

2010

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Roundtable Review

[www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables](http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables)

Volume XI, No. 22 (2010)

19 April 2010

*Roundtable Editors:* Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

*Roundtable Web/Production Editor:* George Fujii

*Assistant Web/Production Editor:* John Vurpillat

**Scott Laderman. *Tours of Vietnam: War, Travel Guides, and Memory.*** Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. ISBN: 978-0-8223-4396-7 (\$79.95, cloth); 978-0-8223-4414-8 (\$22.95, paperback).

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XI-22.pdf>

## Contents

---

Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge.....	2
Review by Mark Philip Bradley, The University of Chicago .....	6
Review by Seth Jacobs, Boston College .....	10
Review by Christina Klein, Boston College.....	16
Review by Viet Thanh Nguyen, University of Southern California .....	19
Author's Response by Scott Laderman, University of Minnesota, Duluth .....	23

---

## Copyright © 2010 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).

The creation of memories concerning the Vietnam conflict began before the end of the direct U.S. involvement in 1973 and Hanoi's final victory in 1975. Some of the initial contributions came from U.S. combat veterans who recounted their experiences in oral history collections, novels, and memoirs. Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1969) represents an influential example of this literature. Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977), a memoir that was sometimes referred to as a novel, had a continuing impact in shaping post-war perspectives. Journalists contributed their perspectives after a tour in Vietnam and historians soon joined in with their secondary accounts. Ward Just's *To What End; Report from Vietnam* (1968) represented an early account by a *Washington Post* correspondent who was in Vietnam from December 1965 to May 1967. O'Brien, Caputo, and Just continued to address their personal experiences with the war as well as its impact on the Vietnam generation in memoirs and novels. To the generation who lived through the Americanization of the war in the 1960s the memories are still powerful and contested in different areas from the political arena and the "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth" campaign against Senator John Kerry in the election of 2004 to the POW-MIA issue that continued into the 1990s and beyond. The unpredictable events after 1975 with respect to the Vietnamese war with communist Cambodia and the Sino-Vietnamese border conflict as well as the Vietnamese movement toward a market economy after 1986 stimulated even more academic and public "head-scratching" about the meaning of the conflict.

Mark Bradley notes in his review that in the current decade scholars have moved to the forefront in exploring the contested efforts by Vietnamese and Americans to address the consequences of the conflict on individuals as well as the states with continuing disagreements over the memory and legacies of the war. Several of the studies that Bradley's mentions will be the subject of H-Diplo roundtables.<sup>1</sup> Scott Laderman's *Tours of Vietnam: War, Travel Guides, and Memory* makes a significant contribution to this literature by using tourism and travel guides for commercial and leisure activity as an avenue to explore Vietnamese and American perspectives on the conflict as well as shaping the views of new generations who came of age after the conflict.

The reviewers welcome Laderman's exploration of the early examples of tourist promotion by the South Vietnamese government and the U.S. Department of Defense before 1965. Viet Thanh Nguyen considers Laderman's assessment of the Republic of Vietnam's efforts to promote western tourism as part of its campaign for legitimacy and stability as a most

---

<sup>1</sup> David Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War, 1959-68* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2009); Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); and Michael J. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

desirable exception to the lack of consideration given to South Vietnamese views, especially the expatriate community and its contested memory campaign and reaction to Vietnam's more recent effort to attract overseas returning Vietnamese as well as American tourists. Bradley and Seth Jacobs also are very favorably surprised by Laderman's discussion of the Department of Defense's pocket guides for American soldiers going to Vietnam in the early 1960s which included a brief summary of Vietnamese history and emphasized that in addition to stopping the spread of communism, American soldiers had an opportunity to explore shops, markets, and restaurants, hunt in the highlands, swim and fish along the South China sea coast, and meet attractive Vietnamese women. Bradley emphasizes that Laderman's use of this primary material has moved "deeper than previous scholarship ... at the pervasive bottom-up quality of official pedagogic efforts to frame the meanings of American intervention in Vietnam." (2)

In assessing current tourism and guidebooks such as *Frommer's Vietnam*, *Fodor's Exploring Vietnam*, and the Lonely Planet guidebooks, Laderman focuses on the guidebooks' presentation of the war as well as the postwar transformation of Vietnam under the *doi moi* reform towards market economic activity. The reviewers agree with Laderman's emphasis on how the guidebooks present a traditional American view of the war as a necessary response to international communism with Hanoi masterminding the conflict through its agent in the south, the National Liberation Front, and later, its own regular army forces. Despite the reality of defeat by 1975 with Hanoi's takeover of South Vietnam, the guidebooks emphasize the ultimate triumph of market capitalism if not representative government. Jacobs, who relied on *Frommer's* during a visit to Vietnam in 2006, went back to read the guidebook's "A Look at the Past" after reading Laderman and found "all of the faults Laderman finds in tourist guidebooks." (2) Christina Klein does question Laderman's interpretive approach to the travel guides, suggesting that *Tours of Vietnam* has an "oversimplified understanding of the concept of ideology, ... a reductive base-and-superstructure-type model of thinking in which works of culture more or less accurately reflect some external social or political reality; the less accurate the reflection, the more ideological the text." (1) Klein also suggests that Laderman "does not interpret travel writing as expressive, *literary* texts and offers no analysis of travel writing as a distinct genre" that differs from academic history. (2) In his response, Laderman addresses these questions at length, noting some of the challenges in situating the Pentagon's guidebooks with other representations as well as finding evidence of soldiers' reactions to them. Laderman also notes the differences between the guidebooks and travel writing.

Klein does agree with the other reviewers that Laderman's exploration of the larger question of historical memory is a definite strength of the study. In chapter three on the Hue massacre of 1968 during the Tet offensive, Laderman successfully contrasts the historical debate concerning what happened at Hue with respect to the North Vietnamese army (NVA) and Vietnamese civilians with the guidebooks' depiction of a premeditated NVA slaughter of thousands of civilians. Laderman notes how the Hue massacre has been used frequently by Americans and Vietnamese expatriates to justify the war against Hanoi and destruction brought to Vietnam and its people by American forces. Klein applauds Laderman's "more nuanced questions: How are memories of traumatic events constructed? Who produces and invokes these memories and to what ends? How can they

remain available for retrieval and re-use decades later? How do diverse social groups invoke the same memory for a variety of purposes?" (3)

Bradley raises the question of how the readers of the guidebooks received the portrayal of the overall American involvement with Vietnam. The reviewers all emphasize that Laderman is able to pursue this question in chapter five on the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City by researching the extensive visitor comments in the museum's comments book and by interviewing visitors. As Laderman and Viet Thanh Nguyen note, the museum put significant emphasis on U.S. war atrocities which stimulated in the reactions of American visitors both sympathy for the Vietnamese as well as anger and criticism of the Vietnamese for a one-sided depiction of the war. Since Thanh Nguyen visited the museum in 2002 and 2009, he notes the changes in the museum apparently designed to make the museum "more hospitable to foreign tourists." (4)

One request shared by the reviewers would be more comparative evaluation of how, as Bradley notes, the "Vietnamese themselves are making sense of their own past and present." As Bradley and Nguyen suggest, the Vietnamese faced a similar challenge to that of the Americans in dealing with their memories and the legacies of the war. The resurgence of religious expressions and dealing with "wandering ghosts of family members" as well as Vietnamese guidebooks would provide a valuable "counter-narrative" to Laderman's account. (2-3) Nguyen also notes the absence of the overseas perspective of Vietnamese on the construction of memory about the war and the postwar changes in Vietnam as well as their own guidebooks as they return to visit their homeland. In his response, Laderman agrees with their suggestions and notes that he collected Vietnamese entries from the comment books of the War Remnants Museum and had planned to discuss them in a separate study.

