up a broad range of war subjects and experiences. However, it has also raised the question of how to theorize infinitely diverse war experiences. To resolve this issue, FSS war scholarship must either ‘curtail the admission of all “women’s experiences” or accept, as other fields have done, that there is a need to judge and select, even within the feminist perspective’.³² The task of judging and selecting requires a scrupulous examination of a body and its linkages with war. Reluctance to do so, along with the ongoing commitment to inclusive pluralism, sets FSS war scholarship on the path of empiricism, effectively forestalling the development of a systematic embodied theory of war.

More recently, a growing number of FSS scholars have embraced an explicitly poststructuralist perspective, focusing on the fundamental structures and practices that (re)produce gendered subjects in and through war.³³ Importantly, feminist poststructuralism conceives of a body as the amalgam of social norms, thus shifting the analytical lens from bodily materiality to symbolicity. Accordingly, a body amounts to nothing more than the ontological side effects of discursive practices: it has no existence prior to, or outside of, discourse and a regulatory regime of truth it sustains. That is to say, the poststructuralist conception of a body as discursive and performative rejects the ontological primacy of a sensing physical body, making the material bodies and corporeal experiences second-order at best.

Attempts of the corporeal turn scholars to maintain dialog with CWS and FSS are laudable. However, as we shall see, antithetical ontological commitments of CWS (to fighting) and FSS (to embodied experiences), FSS privileging of epistemology and methodology of experience over the ontological question of what war is, inclusive pluralist approach to war bodies, and a strong tendency toward post-structuralism leave open two interrelated theoretical gaps in IR research on the corporeality of war. If the corporeal turn is to live up to its analytical potential, these gaps must be closed.

Theoretical gaps in the nascent corporeal turn

In the absence of a careful ontological inquiry, the nascent corporeal turn in IR war research faces two unresolved theoretical problems: (1) the core concept of a body and its linkages with war are underdeveloped, and (2) existing investigations of the corporeal experiences of war stray into discursivism or empiricism negating the very possibility of an ontology of war centered on *embodied* experiences. Consider the following.

In her examination of the experiential nature of war, Sylvester conceives of a body as ‘the essential unit, subject, and level of war analysis’³⁴ treating it as the principal ontological referent in her theory of war. Cognizant of a lack of consensus in feminist circles regarding a body, Sylvester acknowledges that it is a contested entity shaped by social experiences.³⁵ Her ensuing discussion of a body is impressively

³¹ Alison 2009; Sjoberg and Via 2010; Cohn 2013.

³³ Wilcox 2015; Parashar 2014; Managhan 2012; Hutchings 2008.

³⁵ Ibid., 5–6, 66–79.

³² Grant 1992, 95.

³⁴ Sylvester 2013, 5.

extensive in its coverage. Sylvester offers a comprehensive survey of various conceptualizations of a body as 'a biopolitical fact', 'a material', 'symbolic', or 'performative' entity, an 'externally manipulated actor', 'an imagined presence in war', a 'cyborg[...]', 'vampire[...]', 'zomb[y]', or 'robot[...]'.³⁶ Amid a plethora of diverse conceptualizations, Sylvester provides, without any further elaboration, her definition of a body 'as a material and discrete entity [that] emerges from the great stable of intriguing possibilities of its nature and existence' and 'a unit that has agency to target and injure others in war and is also a target of war's capabilities'.³⁷ But, what exactly are these 'intriguing possibilities'? What causal powers and processes condition the emergence of a body 'out of the possibilities of its nature and existence'? How is a material body linked to the social institution of war and its generative powers? Under which conditions do war bodies exercise agency to target and injure others? Sylvester does not address any of these questions.

Furthermore, Sylvester admits that a physically sexed, material body is problematic in poststructuralist analysis because this perspective is geared toward 'post-body-bound-identities'.³⁸ Despite this acknowledgment, she embeds her notion of a body 'as a material and discrete entity [with agency]' into the poststructuralist conception of war as an institution that generates and sustains, through authoritative discourse, the regulatory regime of truth.³⁹ The problem with writing an agentic material body into the poststructuralist conception of war is that once we accept that the regime of truth imposes discursively generated ideal-typical gender roles on the bodies in war, we also ought to accept that bodily materiality is fundamentally inscribed in discourse, making war bodies essentially performative, that is, the products of dominant discourses that come into existence only through discursive enactments.⁴⁰

Herein lies a problem because performativity is 'not enough in the [material] body'.⁴¹ A poststructuralist perspective, as mentioned earlier, situates the performative bodies within discursive practices and structures. It reduces the complexity of embodied war experiences to discourse, subsuming human agency under discursive practices that sustain and are sustained by the social institution of war. If a body in war is performative, how can it be a 'unit that has *agency* to target and injure others'?⁴² If discursive structures and practices determine the generative force of war, how can embodied experiences be the principal ontological referent in a fundamentally structuralist theory of war? Sylvester offers no answers, noting instead that 'questions outnumber answers about body forms, origins, proclivities, representations, and capabilities. In studying war as experiences of physical and other types, therefore, the body looms as a rich and promising area for additional empirical and philosophical exploration'.⁴³

Sylvester's work demonstrates the difficulties of integrating an agentic physical body into the poststructuralist analysis of war not only in FSS, but also in CWS.