### **Participants:**

**Scott Laderman**, who received his Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, in 2005, is an assistant professor of History at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. He is presently at work on a co-edited collection for Duke University Press on the United States and Vietnam since 1975, as well as an international political history of surfing and surf culture.

**Mark Philip Bradley** is Professor of History at The University of Chicago. He is the author of *Imaging Vietnam and America: The United States in the Making Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000), which won the Harry J. Benda Prize from the Association for Asian Studies, and *Vietnam at War* (Oxford University Press, 2009). He is currently working a history of the place of the United States in the global human rights imagination of the twentieth century.

**Seth Jacobs** is an associate professor in the Department of History at Boston College, where he has won three teaching awards, including the Phi Beta Kappa award for professor of the year. He received his B.A. from Yale, his M.A. from the University of Chicago, and his Ph.D. from Northwestern. His research interests focus on the connection between U.S.

domestic culture and foreign policy, and his books include *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam* (Duke University Press, 2004) and *Cold War Mandarin* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). At present, he is working on a study of U.S.-Laotian relations during the Eisenhower and Kennedy years.

**Christina Klein** is an associate professor of English and American Studies at Boston College and the author of *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961*. She is working on a book about the effects of globalization on contemporary Asian and American cinemas.

**Viet Thanh Nguyen** has a doctorate in English from the University of California at Berkeley and is an associate professor of English and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. He is the author of *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (Oxford University Press, 2002), as well as numerous short stories and academic articles in journals including *PMLA*, *American Literary History*, and *positions: east asia cultures critique*. He is working on a collection of short stories and an academic book comparing American and Vietnamese memories of their shared war.

The past several years have seen an outpouring of path-breaking work that takes up the lived experience and memories of the Vietnam wars in especially compelling ways. Whether it be the interior worlds of ordinary Vietnamese whose lives became engulfed by war, the widening gap between official and private memories of war in contemporary Vietnam or the often acrimonious contests of memory in the United States since the war came to an end now more than thirty years ago, this new scholarship has enlarged and deepened our understanding of the complex meanings Vietnamese and American actors have accorded to the war.<sup>1</sup> In his *Tours of Vietnam*, Scott Laderman joins these salutary efforts inventively taking tourism as the lens through which he crafts a rich and nuanced analysis of how race, power and empire inflect American apprehensions of the war and its aftermath in Vietnam.

Readers will perhaps find Laderman's first chapters the most surprising of his excellent book, given their focus on the South Vietnamese and American government's efforts during the war itself to portray Vietnam as a desirably exotic destination for adventure travel. He is nicely attentive to the larger significance of what might initially seem like an oddly quixotic project for a nation at war, whether it be the South Vietnamese state's attempt to sell Vietnam as the "Paris of the Far East" whose "doe-eyed shapely...girls dressed in the most gracious way" (p. 26) or the Department of Defense's suggestion to American soldiers that "the deeply serious business of helping a communist nation repel Communist invasion" ought not get in the way of "some good swimming or deep-sea fishing" on "the quiet beaches of the South China Sea" or a "hunting trip on the high plateaus inland" (p. 51). Yet as he persuasively suggests wartime tourism was among the many misguided efforts of the South Vietnamese state to build its legitimacy at home and abroad, in this case seeking to project a modern normality that meshed with official U.S. preoccupations with nation building and tapped into a growing popular American interest in leisure travel in what was then called the Third World.

Laderman's analysis of the promotion of war tourism for American soldiers is similarly astute. Building on the framework Christina Klein offered in her *Cold War Orientalism* of how middlebrow culture helped teach Americans to assume their new post-World War II global responsibilities in Asia,<sup>2</sup> he carefully explores the texts of the "pocket guides" for soldiers produced by the Department of Defense that combined potted histories of Third

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, David Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War, 1959-68* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2009); Heonik Kwon, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); and Michael J. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

World states and cultures with tips for smoothly negotiating military service. In a marvelous section of this chapter titled “Bill and Joe’s Excellent Adventure,” Laderman unpacks the 1953 *Pocket Guide to Anywhere* [sic] which told its readers the story of two fictional Americans who “find themselves for the first time among alien people, whose ways are not our ways, whose language and customs are different than ours, whose religion may be different, [and] whose skin may be of a different color.” Bill is apparently “well-meaning but thoughtless” and tells Joe “these foreigners are starting to get on my nerves.” Joe, who has “done a lot of reading about the problem,” helps Bill better understand why “the free nations have got to work together” (p. 66). If Laderman wasn’t as attentive as he is to the archival record, readers might think they had entered into the world of a Coen Brothers film. But in drawing so effectively on this remarkable primary material, Laderman gets deeper than previous scholarship has at the pervasive bottom-up quality of official pedagogic efforts to frame the meanings of American intervention in Vietnam.

The final three chapters of *Tours of Vietnam* shift focus to present day tourism in Vietnam and the troubling reconstruction of the Vietnamese past in the guidebooks that Laderman argues are the among the most important mediators of the experiences of the hundreds of thousands of American and other foreign travelers to Vietnam. He offers a close and critical reading of the triumphalist historical accounts that infuse guidebook presentations of the war and its aftermath (especially those offered in the highly popular Lonely Planet guides to Vietnam). Laderman argues their narratives reinforce false claims that the war in Vietnam was a necessary one to combat the menace of international communism and that, despite the apparent battlefield defeat in 1975, the war was ultimately won by the United States given the Vietnamese state’s more recent embrace of the market and neo-liberal economics. Illustrative of his approach is the painstaking deconstruction he offers of the admiring guidebook commentary on the doi moi reforms that brought the market economy to Vietnam after 1986. Against what he sees as their lionization of the triumph of global capitalism in Vietnam (Fodor’s, for instance, called the coming of the market to Vietnam as “nothing short of a godsend”, p. 146), Laderman highlights the growing inequalities in income, health care and education in contemporary Vietnamese society under doi moi.

Laderman is right to emphasize the deleterious socio-economic impact of the market economy, problems that have only accelerated over the past year as the contraction of the global economy put a significant damper on Vietnam’s export-oriented economy. And I should confess that I am deeply sympathetic to his effort to push back on Tony Wheeler’s sometimes smug Lonely Planet empire and its sarong-clad, backpack toting, “get down with the natives” acolytes. But what goes missing in these chapters with their focus on high policy and macroeconomics is a sense of how the Vietnamese themselves are making sense of their own past and present. Among the most striking developments in present day Vietnam is the explosion of religiosity. It can be seen in overflowing Buddhist temples and Catholic churches, the enormous crowds attending religious festivals, fairs, ceremonies and feasts, the profusion of religious display and altars in homes, the resurgence of family and local rituals, the lavish refurbishing pagodas, churches and shrines and the pilgrimage of millions to shrines of gods and goddesses like that of Bà Chúa Xứ, the Lady of the Realm, in

southern Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> The intensification of religious sensibilities and ritual in part rests on the new wealth generated through the market reforms while at the same time it addresses the cultural and spiritual anxieties unleashed by them. As the pilgrimages to the shine of the Lady of the Realm suggest, the Vietnamese are tourists too. Indeed, a Vietnamese guidebook industry catering to the new middle class has emerged under doi moi. The circuits of sights these Vietnamese-language books recommend and their depictions of the past have yet to receive sustained scholarly attention but would offer a fascinating counter-narrative to the one Laderman provides and begin to capture the dense textures and contradictions of life in the market economy.<sup>4</sup>

Greater attentiveness to the contemporary explosion of religious practice might also better contextualize how many Vietnamese have come to terms with the memories and legacies of the war. Laderman concentrates one of his chapters on what is sometimes called the “Hue massacre” in the aftermath of the 1968 Tet Offensive, and the ways in which many tourist guidebooks uncritically convey as fact the accusations of the American and South Vietnamese governments long discredited by scholars that it represented a North Vietnamese communist bloodbath. Again Laderman is right to draw attention to the inaccuracies of these partisan accounts. And yet more could be said about the resurgence of ritual practice and spiritual belief that appears to be essential for ordinary Vietnamese in coming to terms with the wandering ghosts of family members who were victims of incidents that could more properly be called massacres, such as the killing of civilians by American and South Korean forces at My Lai and Ha My.<sup>5</sup> If Laderman skillfully identifies the elisions that mar guidebook narratives, he doesn’t always leave readers with an alternative narrative that conveys these and other complexities of present day Vietnamese society. Unintentionally, his point-counterpoint critique still allows the guidebooks to frame the larger contours of what should and should not be said about the Vietnamese experiences of war.