³⁶Ibid., 5, 66.

³⁷Ibid., 5.

³⁸Sylvester 2013, 77, emphasis added.

³⁹Ibid., 74.

⁴⁰A similar tension between embodied experiences of war witnesses, on the one hand, and a poststructuralist preoccupation with authoritative representations of war and war memory, on the other, marks Sylvester's more recent work on the war memorials and museum exhibits. Although seeking to foreground the embodied and injurious nature of war, Sylvester's focus is ultimately on discourse and who can authoritatively represent war and shape war memory. See Sylvester 2019.

⁴¹Ringmar 2019, 14.

⁴²Sylvester 2013, 5, emphasis added.

⁴³Ibid., 79.

Barkawi and Brighton, for instance, find themselves in a similar predicament. To fully capture the generative powers of fighting, they recognize the importance of war experiences. Thus, they cite Levinas' insightful remark that violence in war 'does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as in *interrupting their continuity*, making them play roles in which they can no longer recognize themselves'.⁴⁴ At the same time, Barkawi and Brighton develop an explicitly post-structuralist understanding of war, presenting it as an unmaker and remaker of truth, that is, a generative force that imposes, through discourse, the order of knowing and being. The War/Truth junction posits that our knowledge of war can never be divorced from the regime of truth that authoritatively reshapes public rationality and institutions of the post-war orders. On this view, a socio-political order is derivative from dominant discourse and knowledge of war, which exist independently from the embodied subjects and their war experiences. By emphasizing the constitutive powers of discourse, Barkawi and Brighton effectively erase the agentic-embodied subjects. These subjects appear secondary and epiphenomenal. They are, to borrow from Ringmar, 'bleak, two-dimensional characters determined entirely by forces beyond their control; they are puppets on structuralist strings, formed by language, by power and by language-as-power'.⁴⁵

Barkawi and Brighton's structuralism is strikingly at odds with their reference to Levinas, whose perspective on war is genuinely phenomenological. In *Totality and Infinity* – the first major book in which he develops the ethics of responsibility grounded in the phenomenological analysis of subjectivity and exteriority – Levinas explains that peace, in the conventional understanding of the secession of fighting, 'does not restore to the alienated beings their lost identity. For that a primordial and original relation with being is needed'.⁴⁶ As I explain later, Levinas' observation suggests that the generative potential of war is much deeper than the notion of war-as-an-unmaker/remaker-of-truth can capture. For Levinas, war has the power to break down a fundamental relationship between a body and the world, causing the alienation of subjectivity and fundamentally disrupting personhood. With the focus on the workings of discourse in and through war, a poststructuralist perspective cannot delve deep enough into the power of war to affect basic structures of consciousness and agential capacities of the embodied subjects.

By rejecting the centrality of a body and bodily experiences as the ontological foundation of war poststructuralist scholarship gravitates strongly toward discursivism or empiricism. Discursivism anchors an ontology of war in discursive practices and structures. Barkawi and Brighton's work is, yet again, revealing in this respect. Although they see war as a knowledge problem, Barkawi and Brighton rightly observe that we should not reduce the theoretical questions of war to epistemology alone. Seeking to develop *the* ontology of war that captures war's enduring essence, that is, 'what war *is*', they ground it in the discursive powers of war.⁴⁷ However, some poststructuralist scholars find Barkawi and Brighton's search for *the* ontology of war positively problematic. Thus, Nordin and Öberg argue that we should not conceive of war's ontology in foundational terms but rather think of

⁴⁴Levinas quoted in Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 136, emphasis added.

⁴⁵Ringmar 2016, 107.

⁴⁶Levinas 1969, 22.

⁴⁷Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 134, emphasis in the original.

war as ‘a normative injunction’ that operates through a discourse of war.⁴⁸ In other words, war is an idea that ‘works as an imperative to thought which tells us “we have a concept, and you must learn to think through it”’.⁴⁹ On this view, war is not a distinct phenomenon, the essence of which we can unearth, but a reified concept. Nor do people have any distinct war experiences. Instead, scholars identify, categorize, and analyze war experiences because they have learned to think through the concepts of war and war experiences. As war is reduced to a discursively reified theoretical abstraction, war bodies and embodied experiences disappear.

Rejection of a foundational ontology of war steers some poststructuralist scholars into empiricism – a tendency they share with standpoint FSS – which shifts their attention from matters of ontology to those of methodology. For instance, in their exemplary analysis, editors of the special issue on *Becoming War* in *Security Dialogue* argue that the elusiveness and mutability of war make it an ‘obdurate mystery’ that defies theoretical capture.⁵⁰ They do not seek to inquire about an ontology of war or develop a theory of war but advance a set of the methodological commitments and conceptual tools to study war. Accordingly, Bousquet *et al.* propose to examine war as an open-ended process of becoming by turning to ‘martial empiricism’, or an unlimited conceptual depository for understanding war. War emerges not as a distinct phenomenon but as a ‘question perpetually posed’ directing analytical attention to ‘war’s empirical fields’,⁵¹ or ‘logistics, operations, and embodiments’.⁵² By turning away from an explicit ontological investigation of war and presenting it as an open-ended process of becoming, martial empiricism seems to halt the charge of discursivism levied against Barkawi and Brighton’s account. However, it runs into a two-fold problem of its own: (1) without a prior specification of what war is, we cannot know, understand, or explain war beyond its fragmented, contextual appearances; and (2) short of a sustained ontological inquiry, we cannot develop a theory of war, only a theory of ‘the conditions of possibility for asking what war does and means’.⁵³