Finally Laderman’s approach to his subject sometimes skates around the question of reception. Do the readers of the Lonely Planet and other guidebooks absorb what he sees as their dominant message of triumphalism? Did the readers of the pocket guides roll their eyes over Bill and Joe’s excellent adventure, or did the guides help shape the perceptions of American military forces in Vietnam? In part Laderman does address this difficult conceptual and methodological problem in his innovative final chapter on the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City in which he uses writings by visitors in the

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Philip Taylor, *Goddess on the Rise: Pilgrimage and Popular Religion in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> So too would a study of Vietnamese-language guides for diasporic Vietnamese who left Vietnam after 1975 and now frequently return for business, to visit family and to travel. Laderman gestures to their perspectives with his cover art by the well-known diasporic artist Dinh Q. Lê, but does not follow up a sustained analysis of them in his text.

<sup>5</sup> See Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

museum's voluminous comment books to provide what he aptly terms "a temporal snapshot in the social history of international postwar memory" (p. 153). Despite the effectiveness of this chapter, his account still leaves open how scholars might reconstruct the historical reception of South Vietnamese and American efforts to promote tourism in the late 1950s and 1960s.

Notwithstanding these qualms and quibbles, *Tours of Vietnam* makes a powerful intervention into the on-going scholarly reassessment of the Vietnam wars and their memories along with providing new insight into the ways in which the practices of tourism and the employment of American power did, and do, go hand-in-hand. The governments of South Vietnam and Afghanistan were apparently on the same page with respect to tourism in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Kabul, like Saigon, was offered up to Euro-American tourists as a little Paris, in this case the "Paris of Central Asia."<sup>6</sup> One can only imagine what the Department of Defense will make of that in whatever passes as today's version of the pocket guide to Afghanistan.

---

<sup>6</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller, "Remembering Afghanistan's Golden Age," New York Times, 17 October 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/18/weekinreview/18bumiller.html>.

I need to begin this review with a confession. While I've written two books on U.S.-Vietnamese relations during the Eisenhower and Kennedy years, I never actually *went* to Vietnam until well after the second book was published. This experiential shortfall provided an interviewer for SKY television with the perfect opportunity to make me look foolish and, of course, he took it. "You've never been to Vietnam?" he asked incredulously, flaring his nostrils and sounding like Rowan Atkinson in *Black Adder*. "And you have the arrogance to call yourself an authority on the Vietnam War?" All of a sudden, the studio lights seemed much hotter, and I could swear I heard the cameraman giggle. I don't perform well under such conditions. If I recall correctly, I spluttered some retort about how the Vietnam I studied no longer existed, and that I hadn't "called myself" anything. It wasn't my finest hour. Fortunately, SKY only broadcasts in Europe, so my family was spared the spectacle, but I'm sure I confirmed for millions of viewers that we Americans are indeed the most solipsistic people alive, so uninterested in the world beyond our shores that we elevate to the professoriate vulgarians who haven't even visited the countries they teach about.

That interview took place four years ago. Since then, I *have* been to Vietnam. To celebrate my receiving tenure, my wife and I took a month-long tour of the country in 2006, and we covered a lot of ground, starting in the south at Ho Chi Minh City and gradually working our way up to Sa Pa on the Chinese border before doubling back to Hanoi. The trip was full of mind-expanding experiences. I knelt in the pew where Ngo Dinh Diem prayed for the last time. I almost had a heart attack squeezing through the Cu Chi tunnels, even though they've been widened to accommodate overweight Westerners. I took the breeze on the balcony of Bao Dai's summer palace in Dalat. I spent two days sailing in Ha Long Bay, which comes closer to approximating Neverland than any other site on earth. I was sick with shame at My Lai, and astonished at how little anti-American sentiment I encountered. For the first time, I understood on a gut level many things I had appreciated intellectually before, like how the terrain of most of Vietnam favors the defender, or how heat exhaustion alone might force the evacuation of an entire company. (Hell, I couldn't carry enough water to keep myself hydrated, and I wasn't humping eighty pounds of equipment!) In all, it was a revelatory tour, and its impact on how I teach and write about the Vietnam War has been profound.

Most important for present purposes, though, is the fact that *Frommer's Vietnam* never left my side from the moment I deplaned at Tan Son Nhat Airport until I flew out of Noi Bai four weeks later. I would sooner have parted with my eyeglasses, my wallet, and even my passport than my *Frommer's*. It was, as one of Scott Laderman's sources says of the *Lonely Planet* series, "my lifeline," a calm, savvy companion showing the way. (p. 7.) Whenever I was in an uncertain or perilous situation, *Frommer's* had the answers. Should I tip? How much? Is there an etiquette to haggling? Do shopkeepers prefer to be paid in dollars or dong? Is it dangerous to ride a cyclo after nightfall? Should I ask permission before snapping someone's picture? My dependence upon, and blind faith in, *Frommer's* was cemented on the first day, when I stood at the corner of Le Loi and Dong Khoi Streets,

paralyzed, as many tourists are, by Ho Chi Minh City's traffic. The tide of automobiles, motorbikes, pedal-operated rickshaws, and bicycles swept madly by with no concern for whether the lights were red or green, and I needed to get across. After waiting fifteen minutes for a lull, I fished *Frommer's* from my backpack. It told me to jaywalk. "Wade out" into the street, it said, and "maintain a steady pace."<sup>1</sup> To a native New Yorker like me, that sounded suicidal, but I couldn't stand on the curb forever, so I took the plunge, maintained as steady a pace as I could—and darned if *Frommer's* wasn't right. Traffic parted around me like magic. The Miracle of the Red Sea! By the time I reached the other side, I was sold. *Frommer's* could have advised me to wash my clothes in *nuoc mam* and I would have done it. I doubt if I've ever put more complete trust in a book in my life.

In fact, the only part of *Frommer's* that wasn't dog-eared by the time I returned to the States was the chapter dealing with Washington's thirty-year military involvement in Vietnam. I figured I didn't need to read that, since, after all, I had been teaching the Vietnam War for over a decade. It wasn't until after I finished *Tours of Vietnam* that I took *Frommer's* off the shelf and opened it to "A Look at the Past." The experience was akin to watching one's favorite professor morph into Glenn Beck. All of the faults Laderman finds in tourist guidebooks were there: guilt-free assertion that the United States "inherited" the war from France, misrepresentation of the Geneva Accords, presumption that "South Vietnam" was a sovereign state as legitimate as Ho Chi Minh's regime, conflation of the North Vietnamese with the National Liberation Front, and so on. I stopped counting howlers after two paragraphs, but H-Diplo readers might be interested to learn that the Battle of Dien Bien Phu "lasted 25 days"; that "[t]he Viet Minh became the Viet Cong" immediately thereafter; that American troops enjoyed "a flying success" in the Ia Drang Valley in 1965; and that "'Vietnamization' of the war began" after the 1973 Paris Peace Accords. Most eye-opening was *Frommer's* claim that "U.S. soldiers fought valiantly, but the strategy of a 'limited war' meant that the army had to fight one-handed and was unable to mount a full attack," which assumedly would have entailed something harsher than dropping the equivalent of one 500-pound bomb for every man, woman, and child in Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> *Frommer's*, I should mention, does not present this potted history as stridently as some travel books do, and I doubt that its principal author, Charles Agar, shares the views of Robert Storey, Lonely Planet's Vietnam sage, but its interpretation of a complex, controversial world-historical event is, to borrow Laderman's gentle phrasing, "deficient by the standards of contemporary scholarly opinion." (p. 6.)