The theoretical issues discussed above demonstrate that a poststructuralist perspective is problematic for developing an embodied ontology of war because it rejects the ontological primacy of the material bodies and grounds the generative powers of war in discourse. To develop a theory of war anchored in embodied experiences, we must find a theoretical perspective that would allow us to retain an agentic material body as the ontological starting point for a systematic analysis of the corporeality of war. In the remainder of the paper, I demonstrate the potential of existential phenomenology to provide a tenable theoretical foundation for IR research on the corporeality of war and chart an embodied ontology of war centered on the phenomenological conception of the lived body.

Beyond poststructuralism: the promise of existential phenomenology in IR war research

Admittedly, this is not the first suggestion to turn to phenomenology to understand embodied experiences of war. A phenomenological perspective has been quite

⁴⁸Nordin and Öberg 2015, 398.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 394.

⁵⁰Bousquet *et al.* 2020, 100.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 112.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 101.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 7.

prominent in war research elsewhere but received only cursory attention in IR.⁵⁴ Thus, Barkawi and Brighton, as mentioned earlier, have gestured toward phenomenology, citing Levinas' work. Brighton has briefly discussed the promises and challenges of a phenomenological analysis of war.⁵⁵ And more recently, Kinsella has explored sleep as a weapon of war, pointing to the importance of the sensate dimension of war.⁵⁶ Perhaps most notably, Sylvester hinted, intentionally or otherwise, at the possibility of a phenomenological examination of war when she proposed to study war as a theatrical performance.⁵⁷ Performances employ actors, who convey meanings to the viewers in, through, and with their bodies. Performances belong to the non-discursive realm of expressive behavior, which creates and transmits meanings through the embodied actions. For actors and their audiences, meanings are felt affectively and viscerally, indeed come alive, as performers move their bodies on stage, interact kinesthetically, gesture, and so on. The somatic actions on stage 'speak' directly to the viewers' bodies. Performances, as Taylor aptly put it, are 'an embodied praxis and episteme'.⁵⁸ Drawing on research in neuroscience, Ringmar concurs that a body in performance is vital to making and transmitting meanings, noting that '[w]ithout the presence of the body the performance would clearly not work ... [T]he bodies of the people in the audience react viscerally and largely precognitively to the distressed bodies of the people on the stage'.⁵⁹

Performance provides a counterpoint to the poststructuralist concept of performativity. The latter underscores the perlocutionary power of language whereby 'the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action'.⁶⁰ Both meaning and action are the functions of language in that words do not only create meanings, but also act. That is, performativity strongly privileges discourse, which makes poststructuralism ill-equipped to account for non- or pre-linguistic meanings that register themselves on the haptic and affective levels of a body and lie beyond the limits of narrativity.⁶¹ In contrast, performance reclaims meaning-making and action for embodied practices, highlighting how various embodied actions generate, record, and transmit knowledge. As Ringmar observes, 'Our bodies understand before our minds interpret and this is what lends the theatre its visceral force'.⁶² Although performativities are mediated through the symbolic structures of language alone, performances include linguistic communication *and* embodied knowledge that is never determined exclusively by discourse. As Taylor astutely points out, discourse may 'shape embodied practice in innumerable ways, yet [it can] never totally dictate embodiment'.⁶³

Examining war through the lens of masqueraded performances offers an opportunity to recognize the ontological significance of embodied experiences in war by shifting analytical gaze from a performative/poststructuralist body to an agentic/material/phenomenological one. It offers an opportunity to demonstrate that violence unleashed in war inadvertently transforms rational thought, symbolic representations, and communicative interactions. However, acts like thinking,

⁵⁴See, for example, Gregory 2018, 2015; McSorley 2013, 2014.

⁵⁶Kinsella 2020.

⁵⁷Sylvester 2015.

⁵⁸Taylor 2003, 17.

⁶⁰Austin 1975, 6.

⁶¹See Taylor 2003; Ringmar 2019; Staudigl 2007.

⁶³Taylor 2003, 21.

⁵⁵Brighton 2011.

⁵⁹Ringmar 2019, 904.

⁶²Ringmar 2019, 904.

representing, and communicating depend on the existence of the embodied subjects capable of rationalizing and expressing meanings that antecede rational thought and linguistic representations. It offers an opportunity to explore how countless corporeal acts in war make up an *embodied* ontology of war.⁶⁴ Regrettably, although insightful in many ways, *Masquerades of War* is bereft of a consistent theoretical investigation. As Sylvester concedes, ‘The reader looking for a single theory of masquerade and war will not find it here – and nor should there be one at this point’.⁶⁵

It is time for IR scholarship on war to reflect systematically on the embodied condition as the ontological foundation of war. In the remainder of the paper, I demonstrate that existential phenomenology offers analytical access to a body as the fundamental pre-condition of experience and a center of potential action, thus allowing us to retain the ontological centrality of an agentic material body in theorizing the generative force of war. I elaborate the phenomenological conception of the lived body and lay out an ontology of war centered on the lived body. The proposed ontology foregrounds the capacity of the transformative powers of war to disrupt individual and collective interpretive integrity, alienating the individual and collective subjects from their pre-war social identities and roles. It also underscores the potential of embodied everyday practices to unmake war’s alienating effects.