Had I not been a teacher of U.S. foreign policy, professionally obliged to plow through the massive literature on the Vietnam War, there is no question but that I would have accepted *Frommer's* "history" as credulously as I did everything else between its covers. Laderman has identified an important and under-studied factor shaping Americans' comprehension of recent events. Guidebooks, he observes, are "trusted arbiters of historical truth" whose

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Agar, *Frommer's Vietnam, Including Angkor Wat*, First Edition (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publishing, 2006), 72.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 467-475.

“power of signification resides in their *appearance* of objectivity.” (p. 8.) One purchases a guidebook expecting it to contain useful information, not agitprop; hence, one’s guard is down. I suspect that most tourists do not even know the names of the people who write their travel guides, much less the institutional or political affiliations of a publishing house like Lonely Planet. Yet they rely upon *Baedeker’s China*, *Fodor’s Essential Indonesia*, and *Southeast Asia on a Shoestring* to organize and make sense of virtually every waking moment of their journeys abroad. They thereby invest these texts with tremendous authority. As Laderman notes, guidebooks not only advise tourists on what to see; often, they specify “how such places should be interpreted.” (p. 125.)

To cite a hideous example of this presumptuousness: the folks at Fodor’s and Lonely Planet want Americans to visit the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, but they want us warned in advance that the museum’s displays are “one-sided,” “skewed,” and “manipulative.” Tourists prepped by Storey enter the museum expecting to be outraged by the “unnecessary[ily] crude” portrayal of American soldiers and the “official amnesia” with respect to communist war crimes. (pp. 161, 163.) Such objections are scarcely groundless. Still, when measured against similar exhibits in other countries, the museum demonstrates what Laderman correctly calls “a remarkable willingness by the conflict’s principal victims to acknowledge the human travails of their foreign adversaries.” (p. 158.) More significantly, it challenges conceptions of the war as an American “story” by placing Vietnamese actors at the center. The de-nationalizing impact of this counter-narrative, so valuable for travelers whose knowledge of Vietnam comes from *Rambo* and *Missing in Action*, is blunted by the guidebooks’ mediation, and a potentially transformative encounter becomes an occasion for tongue-clucking. We experience what Storey intends for us to experience.

Laderman might have pointed out that propagandists like Storey benefit from the self-doubt of their readers. The relationship between a tourist and his or her guidebook is a unique one. Because the tourist is in an alien setting where the laws, value systems, behavior patterns, and economy—and often the language—are strange, he or she feels unmoored and anxious. The guidebook’s counsel, stated in plain English, is reassuring, and the grateful tourist accepts it with fewer reservations than would be the case on his or her home turf. A management analyst from Little Rock thrust into the hurlyburly of Cholon market and clutching *Fodor’s Exploring Vietnam* for dear life does not care that Eugene Fodor served in the OSS during World War II, that he “allowed CIA operatives to work as travel writers . . . to furnish them with civilian cover,” or that an author of the most recent volume on Vietnam is “the former director of the American Chamber of Commerce in Ho Chi Minh City.” (pp. 32, 124.) Such facts might cause stateside readers to question the book’s objectivity, but the tourist surrounded by eager Vietnamese stallholders yelling, grinning, waving, and pointing at their merchandise will take whatever guidance is at hand.

Of course, the most vulnerable American “tourists” to “visit” Vietnam during the past half-century were those military advisers posted there in the early 1960s, before Lyndon Johnson committed combat troops and ordered the bombing of the North, and a highlight of Laderman’s book is his treatment of this early, liminal period. Since, as one veteran remembered, “the war hadn’t really become a war yet,” many of the men arriving in

Vietnam weren't sure what their mission was. (p. 48.) They certainly weren't prepared to die for Ngo Dinh Diem's abstruse philosophy of "personalism," or for Diem himself, whose unpopularity and incompetence they recognized. The Pentagon therefore began issuing its pocket guide to Vietnam, an accessibly-written booklet that summarized Vietnamese history, gave a few facts about the local culture, and told servicemen the best places to shop, eat, hunt, swim, or go sightseeing during their tour of duty. Along with this friendly advice, the guide explained the reasons for America's presence in Vietnam, repeating and reinforcing the cold war mantra that any communist movement was by definition Moscow-inspired and that the "State of Vietnam" had to be protected against Ho Chi Minh's efforts to drag it into the red orbit. Laderman observes that the 1963 pocket guide, and its successor in 1966, constituted an "implicit acknowledgement of the manner in which travel literature could be embraced to further crucial political and ideological ends." (p. 50.)

What remarkable primary sources these pocket guides are! As paraphrased and excerpted by Laderman, they read as black comedy, calling up images of Robert Duvall ordering his besieged men to "surf this beach" in *Apocalypse Now*, or of *Doonesbury's* B.D. exclaiming "Look! Rice paddies!" as he gazes out the window of the plane taking him to war. The Office of Armed Forces Information and Education (OAFIE), which produced the guides, gushed in 1963 about Vietnam's "great variety of attractions"—"fascinating shops and markets," "excellent restaurants," "quiet white-sand beaches," the "exquisite mountain resort" at Dalat—while at the same time somberly intoning that Americans were in Vietnam to "block the spread of Communism throughout Southeast Asia" and help "a staunch and dedicated nation in a most critical period of its history." (pp. 52-53.) Escalation of the conflict following the 1965 U.S. ground invasion narrowed opportunities for tourism and obliged OAFIE to stress the dangers and responsibilities of service in Vietnam, but not until 1971 did the pocket guide abandon its premise that soldiers could mix business with pleasure. This is one of the scariest manifestations of "best and brightest" hubris I have run across. Can you imagine the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force suggesting to the men under its command which scenic places in northern France they should visit after D-Day? Or Douglas MacArthur telling his troops where to waterski in the Philippines? OAFIE's packaging of Vietnam as both war zone and recreation spot spotlighted American contempt for the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong as vividly as any of LBJ's remarks about "that third-rate, raggedy-ass little country." I look forward to citing the pocket guides in my foreign policy class.

Defeat in Vietnam posed new tests for the American empire—a term Laderman does not shy away from using, nor should he—and travel guidebooks reflected the change. They did not become more "objective." Rather, like much of the mainstream media, some political commentators, and Hollywood, they contributed to a reimagining of the Vietnam War, depicting it variously as a "noble cause," a "mistake," or a "quagmire" and promulgating a number of fictions that framed how Americans remembered the conflict. Laderman addresses two such fictions, the 1968 "Hue Massacre" and the "success" of doi moi, Vietnam's postwar adoption of capitalist reforms. Both are the subject of spirited scholarly debate, with nothing approaching consensus in sight, but, as far as *Lonely Planet* and its competitors are concerned, the facts stand out like lighthouses: North Vietnamese soldiers committed a premeditated atrocity in Hue during the Tet Offensive; and the government of

a unified Vietnam rescued the country from economic catastrophe by forsaking socialism and moving toward a market economy. These oversimplified accounts, not coincidentally, help salve the American conscience. When measured against the spectacle of the NVA shooting, clubbing, decapitating, and burying alive thousands of defenseless civilians, My Lai doesn't look too bad. Moreover, if the communists carried out such acts in 1968, then the Nixon administration's rationale for prolonging the war—the "bloodbath theory" that forecast mass executions if the NVA/VC won—seems plausible. Similarly, the guidebooks' portrayal of doi moi as, in *Fodor's* words, nothing "short of a godsend" has doubtless been interpreted by many American tourists as partial vindication of their country's war effort. (p. 124.) The bright capitalist future that U.S. troops fought for in Vietnam has finally arrived! P. J. O'Rourke summed up this view in a repulsive piece for *Rolling Stone* magazine, writing, "The best method of existential improvement is making money. It is precisely this that is being done in—of all places—the People's Republic of Vietnam. But don't tell them. Shhh, they think they won the war."<sup>3</sup>

Laderman does a masterful job of picking apart such feel-good fantasies. He demonstrates, among other things, that even Douglas Pike, author of the most lurid account of the Hue Massacre, had "distanced himself" from his original estimate of 3,000 executions "by the late 1980s," and that the Vietnamese citizenry, far from applauding doi moi, rose up in "an explosion of grassroots unrest" at roughly the same time. (pp. 91, 148.) The killings in Hue served a useful public-relations purpose for Washington, Laderman notes, but only if inflated, sensationalized, and, most important, decontextualized—i.e. ascribed to innate communist cruelty rather than the circumstances of an asymmetrical war in which Hue and its environs were ravaged by American bombs, napalm, and crop defoliants. Nixon speechwriter Pat Buchanan and other cold warriors were quick to promote this interpretation, and it survives virtually intact in the pages of today's backpackers' bibles, standing in stark contrast to *Fodor's* and *Lonely Planet's* sympathetic portrayal of traumatized, bewildered American GIs at Son My. As for the "godsend" thesis: while Laderman admits that doi moi has brought about growth—at least if we're using the International Monetary Fund's criteria—he contends that it has also contributed to economic inequality, social stratification, and restricted opportunities for education and health care. *Tours of Vietnam* relies too heavily upon Gabriel Kolko to make this point (I join with Peter Novick in finding Kolko "dogmatic and arrogant"<sup>4</sup>), but Laderman is right to conclude that doi moi's record is, at best, mixed, and that guidebooks' refusal to acknowledge this reveals more about "the ideological triumph of global capitalism" than about current conditions in Vietnam. (p. 149.) Particularly valuable is Laderman's underscoring of the hypocrisy of American industrialists and legislators who, for all of their professed devotion to Adam Smith, resorted to protectionism—and xenophobic cant—when Vietnamese exporters threatened to penetrate the shrimp and catfish markets of the United States.

---

<sup>3</sup> P. J. O'Rourke, "Economic Justice: To Hell with Everything, Let's Get Rich," reprinted in *All the Trouble in the World* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994), 309.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 451.

This is high-quality scholarship. Nonetheless, I was left wanting something more from Laderman: namely, a solution to the problem he identifies. To be fair, I'm not sure there is one. Since historians differ so pointedly over the Hue Massacre, *doi moi*, and many other phenomena associated with the Vietnam War, and since the monographs, articles, and online publications in which they air their differences are so prolix, how would one reduce the millions of words to a brief, user-friendly history suitable for inclusion in a guidebook? What do we say to a tourist who wants "just the facts" about what happened in Hue in 1968? That there are no settled facts? That while, in Laderman's words, "the reality of the executions is acknowledged by scholars on all sides," these scholars cannot agree on how many noncombatants were killed, or on who killed them (was it principally American firepower or the NLF?), or on whether the murder of civilians represented official NLF policy? (p. 91.) Historians are used to such gray areas, but the tourist, I fear, will soon grow impatient. Can a travel guide incorporate scholarly dissensus without losing its readership? Is the Vietnam conflict even susceptible of discriminative treatment in a vehicle like *Let's Go Vietnam*? These are important questions, because, as Laderman shows, guidebooks play a substantial, often insidious role in defining what thousands of American tourists "know" about their country's longest war.

Scott Laderman's *Tours of Vietnam: War, Travel Guides, and Memory* takes an unusual route into the well-traveled terrain of the history of America's war in Vietnam. Instead of writing a top-down political history or bottom-up social history, Laderman has written a cultural history that explores how tourism and travel writing have, from the late 1950s through the early 2000s, been "intertwined with the projection of American power" into Southeast Asia (10). Laderman treats travel and tourism not as ends in themselves, but as an "interpretive lens" (11) through which he can understand the larger issues of U.S. ideology and the construction of historical memory. Over the course of five chapters, Laderman argues that travel writing legitimated the Diem regime, sold military service as a form of pleasurable tourism, reproduced myths of Communist savagery, and naturalized capitalist economic principles. Laderman also reads guidebooks as instances of popular history writing, and considers how the insights of professional historians are – and are not – filtering down to the average American tourist. Laderman earned his PhD in American Studies and his book participates in that field's "transnational turn," in which the study of American culture is combined with diplomatic history's traditional focus on the exercise of U.S. political and military power beyond the nation's borders.

*Tours of Vietnam* is an uneven work of scholarship. As the subtitle suggests, the book has two main interpretive foci: the travel guides to Vietnam that were produced during and after the war by both American and Vietnamese writers, and the memories of the war that were discursively constructed by a variety of cultural producers and social actors after 1975. Those portions of the book that take memory as their central object of inquiry are far stronger than those devoted primarily to travel guides. Ultimately, the book is stronger when it thinks historically about memory than when it thinks textually about travel writing.

The book has two main weak spots. The first is its oversimplified understanding of the concept of ideology. Laderman neither defines this term nor engages with those theorists, such as Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, or Frederic Jameson, who have used it most productively to analyze culture. *Tours of Vietnam* too often defaults to a reductive base-and-superstructure-type model of thinking in which works of culture more or less accurately reflect some external social or political reality; the less accurate the reflection, the more ideological the text. The guidebooks to Vietnam are ideological, according to Laderman, because they fail to reflect accurately a number of social and political realities (which Laderman spends many pages documenting), including: the Kennedy administration's awareness in the early 1960s of the Diem regime's instability, the nature of and motivations for the so-called Hue massacre of 1968, and the economic consequences of the market reforms launched in the 1980s. Travel writing, in Laderman's formulation, often works to "erase" (30), "mask" (51), "elide" (53), "ignor[e]" (69), "cloak" (69), and "distort" (83) the truths of the war.

The second (and related) problem lies in the book's treatment of travel guides. Laderman does not interpret travel writings as expressive, *literary* texts and offers no analysis of

travel writing as a distinct genre, beholden to its own formal conventions, commercial motivations, and assumptions about audiences. Too often Laderman condemns travel guides for failing to meet the standards of academic history writing: they ignore scholarly debates, reduce complexities, and do not consider competing narratives. At the same time, the book is focused quite narrowly on guidebooks, without adequately situating them within larger cultural discourses about Vietnam that may include alternative or competing representations. Although Laderman at times gestures towards this cultural milieu, he rarely brings it into focus with any depth. As a result, there are jarring moments when the travel texts under consideration utterly fail to illuminate – or even connect to – a given historical situation. For example, towards the end of the chapter on Defense Department guidebooks of the 1960s and early 1970s, which Laderman argues served to instill “in military personnel the ideological assumptions of American global anti-Communism” (55), Laderman notes that by the early 1970s the U.S. Army was in a state of near collapse, with rampant drug use, racial tensions, “fragging,” and insubordination. But he can’t connect the guidebooks and their work of ideological indoctrination to this state of near mutiny. Did the guidebooks present an internally flawed or unpersuasive ideological message to the troops? Were soldiers coming to see their presence in Vietnam through other, more potent interpretive frameworks? If this is the case, what were those frameworks and how were they circulating? In the absence of a sophisticated model of ideology that can account for the multiple, competing, and fluid explanations for the U.S. presence in Vietnam, Laderman can only introduce, but not explain, this seeming contradiction.