Mapping an embodied ontology of war

The lived body

Phenomenology is the philosophy of experience first developed in the early 20th century by Edmund Husserl.⁶⁶ Keen on transforming abstract metaphysical speculations of traditional philosophy, Husserl sought to reawaken philosophy to pre-scientific, pre-theoretical experiences of everyday life. He regarded lived experiences as the source of true knowledge of phenomena as they manifest themselves to consciousness, that is, knowledge free from dogmatism, unbound and undistorted by the misconceptions of common sense, culture, or science. Treating experiences of direct engagement with the perceptual world as a ‘legitimizing source of cognition’,⁶⁷ Husserl and his followers saw phenomenology as a radically new way of doing philosophy that focuses on studying meanings beyond, and prior to, their expression in language, that is, as found in experience.

Interest in experiences does not mean that phenomenology is yet another version of empiricism. Phenomenology rejects the attitude of positive science, which

⁶⁴Although the epistemological and methodological questions are outside the scope of this analysis, it is worth noting that a theory of war as theatrical performance requires that embodied ontology be supported by appropriate epistemology and methodology. Research on war outside IR demonstrates that the bodies know war affectively and viscerally (see McSorley 2014). Somatic knowledge of war persists long after the secession of fighting, as war bodies store knowledge and experiences of war in gestures, hallucinations, flashbacks, and the like. Such knowledge can also be transmitted to future generations. For example, Eibuszyc, a daughter of two Holocaust survivors, writes: ‘I grew up in a home where my sister and I lived, day by day, haunted by my parents’ experiences. Their psychic injuries, their traumas were transmitted to us, the second generation’ (2015, 65). On epigenetic mechanisms of intergenerational transmission of trauma among Holocaust survivors, see Yehuda *et al.* 2016. Future research on war as performance may find feminist epistemology of experience and the method of phenomenological reduction useful for accessing and communicating the embodied knowledge of war. ⁶⁵Sylvester 2015, 3. ⁶⁶Husserl 1960.

⁶⁷Husserl 1983, 44.

accepts the perceptual world as certain, and treats experiences as the starting point for the investigation of various phenomena. Through the method of phenomenological reduction, phenomenology brackets the world so as to subject it to radical reflection and provide ultimate clarification of all knowledge and experience. As Merleau-Ponty explained: 'It is not a question of reducing human knowledge to sensation, but of assisting at the birth of this knowledge...'.⁶⁸ Nor is phenomenology a rationalist project committed to developing value-neutral explanations of the world. Each perspective, that is, empiricism and rationalism, is 'a kind of mental blindness' trapped in the predicament of reducing reality either to the material or the ideal, thus producing limited and limiting understandings.⁶⁹ In contrast, phenomenology turns to lived experiences to make us cognizant of the phenomena by uncovering pre-reflective meanings as they disclose themselves in experience. The principal effort of phenomenology is directed toward a critical examination of the ways in which lived experiences affect how we habitually make sense of the world, toward rendering the limitations and distortions deriving from our finite perspectives explicit and offering the means for transcending objectifying explanations and pre-conceptions.⁷⁰

Husserlian phenomenology is transcendental, that is, it is keen on understanding the general conditions of consciousness. Unlike Husserl however, Merleau-Ponty has focused on developing existential phenomenology that conceives of consciousness and experience as situated in, and bound up with, the materiality of a body. For Merleau-Ponty, consciousness is incarnate and can only be elucidated through our embodiment. The coexistence of consciousness and a body means that the latter is not just a passive recipient of sensory stimuli, that is, a mere physical object governed by the same physical laws as other objects. Rather, a body is the locus of consciousness and should be understood as the lived/phenomenal body, or being-in-the-world. The lived body is not only material but also agentic. It is 'our means of communication with it [the world], to the world no longer conceived as a collection of determinate objects, but as the horizon latent in all our experience and itself ever-present and anterior to every determining thought'.⁷¹ The lived body serves as 'our anchorage in', 'mediator of', and 'general medium for having' the world.⁷²

The notion of being-in-the-world posits mutual openness between the embodied subject and the world so that the lived body and the world form a single existential whole that is always in the process of becoming. Indeed, the lived body actively projects itself into the physical and social world, conceived as the horizon open to diverse articulations. As such, it contains 'the potentiality of a certain world',⁷³ enabling the embodied subjects to recognize their power of existence and constituting a basic condition for the existence of the world. Embodiment, in other words, entails possibilities for acting in the world and 'assigns us the world as an open field of possible action'.⁷⁴ Indeed, the lived body and the world are fundamentally intertwined, as consciousness operates through the bodily 'I can' that transforms the possible into the actual. As Merleau-Ponty put it, 'Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of "I think that" but of "I can"'.⁷⁵ In other words, 'I can' antecedes 'I think' informing the subject's being-in-the-world.

⁶⁸Merleau-Ponty 1962, 55.

⁶⁹Ibid., 25.

⁷⁰Staudigl 2007.

⁷¹Merleau-Ponty 1962, 92.

⁷²Ibid., 144–46.

⁷³Ibid., 106.

⁷⁴Staudigl 2007, 237.

⁷⁵Merleau-Ponty 1962, 137.

On this view, consciousness coexists with a body and action, not with mind and thought. The lived body is the source of intentionality: it bestows meanings onto things, disclosing the world to us and making it intelligible through the meaning-giving acts. As such, the lived body provides a basic precondition for making sense of the world and plays an active role in the constitution of the world. In Merleau-Ponty's words, the lived body 'is a pure meaning-giving act'⁷⁶ that enables us 'to return to things themselves'.⁷⁷ Thus, the bodily 'anchorage' in the world provides the foundation for cognition and meanings.

Importantly, emphasis on the lived body situates meanings in relation to *subjective* embodied experiences, raising concerns about whether a phenomenological perspective can account for *intersubjectivity*. These concerns are misplaced, if we recall Merleau-Ponty's insight that the phenomenal world is fundamentally relational. As the meaning-bestowing subjects, we are situated in our lived bodies *and* the world. Our experiences intersect with the experiences of others and 'engage each other like gears'.⁷⁸ Our subjectivity is constituted through encounters with others: it is conditioned by social consciousness and is entrenched in the intersubjective patterns of everyday life. This means that subjectivity is always already intersubjective. Subjectivity and intersubjectivity 'find their unity when I either take up my past experiences in those of the present, or other people's in my own'.⁷⁹ This unity forms the basis of our sociality, enabling us 'to enter into communication with them [others] – and thus, into a community'.⁸⁰

The lived body and the politics of war injury

By demonstrating that meanings are never purely conceptual but reflect the deeper structures of consciousness derived from embodied experiences, a phenomenological perspective challenges a long-standing orthodoxy prevalent in MSS and CWS of treating war as a phenomenon with a fixed meaning, that is, fighting. It calls for careful reflection on war experiences mediated through the lived bodies. From a phenomenological perspective, war is a fundamentally violent phenomenon whose principal purpose and outcome is the infliction of massive bodily injury.⁸¹ As Scarry poignantly observes, a single, most immediate aim of war is 'to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue, as well as to alter the surface, shape, and deep entirety of objects that human beings recognize as extensions of themselves'.⁸² Bodily injury, and not any other means, as Clausewitzian famous dictum asserts, is at the heart of the political contestation of war.⁸³ It is the ultimate source of substantiating any socio-political order. In Scarry's words:

War is the suspension of the reality of constructs, the systematic retraction of all benign forms of substance and simultaneously, the mining of the ultimate

⁷⁶Ibid., 121. ⁷⁷Ibid., ix. ⁷⁸Ibid., xx. ⁷⁹Merleau-Ponty 1962, xx. ⁸⁰Taipale 2006, 752.

⁸¹War belongs to a broader category of violent phenomena and is not unique in its capacity to destroy embodied interpretive integrity, as all forms of violence achieve similar effects. For example, the victim of domestic violence can experience the alienating effects of violence. However, unlike domestic violence, bodily injuring in war is political, i.e. it is the key means to the construction of socio-political reality.

⁸²Scarry 1985, 64; see also Sylvester 2013, 4, 66–67; McSorley 2014.

⁸³Clausewitz states that war is not an isolated political act but 'a mere continuation of policy by other means'. See Clausewitz 2006.

substance, the ultimate source of substantiation, the extraction of the physical basis of reality from its dark hiding place in the body out into the light of day, the making available of the precious ore of confirmation, the interior content of human bodies, lungs, arteries, blood, brains, the motherlode that will eventually be reconnected to the winning issue, to which it will lend its radical substance, its compelling, heartsickening reality, until more benign forms of substantiation come into being.⁸⁴

Importantly, the phenomenological concept of the lived body as a source of intentionality, meaning, and action suggests that we must seek to understand war beyond the physical impact of the politics of bodily injury. Although war-time violence undoubtedly inflicts physical injuries, a phenomenological perspective steers analytical attention to the effects of the politics of war injury on the deeper structures of consciousness founded in the embodiment and, by extension, on the lived body's ability to project itself into the world.

With the lived body placed at the heart of an ontology of war, we can link the embodied agentic subjects and their experiences with socially transformative powers of war. War emerges as a complex social institution with the colossal potential to remake key coordinates of socio-political life through its power to disrupt, by means of the violent politics of injury, the lived bodies, thus unsettling individual and collective interpretive integrity founded in the bodily 'I can', generating the loss of meanings, and disassociating individuals and communities from their pre-war social identities and roles. As we shall see, the lived bodies can reclaim their interpretive integrity and agency by engaging in embodied everyday practices. Thus, the generative force of war is born out of the dynamic interplay between the power of the politics of injury to exert the alienating effects on the individual and collective being-in-the-world and the potential of embodied everyday practices to counter the disruptive effects of the politics of war injury, effectively restoring to the lived bodies their sense-making capacities, continuity of personhood, and agency.