While the guidebooks may represent a valuable new archive for diplomatic historians, in the end, Laderman does not offer new ways to understand the *relationship between* travel writing and the exercise of U.S. power abroad. He makes the same basic argument that scholars of Cold War culture have been making for many years, namely, that the guides functioned as “tools of ideological indoctrination” (73), unproblematic vessels for the dominant American ideologies pertaining to Asia, from anti-communism and modernization theory in the 1960s and 1970s to the celebration of capitalism in the 1990s.

*Tours of Vietnam* becomes much more impressive when it steps back from travel writing to foreground the larger questions of historical memory and the construction of historical narratives. The chapter on Hue becomes fascinating when it undertakes a rhetorical analysis of how the myth of the Hue massacre has been invoked by a range of political actors to achieve a range of different ends. Laderman traces how the Nixon administration used Hue to justify the U.S. intervention in Vietnam, how right-wing activists used it in the 2004 presidential election campaign to discredit John Kerry, and how members of the Vietnamese diaspora used it after the war to educate their children about the Communist government they fled. Laderman suggests persuasively how constructions of the past can play a vital role in negotiating diverse political dilemmas in the present. While ideology is still central to this argument – Laderman proposes that the myth of the massacre worked as a “salve for America’s wounded collective conscience” (122) by diverting attention away from the much larger violence perpetrated by the U.S. during the war – Laderman is able to address a series of more nuanced questions. These include: How are memories of traumatic historical events constructed? Who produces and invokes these memories and to

what ends? How can they remain available for retrieval and re-use decades later? How do diverse social groups invoke the same memory for a variety of purposes?

The final chapter, on the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, is a masterpiece of cultural analysis. Laderman is able to explore the Museum as a rich cultural artifact that extends beyond the exhibit itself and includes comments written in the museum's guest book and the reflections of scores of museum visitors, as well as the framing of the museum in the requisite guidebooks. Laderman brings the question of historical memory vividly to life as he shows real people struggling in diverse ways to reconcile competing versions of the origins of and rationales for the war. Here we finally get a sense of the complexity and diversity of American perspectives that is largely absent from the earlier chapters. Leaving behind stale notions of monolithic ideologies, Laderman undertakes a far more productive exploration of how the museum provokes crises in visitors that are both historical in nature (Did the U.S. engage in a counter-revolutionary war or a defensive war against external aggression?) and moral (How can we make sense of the horrors that U.S. policy and American soldiers perpetrated?). This chapter also finally engages with the broader body of American cultural representations of the war, raising questions about the diverse sources of popular historical knowledge and interrogating what happens when competing versions of the past come into conflict. Finally, Laderman brings the Ho Chi Minh City exhibit into productive conversation with similar memorials that Americans have constructed at home. He notes incisively that while American visitors to the War Remnants Museum often bitterly critiqued the lack of attention to American suffering during the war, virtually no American guidebooks even noted the complete absence of Vietnamese names and experiences from the war memorials in Washington, DC. Laderman observes with great insight that to locate the Vietnamese people at the center of the historical narrative was, for many Americans, "to reveal an ideological bias," while placing Americans in that position was regarded as "ideologically neutral" and even "normative" (165).

With this final chapter, Laderman makes a significant contribution to the cultural history of America's war in Vietnam.

Scott Laderman's *Tours of Vietnam: War, Travel Guides, and Memory* is a welcome addition to the growing body of United States scholarship on the American War in Vietnam that takes seriously Vietnamese points of view. Laderman signals his intentions from the beginning in his nuanced prefatory note on the "Nomenclature of the Vietnam War," where he exhibits a trademark attention to detail in discussing the politics of naming. Here he remarks on how the "Vietnam War" signals an American perspective, while the "American War" shifts the perspective to the Vietnamese, for whom the war was an episode in a much longer history of conflict. But even the "American War" has some limitations, as Laderman notes. A North-South war, a civil war, a second Indochina War—all of these names frame the war in significantly different ways, as does Viet Cong versus National Liberation Front, North Vietnamese Army versus People's Army of Vietnam, South Vietnam versus Republic of Vietnam. Laderman rehearses these terms and more in order to indicate that American commentators on the war have all too often been careless in considering the war's complexities, often excluding Vietnamese viewpoints. Laderman's book is then a necessary and important corrective to, and critique of, some of these American approaches.

While Laderman takes to task American academics and journalists for obfuscating the war's representation as they deal with events like the "Hue massacre," the main objects of his insightful criticism are the travel guides that arm western tourists to Vietnam. He makes a compelling and persuasive case for how travel guides condense dominant western thinking about Vietnam, becoming ideological tour guides behind masks of seemingly neutral cultural observations about land, people, and history. Laderman's excellent chapter on the "Hue massacre" spells out the connection between academic and journalistic distortions of the event and how these distortions eventually became common sense, repeated in travel guides and repeated again in tourists' remarks left at comment books in Vietnamese museums. Laderman traces how American journalists, scholars and politicians exaggerated an atrocity in which the NLF executed several hundred captured South Vietnamese so that the numbers of the dead grew to several thousand. The exaggeration was useful at a time when revelations about the My Lai massacre were just beginning to circulate, allowing Americans and South Vietnamese alike the opportunity to point to the atrocities of the other side.

Laderman's scholarship, which gives credence and even prominence to Vietnamese experiences, can be understood as part of a left wing approach to the political, cultural, and intellectual outcome of the American War. While the right wing has recast the war as a noble anti-Communist endeavor that failed because of weaknesses in American leadership and culture, the left has depicted the war as the foremost example of American imperialist behavior, one that continues in Iraq and Afghanistan. This critique of American foreign policy goes hand-in-hand with other changes wrought in American society and academia because of the war, namely the impact of "new social movements" that advocated for the rights of minorities, including women, people of color, and gays and lesbians, which directly influenced and were influenced by the antiwar movement. The resulting necessity

for cultural sensitivity and the rise of multiculturalism within the United States have probably shaped tourists' sensibilities as they go overseas, and they have also shaped scholarship. Thus, American studies, which in the 1950s was oriented towards understanding and advocating American exceptionalism, is today indelibly marked by the war and its aftermath, becoming both more multicultural and also more critical of American culture and politics. At the same time, the discipline of American studies has taken a related international turn, beginning slowly in the 1970s and accelerating post 9/11. Laderman's book expresses these tendencies in American studies scholarship towards an antiwar critique, an international orientation, and a commitment to acknowledging the other. In all these matters, but from the perspective of Vietnamese studies, a valuable supplement to his work can be found in Christina Schwenkel's *The American War in Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation* (Indiana University Press, 2009), a fascinating examination of Vietnamese efforts at remembering the war.

In both books, however, the authors' sensitivity towards Vietnamese points of view is felt mostly for the war's winners. Marginal attention is paid to dissident perspectives from Vietnam and its war-created diaspora, which numbers roughly 3.5 million. This neglect, too, is an outcome of the genealogy of American studies scholars and of U.S. scholars doing Vietnamese studies, where both sets are shaped by antiwar sensibilities and sympathy with the Vietnamese as victims of American aggression. As a result, American writers and scholars usually either overlook the South Vietnamese of the losing side or cast them as followers of a corrupt regime and an illegitimate nation. Thus, when it comes to the South Vietnamese of the losing side, Laderman's scholarship is most useful in demonstrating the Republic of Vietnam's agreement with American aims, and is particularly revealing in its treatment of the RVN's militarized relationship to tourism. His chapter on the Republic's quixotic wartime efforts to promote tourism reveals a little-known aspect of the Republic's history, one where tourist literature was mostly about legitimizing the RVN through government management of tourism as equal parts public relations and diplomacy. And, as Laderman points out, Vietnamese women played a key part in tourist promotion and tourist guide literature, serving as the welcoming face (and body) of the Republic. Women are still central, and in the same way, in Vietnamese diasporic travel guides to Vietnam, which are mostly video documentaries about a rebuilt Vietnam's pleasures for overseas returning Vietnamese. Comparing how overseas Vietnamese use tourism and produce travel guides with western and state-sponsored Vietnamese guides, which are Laderman's focus, might have illuminated a very different tourist sensibility.

The absence of overseas or dissident Vietnamese perspectives does not dispel my appreciation for Laderman's arguments or the depth of his archival work, evident throughout his rich and rewarding book. Besides uncovering wartime South Vietnamese and American travel guides, he also reveals surprising incidents such as the tantalizing fact that in 1958 Dorothea Lange visited Vietnam. She was cognizant then of some of the implications of the American presence in Vietnam and two other Asian countries she visited on that tour, South Korea and the Philippines. "We are like a conqueror nation," she says of the United States, and it was this fact—or perception—that the tourism literature of both the Republic of Vietnam and the United States was designed to obscure. Laderman's

reading of the different editions of the U.S. wartime tourist literature—travel guides produced by the military for American soldiers in Vietnam—brings to light a little-known body of writing that served as propaganda for the American soldier. Laderman's connection of wartime travel guides to present-day travel guides shows convincingly that tourism literature has had, for a long time, uses that are as much political as cultural.

Studying tourism literature and the tourism industry, Laderman is particularly sharp at revealing American biases. He does so most powerfully in his chapter on the War Remnants Museum, the most controversial tourist site in Vietnam and also one of the most popular, where depictions of U.S. war atrocities constitute a significant part of the exhibit. Interviewing visitors and reading their written responses in the museum's comment books, Laderman shows that foreigners' reactions tend to fall in one of two areas: sympathy with the Vietnamese, and a corollary antiwar sentiment, or anger and rejection at alleged Vietnamese propaganda. Those who reject the museum's exhibits demand equitable representation and an acknowledgment of American suffering. Travel guides often participate in decrying the perceived bias of the museum. But, Laderman points out, no such equity of representation exists in American treatments of the war, and the museum's depiction of Americans is far more just than the distortions or erasure of the Vietnamese in American sites of memory, such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The demand for balance, Laderman argues, is mostly a refusal to acknowledge the exhibition of American exceptionalism's spectacular failure. By the time Laderman reaches his conclusion, I am in full agreement when he writes that "the placement of Vietnamese experiences at the center of the war's history proved so unsettling to tourists accustomed to remembering the war as, above all, an American tragedy that the museum inspired a backlash....The War Remnants Museum has been held by tourists and travel writers to a standard quite different from that for American institutions. The singular focus in the United States on American suffering has always seemed entirely natural" (188).

The history of the museum itself is symptomatic of Laderman's arguments. I visited the museum in 2002, roughly the same time as Laderman did, and again in 2009. From a collection of small, decaying war-era buildings that had housed U.S. Information Services, the museum had been transformed into an impressive, gray monolith, a three-story archive presumably benefitting from the enormous tourist traffic over the years. In 2009, the general comment books that Laderman read were no longer available to be signed in the lobby. Instead, the only comment books I found were in the wing devoted to Japanese photographers' images of Agent Orange victims (and given the nature of that exhibit, not much critical was said of the museum). The bottles with the deformed fetuses and stillbirths caused by Agent Orange were no longer on display. Many of the photographs showing U.S. war atrocities that disturbed some tourists were still on view, but the captions had been changed. Whereas in 2002 the captions were in an ungrammatical English that must have had some impact on American tourist perceptions, many of the captions in 2009 were in a more fluent English and were often less critical of Americans. A particularly horrific photograph of an American soldier carrying the head and spine of a Vietnamese corpse stuck in my mind from 2002, when its caption quoted the remarks of the Japanese photographer who took the image: "The American soldier laughed satisfactorily....In my feelings I wondered whether he could have been a monster or a human being?" Now the

caption reads: “ A GI from the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, holding a part of the corpse of a Liberation soldier...”

The War Remnants Museum has, like the rest of Vietnam, revised itself drastically in the course of a decade, at least partially to become more hospitable to foreign tourists. Laderman captures the meaning of this revision in his chapter on how travel guides deal with Vietnam’s efforts to compete in a globalizing, capitalist environment, beginning in 1986. The travel guides uniformly laud such efforts, contrasting them with the failures of the state-controlled economy from 1975 until the mid-1980s. But, as Laderman rightly points out, the travel guides put little stress on the role of the U.S. embargo in stifling Vietnam’s postwar economy, as well as the worsening economic inequality between classes that has resulted from Vietnam’s economic renovation. The travel guides, in other words, serve not only to orient the tourist’s memory of the past in a certain direction but also endorse free-market capitalism with little, if any, qualification. Both gestures provide aid and comfort to the western tourist, enabling the foreign visitor to ignore the trauma of the past and forget the difficulties of the present. Laderman argues that travel guides are part of a continuing effort to shape tourist perspectives on Vietnam before tourists even make contact with the country or the people, an effort beginning with an American revisionism of history that is most spectacularly evident in U.S. war films about Vietnam. But the power of Laderman’s argument is even more evident if we consider the possibility that many Americans no longer even have a cinematic memory of the war to begin with. This is certainly the case with my students, almost none of whom have seen *Platoon* or *Apocalypse Now*, and most of whom think of *Tropic Thunder* as a Ben Stiller comedy rather than a Vietnam War comedy. In this environment, young Americans and other foreigners heading to Vietnam may carry with them only the vaguest ideas about the war’s history or U.S. relations with Vietnam. But among the things they will surely carry are travel guides like the ones Laderman reads so adeptly and acutely. These travel guides not only explain the ways of rest and recreation, they also explain history and shape memory through gestures both subtle and explicit, proving Laderman’s point that the literature of tourism has an ideological pulse.

*From Reading Ideology To Gauging Reception: A Rejoinder*

It is customary to begin an author's response by thanking the forum hosting the roundtable and the reviewers whose time and commitment made its publication possible. I wish to offer such thanks, though hardly because I am required by custom to do so. My appreciation is deep and heartfelt. I am extremely grateful to have had my first book selected by H-Diplo for a roundtable, and I thank Tom Maddux and the entire crew of H-Diplo volunteers for this honor. And I of course want to thank Mark Bradley, Seth Jacobs, Christina Klein, and Viet Thanh Nguyen – four wonderful scholars whom I greatly admire – for their thoughtful and typically insightful comments.

Because Christina Klein offers the most extensive critique of my book, and because the esteem in which I hold her work necessitates that I take this criticism seriously, the bulk of my remarks will be devoted to her review. In offering a rejoinder, I certainly do not want to come off as too nit-picky. After all, Klein wrote that the last chapter of *Tours of Vietnam* was a “masterpiece of cultural analysis,” while certain other elements of the book were “impressive.” Still, I worry that she has at times misunderstood my study and what I sought to accomplish. “Those portions of the book that take memory as their central object of inquiry are far stronger than those devoted primarily to travel guides,” she concludes. I confess to finding this a difficult criticism to which to respond, as other reviewers have commended my detailed attention to the tourism publications. Nevertheless, I will try to do justice to Klein's concerns.

Klein writes that there are two “main weak spots” with *Tours of Vietnam*. The first is “its oversimplified understanding of the concept of ideology.” Given what appears to be my general agreement with Klein on the nature of this concept, I was surprised by her comments. Perhaps I was insufficiently clear on this point in the book. I argued, or so I thought, not that “guidebooks to Vietnam are ideological ... because they fail to reflect accurately a number of social and political realities,” as she wrote. Rather, I argued, they are ideological because all explanatory frameworks are subjective constructions (119). This is significant, I believe, because guidebooks purport to be ideologically neutral and, as my interviews of tourists revealed, are generally considered as such by their readers.