Whether they suffer violence as direct victims, witness it as passive observers, or commit it as active perpetrators, the lived bodies experience the alienating effects of the politics of war injury. It disrupts their meaning-making capacities and unravels their pre-war relationship with the world, others, and self. Evidence of the power of war to generate 'pure *un-meaning*...' abounds.⁸⁵ Chronicles of exhilarating experiences of sadistic killings and brutal war-time sexual violence⁸⁶ reveal that the politics of war injury deprives the perpetrators of violence of their meaning-making capacities, pushing them to 'the edge of insanity'.⁸⁷ Victims of the politics of war injury also suffer its disruptive effects and the loss of meaning. For instance, in recounting their World War II experiences, survivors of the Nazi concentration

⁸⁴Scarry 1985, 137.

⁸⁵Staudigl 2006, 692.

⁸⁶see Goldhagen 1996; Bourke 1999; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013.

⁸⁷Junger 2010, 265. The militaries increasingly recognize the importance of embodied meaning-making capacities. With the advent of post-modern warfare, Western militaries are moving toward a new operational paradigm whereby soldiers are expected to make sense of complex environments by experiencing them 'as a whole and living person' in and through the body that can smell, taste, see, hear, and feel 'the culture in a way that [makes] it part of [their] own' (Sookermy 2011, 485). On the sensate regimes of war see McSorley 2020.

camps have often found their experiences beyond sense, describing their condition as a form of profound mental deprivation. Yehiel Dinooor's testimony at Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem in 1961 epitomizes the collapse of the lived body's interpretive integrity and the resulting inability to speak brought by the politics of war injury. A survivor of Auschwitz, Dinooor described the concentration camp as a different planet where time 'is not a concept as it is here in our planet. Every fraction of a second has a different [sic] wheels of time. And the inhabitants of that planet [...] breathed and lived according to different laws of nature'.⁸⁸ Before he could finish his testimony, Dinooor collapsed on the stand and went into a coma. The simultaneous collapse of a physical body and its meaning-making capacities during Dinooor's testimony provided perhaps the most dramatic manifestation of the forceful destruction of the lived body. Still, numerous perpetrators, victims, and observers of various wars share a similar loss of sense-making capacities.

From a phenomenological perspective, the transformative power of war reaches beyond its capacity to change symbolic representations that define socio-political certainties.⁸⁹ Such power includes the potential of war to undo our being-in-the-world. In breaking down the system of meanings, which render the essence of self, others, and their relationships intelligible, the politics of war injury upends the lived body's agentic capacity, that is, the capacity to project itself actively into the world and invest it with significance. It unsettles bodily anchoring in the world, disrupts intentionality toward others, and breaks the familiarity and communication between the lived body and the world. The lived body, in Merleau-Ponty's words, 'ceases to be definable in terms of the act of sense-giving, [... and] relapses into the condition of a thing, the thing being precisely what does not know, what slumbers in absolute ignorance of itself and the world, what consequently is not a true "self"...'.⁹⁰

Importantly, the politics of war injury exerts its disruptive effects not only on the individual, but also on the collective lived bodies whose intentional openness to the world is suppressed, expropriated, or alienated.⁹¹ It is in this context that we can fully appreciate Levinas' insight that war 'does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating [physical] persons as in *interrupting their continuity*, making them play roles in which they can no longer recognize themselves'.⁹² When the collective ways of being-in-the-world break down, so does the modality of existence that develops out of intentional collective orientation toward the world. Suspension of the communal capacity for intentional projecting into the world generates an 'interiorized alienness'.⁹³ It de-subjectifies communities, disconnects them from their pre-war identities, unsettles habitual patterns of interactions, and drastically limits their field of possible actions, leaving them, basically, outside sense.

⁸⁸Quoted in Bennett 2015, 153.

⁸⁹For instance, for Barkawi and Brighton 2011, the contingency of fighting upends normative certainties that define politics (i.e. war as an unmaker of certainty). Ensuing uncertainty is then recast through authoritative discourse, effectively imposing new certainties that determine symbolic representations of fighting and (re)create the subjects and meanings (i.e. war as a remaker of certainty).

⁹⁰Merleau-Ponty 1962, 121.

⁹²Levinas quoted in Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 136, emphasis added.

⁹³James Dodd 2014, 54.

⁹¹See Staudigl 2007, 244.

This begs the question: can the relationship between the lived body and the world, once broken by the politics of war injury, be restored? To answer this question we need to turn to the site where the lived body accesses the world – the everyday.

The everyday and war's alienating effects

The lived body interacts with the world not within the conceptual abstractions of the balance of power or discursive structure but in the immediacy of everyday life. Thus, with FSS scholarship on war, a phenomenological perspective situates war on the plane of the everyday, that is, an experiential mode of social existence constituted by the mundane and repetitive aspects of life that fulfill our needs, sustain our hopes, and express life as it is meaningfully lived. Seemingly, inconsequential routine actions, like cooking, cleaning, or tackling day-to-day projects shape our lives, while their repetitive performance sustains the ways in which we habitually ascribe meanings to ourselves, the world, and others.