It is not my belief that there exists a meta-reality just begging to be objectively recorded by historians. Indeed, I cited Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream* and Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* on precisely this point (8, 11, 119). But I do believe that, whether socially constructed or not, there are certain realities in this world. It is unclear to me whether Klein is suggesting otherwise. If so, then we do depart on this issue. To be sure, I do not accept that there is something called “the truths” about the war – Klein's use of “the” implies a totality to which I do not prescribe – but I do accept that there are, at least, some realities (I did not actually use the term “truths,” or at least not in the manner she suggested) that scholars and others have been able to discern. It is a historical reality, for instance, that some number of Vietnamese were executed or otherwise killed in Hue and its

environs in 1968, just as it is a reality that Vietnam has seen a growth in economic inequality since the mid-1980s. How these realities are interpreted and inscribed may in part be a function of ideology – and here it would be useful to consider Trouillot’s remarks about power and the construction of narratives to which I referred in the book’s introduction (11) – but that they are realities I do not doubt. The fact that travel guidebooks have consistently constructed narratives about these and other realities in a manner largely favorable to American global ambitions is something I find significant. That these narratives are presented as settled – in spite of scholarly views suggesting otherwise – is also, I believe, significant.

When Klein faults *Tours of Vietnam* for making “the same basic argument that scholars of Cold War culture have been making for many years, namely, that the guides functioned as ‘tools of ideological indoctrination’ (73), unproblematic vessels for the dominant American ideologies pertaining to Asia,” I feel compelled to respond that when I referred to “tools of ideological indoctrination” I was specifically discussing the Pentagon’s pocket guides for Vietnam. This was, as an abundance of documentary evidence demonstrates, their avowed purpose. And it is simply not true that I view guidebooks as “unproblematic vessels.” Indeed, I explicitly stated that “people read guidebooks in different ways and are capable of problematizing their narratives” (8). Still, as I pointed out, most tourists – or at least most of those I interviewed – tend to read them as reliable and “objective” sources of information. This was so, I suggested, because while “Americans hardly arrived in Vietnam as *tabula rasae* entirely unfamiliar with their nation’s history in Indochina,” the “historical discourses extant in their travel guidebooks” were “consistent with many of the representations of the war in most standard U.S. history texts and in American popular culture” (121).

Klein draws on the example of the Pentagon’s pocket guides for Vietnam – and I agree with Seth Jacobs that these are “remarkable primary sources” – to illustrate what she sees as the book’s failure to adequately situate its focus on guidebooks “within larger cultural discourses about Vietnam that may include alternative or competing representations.” Her specific concern is the late 1960s and early 1970s. The questions she raises are good ones. Referring in particular to the third edition of the pocket guide published in 1971 (the first two editions appeared in 1963 and 1966), I noted how the Department of Defense published the guide at roughly the same time as the publication of the Pentagon Papers, an event that would “demonstrate to millions of Americans the extent to which government officials had deceived the public for well over a decade about the realities of the Vietnamese political situation and their effects on the U.S. military campaign.” I also noted the state of grave peril in which the armed forces then found themselves, citing Colonel Robert Heinl’s famous (and controversial) judgment that “our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse.” While the United States had for years been attempting to win the “hearts and minds” of Vietnamese, I wrote, “it was clear by the early 1970s that American policymakers had lost the broad support of even their own military charges.” The pocket guide, I thus suggested, “reflected the U.S. government’s deteriorating political and military control” and signified a “desperate embrace of the [war’s] crumbling official narrative” (80-81). So, to create a question out of one of Klein’s statements, how

would I “connect the guidebooks and their work of ideological indoctrination to this state of near mutiny?”

First, let me say that Klein’s criticism is well taken. While I do not agree that it indicates anything about a “sophisticated model of ideology,” I probably should have said more about why the Pentagon’s indoctrination efforts were so clearly failing by the late 1960s and early 1970s. Offering an extensive analysis of military dissent was not the purpose of my book, but clearly greater attention to why so many American troops stopped subscribing to the Cold War mission would have been useful. Although she did not raise the “r” word, it seems to me that Klein is nodding toward an issue also touched on by Mark Bradley: the question of reception. For *Tours of Vietnam*, it was generally easier to address reception issues with more recent travel guidebooks than it was for the Pentagon’s pocket guides. After all, I could, among other things, interview or otherwise speak with tourists, consult what they had written, and ask the author of the most popular guidebook for Vietnam about feedback he had received from readers. I could also better address issues of reception for publications for which a fuller archival record exists, such as the *Guide to Vietnam* published by the RVN’s Washington embassy (28-29) or the *Armed Forces Talk* series that I discussed in chapter two (55-60). But for certain publications, such as the pocket guides created and disseminated by the Department of Defense, this was a much greater challenge. The pocket guides were not purchased by the troops who read them, so there are no sales figures from which we might draw an inference. They were not the sorts of publications that would be selected for the Book-of-the-Month Club, nor were they subject to scholarly or popular review. My work in the archives, moreover, uncovered only minimal correspondence regarding the Pentagon guides (206, n. 50). How, then, do we get at issues of reception with publications such as these? As unsatisfying as this response may be, I am still not entirely sure. The best I can do is suggest that the pocket guides’ narratives would almost certainly have been increasingly rejected by a substantial number of those who encountered them as the 1960s progressed. What Klein called “alternative or competing representations” of the war, as well as direct experience “in country,” indeed had an effect on the troops. I assumed this would have been understood by the book’s readers, but I could have been more explicit in saying as much.

The second “main weak spot” Klein identifies in the book is in some ways related to the first. *Tours of Vietnam*, she writes, “does not interpret travel writings as expressive, *literary* texts and offers no analysis of travel writing as a distinct genre, beholden to its own formal conventions, commercial motivations, and assumptions about audiences.” Klein is probably right that I could have done more to address how travel guidebooks constitute a unique genre. I indirectly sought to do so in the introduction, but undoubtedly more could have been said. Still, I am a bit reluctant to conflate guidebooks with “travel writing” more broadly. Guidebooks clearly are a form of travel writing. But, it must be noted, they differ fundamentally from the more traditional manifestations of that genre in that they are intended to be principally referential. Tourists turn to guidebooks, as Seth Jacobs hilariously related, because they offer travel counsel, not travel stories. They are “instruments of instruction” (3), not tales of adventure, exploration, or self-discovery. Klein is right that they, like traditional travel writing (or perhaps together with it), do form a distinct genre, and guidebooks are, to be sure, literary instruments. Yet they attempt

something very different from travelogues. It is their avowed referential purpose that I sought to analyze in *Tours of Vietnam*.

Finally, Mark Bradley is correct that I could have given greater attention to “how the Vietnamese themselves are making sense of their own past and present.” As suggested by Viet Thanh Nguyen, tourist narratives might look quite different if we looked at the experiences not only of Vietnamese domestic tourists, as suggested by Bradley, but also at the overseas Vietnamese to whom Nguyen pointed. This makes sense. I did draw briefly on a Vietnamese-language guidebook to make a point about the War Remnants Museum (162), but Bradley is right that a fuller examination would likely offer a “fascinating counter-narrative” to the one I provide. Both Nguyen and Bradley may be interested to know that I have in my files numerous entries recorded by Vietnamese in the comment books at the War Remnants Museum. I left these out of *Tours of Vietnam*, thinking that I would address them in a separate publication on tourism and Vietnamese memory. Then other priorities emerged, and Christina Schwenkel published her excellent book. Alas, they remain in my files.

---

**Copyright © 2010 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.** H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the H-Diplo Editors at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).

---