From diverse locations of the everyday, war does not suspend daily life but 'shares in [its] heterogeneity'.⁹⁴ It saturates the banal and trivial lived experiences as '[p]eople live in wars, with wars, and war lives with them long after it ends'.⁹⁵ As a young Mozambican female survivor of war put it, war reaches 'to my very heart [...]. This [war] lives in me – it is a part of my being, a constant companion... I can never leave war'.⁹⁶ Unlike an ontology of war as fighting, which emphasizes an antagonistic encounter, an embodied ontology of war accentuates the *repetitive* rhythm of everyday experiences in multiple temporalities and spaces of war: the everyday of combat training regimes defined by regular physical exercises to develop good soldiering skills; the everyday of fighting marked by iterative air-strikes, drone attacks, patrols, and adrenaline-rushing combat; the everyday of civilian life in the war zones with recurrent lootings, detentions, kidnappings, tortures, and sexual violence, often committed in front of the family and community members.⁹⁷

Much of IR, with the exception of feminist IR, tends to view the everyday as merely personal, banal, and easily dismissible, inadvertently overlooking that war and the everyday have historically shaped one another.⁹⁸ Although modernity has obscured their mutually constitutive relationship and trivialized the everyday, the latter remains an important site of micro-politics that binds repetitive embodied experiences with the broader socio-political orders. Through the everyday routines the lived bodies engage in 'the quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that indirectly and for the most part privately endorse, modify, or resist prevailing procedures, rules, [and] regulations...'.⁹⁹ Effectively, everyday experiences and actions

⁹⁴Das 2007, 136.

⁹⁵Parashar 2013, 618.

⁹⁶Cited in Nordstrom 1998, 104.

⁹⁷Emphasis on repetition does not erase the significance of the singular acts in war, like deciding which picture to leave on a war grave. However, it reminds the readers that singular acts are gradually enveloped into the repetitive rhythm of the everyday as one visits a war grave and these visits become part of the individual and collective mourning, memory, and identity.

⁹⁸In its original meaning, the 'banal' refers to compulsory feudal service indicating a deep-seated relationship between military obligations and everyday life in feudalism (see MacPhee and Naimou 2016, 4).

⁹⁹Kerkvliet 2005, 22.

comprise crucial micro-level processes of the reproduction of norms, identities, and practices, creating fundamental coordinates of social and political life.

The lived bodies experience and make sense of the world, selves, and others on the basis of socially derived and individually developed understandings. These understandings undergird the interpretive integrity of the lived bodies. They constitute 'a cognitive reservoir' that makes everyday experiences meaningful, enabling the lived bodies to respond to any challenges in a habitual manner.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, the lived bodies select everyday projects and engage in habitual patterns of meaningful activities on the basis of 'pragmatic relevancies selected by our attention'.¹⁰¹ Such relevancies are at once 'imposed' by the existing social structures and 'volitionally chosen' by the lived bodies on the basis of their cognitive reservoir.¹⁰² To sustain intentionality toward the world, the lived bodies must be able to transform the imposed relevancies into the volitional ones. Persistent failure to do so will lead to the constriction of the lived body, causing a rupture in its relationship with the world as a field of possible action.

As discussed earlier, the politics of war injury disrupts individual and collective interpretive integrity founded in the bodily 'I can', generating the loss of meanings and alienating individuals and communities from their pre-war social identities and roles. Importantly, embodied everyday practices contain the potential to counteract these disruptive effects. By engaging in habitual actions, the lived bodies can convert imposed relevancies into the volitionally chosen ones, thus reclaiming individual and collective interpretive integrity and making the world meaningful again. This is not a simplistic suggestion that *all* routine everyday practices and actions are intentionally defiant and, therefore, represent embodied agentic resistance to the alienating effects of war. Everyday behavior falls into at least three different categories, including (1) creative conformity to the imposed relevancies, as in war profiteering; (2) submissive fatalism or inability to recover interpretive integrity, as is often observed in countless victims of war-time sexual violence; and (3) resistance to objectification manifested in critical detachment from imposed relevancies.¹⁰³ Still, although everyday practices are undoubtedly chaotic, dynamic, and not always intentionally resistant, through the repetition of embodied everyday routines, the lived bodies can render their experiences of the world meaningful. This enables them to know and recognize their being-in-the-world, their power of existence. Thus, through the meshing of seemingly trivial activities, the everyday is deeply at work in unmaking the alienating impact of war.

The work of war anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom illustrates the potential of the everyday to restore the individual and collective lived bodies. Although conducting fieldwork on the devastating war in Mozambique (1975–92), Nordstrom has discovered that the politics of war injury stripped individuals and communities of their pre-war personhood, making them unrecognizable to themselves. In the words of one interviewee, '[war] took away everything we had, including *who we were*'.¹⁰⁴ The politics of war injury has permeated everyday life as common household items were turned into weapons of torture and public spaces recast as perilous and lethal.

¹⁰⁰Staudigl 2007, 243.

¹⁰²Ibid., emphasis in the original.

¹⁰⁴Nordstrom 1998, 109, emphasis in the original.

¹⁰¹Staudigl 2007, 243, emphasis in the original.

¹⁰³See Staudigl 2007, 246–7.

Nonetheless, Nordstrom's extensive fieldwork has also uncovered that even though war has changed people, they were not controlled by their war experiences. Most people have resisted the alienating effects of the politics of war injury by recreating and sustaining, through routine embodied acts and everyday practices, 'viable worlds' and 'viable selves'.¹⁰⁵ One way of reclaiming the individual and communal lived bodies was the ritual of 'healing the war', which was performed in numerous communities across Mozambique in the wake of war.

Through this ritual, African doctors – Curandeiros or Curandeiras – helped war abductees, refugees, displaced persons, and demobilized soldiers reconstruct their humanity, reclaim personhood, and rejoin their communities as active subjects by taking 'the violence out of them'.¹⁰⁶ The ritual of healing the war involved the entire communities engaging in a series of activities focused centrally on the body, including carrying, rocking, stroking, and lifting the body, cooking and sharing food, dressing, bathing, making music, and dancing. Through these actions, the embodied meanings and meaning-making capacities were reclaimed, life reaffirmed, and communities rebuilt. As one Curandeiro put it, 'We literally take the violence out of the people, we teach them how to relearn healthy ways of thinking and acting'.¹⁰⁷

The healing of war and the unmaking of violence became a social obligation among Mozambicans, even though the state has never formally instituted these practices. Community groups took the lead in assisting war-affected individuals in their reintegration into community life, teaching them, for example, how to farm. One cannot overstate the significance of such embodied everyday practices for creating the conditions of possibility for continuity in individual and collective personhood, social identities, values, relations, and knowledge. As Nordstrom observed, 'in agricultural work people were...relinked with their ancestors and the traditions that keep society sound. These creative acts took place not only at the individual level of crafting a person, but also at the larger level of people crafting society. Meaning is given form. It is embodied in the minutia of daily living'.¹⁰⁸

A phenomenological perspective on war as embodied experience enables us to recognize the everyday as the deep socio-political layer that makes up a substantive content of war and has the potential to unmake its de-subjectifying effects. Instead of rendering it insignificant, we should recognize the everyday as an important generative mode of social existence and the realm of possibility where the lived bodies experience war, heal from its alienating effects, and reproduce socio-political orders in and through their routine activities.

Conclusion

For far too long, war bodies and experiences have been conspicuously absent from IR research on war. Although the corporeality of war may have once seemed too trivial or 'self-evident to require articulation',¹⁰⁹ the emergent corporeal turn in IR research on war demonstrates that the meaning and socially generative powers of war cannot be fully apprehended outside of the violent politics of injury experienced in and through the body. Although sharing an analytical interest in

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 111.

¹⁰⁶Interviewee, cited in Nordstrom 1998, 113.

¹⁰⁷Cited in Nordstrom 1998, 116.

¹⁰⁸Nordstrom 1998, 117.

¹⁰⁹Scarry 1985, 64.

embodied experiences of war with the corporeal turn, this paper has emphasized the importance of a sustained ontological inquiry. It has been argued that existing attempts to build a robust theory of war as experience in IR have fallen short in two respects. First, a careful inquiry into the concept of a body should be the first step to developing a sound theory of war as embodied experience. Yet, even though the corporeal turn scholarship has recognized the importance of a body, it has not found a way to integrate it into an embodied theory of war in an analytically coherent way. Amid various conceptualizations of a body, each informing a particular way of apprehending war as experience, the corporeal turn scholarship has increasingly embraced the concept of a performative body. This concept accords ontological and analytical primacy to disembodied discursive practices and structures of war, reducing the embodied human agents to mere ciphers of structural forces. As a result, a performative body is inadequate to provide a solid conceptual foundation for an embodied ontology of war. Second, and closely related to the first issue, the corporeal turn in IR research on war has been disproportionately influenced by poststructuralism. A poststructuralist perspective highlights important dynamics sustained by the complex social institution of war, but it gravitates strongly toward discursivism. The latter reduces the bodies and experiences to the structural imperatives of prevalent war discourses, leaving little analytical space to account for the agentic material bodies in the theory of war as experience or in the constitution of the socio-political orders. Alternatively, a poststructuralist perspective tends toward empiricism, which denies the very possibility of an ontology of war.

This paper has sought to demonstrate the analytical attraction of existential phenomenology for developing an embodied ontology of war. Unlike poststructuralism, a phenomenological perspective situates the analytical and ontological center of war in the embodiment and corporeal agency. It shifts the ontological emphasis from the operation of discourse in and through war to the relationship between the lived body and war, highlighting the effects of the violent politics of war injury on the deeper structures of consciousness through which the lived bodies habitually make sense of and act in the world. From a phenomenological perspective, the generative powers of war reach beyond the socio-political certainties and symbolic representations and affect the basic sense-making capacities founded in the embodiment. The politics of war injury deprives individual and collective subjects of their embodied interpretive integrity and alienates them from pre-war identities. However, embodied routine activities of everyday life contain the potential to recover an individual and communal sense of identity, reclaim agency, restore habits and skills, and transmit social knowledge, thus enabling the individual and collective subjects to make political claims and participate actively in the (re) creation of socio-political orders.

Acknowledgement. I would like to thank the journal editors and anonymous reviewers for their incisive comments on earlier versions of this article.

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