

# Vietnam's War-Memorial Museums: Diverse Narratives and Multiple Histories Searching for Identity

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Nearly four decades since the American-Vietnam War (1956–1975)<sup>1</sup> ended and North and South Vietnam united politically, no common, nationalist, victory narrative appears across Vietnam's war memorials and museums. Instead, Vietnam's war memorials and museums present divergent narratives of the historical events, places, and people (including warriors, victims, witnesses, and leaders) they have commemorated in common. The educational and political agendas accompanying the narratives vary widely comprising the truths or lies they advance, the memories they highlight, and the values they promote.

In this article, I analyze the narratives of four prominent *war-memorial-museum* sites in Vietnam through the lens of Hayden White's metahistory model<sup>2</sup> juxtaposing the stories the museums tell with visitors' comments on social media to illuminate divergent cultural identities and pedagogical aspirations across these four, Vietnamese, cultural institutions. To inform my analysis, I couple Stuart Hall's<sup>3</sup> theory of knowledge construction and representation with Foucault's<sup>4</sup> theory of institutions' power-knowledge tension. After identifying the four, war-memorial-museum sites I analyze, I define and explain White's<sup>5</sup> concept of metahistory and apply his employment types to characterize memorials' and museums' narratives as literary typologies. I then briefly explain Hall's<sup>6</sup> particular approach to knowledge construction and representation and Foucault's concept of institutional power-knowledge tension. With this multi-layered theoretical foundation in place, I define and explain museums, memorials, and war-memorial museums particularly drawing upon scholarship examining such institutions' narrative meanings and values, for this scholarship complements White's<sup>7</sup> and Hall's<sup>8</sup> theories. I then analyze four, war-memorial-museums' narratives in juxtaposition to blogs from various visitor, social-media sites through the lens of White's metahistory. Ultimately, I gain insight into and draw conclusions about the war-memorial-museums' roles in shaping Vietnamese citizens' cultural memories of their war experiences, in defining national or global

identities, in making historical meanings, and in promoting political and educational agendas.

While recognizing my limitations as a short-term, foreign visitor to Vietnam, one with biases of a former anti-war advocate and draft-age, Asian-American, conscientious objector, I analyze these Vietnamese, war-memorial museums, study their narratives, and thereby uncover the cultural-historical identities each narrative advances and illustrates and the pedagogical or moral missions emerging from each narrative. Following, I list the four museums I analyze indicating each museum's location and declared purpose.

1. *The Ho Chi Minh Museum* in Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, is a tribute to the most revered and honored leader in Vietnam's history.
2. *The Củ Chi Tunnels War Memorial Park*, located outside Ho Chi Minh City proper, part of a 75-mile-long (121 km) complex of connecting underground tunnels, now provides visitors with a taste of how the Viet Cong heroically lived and fought U.S. soldiers through these tunnels.<sup>9</sup>
3. *The War Remnants Museum*, a large, Vietnamese, government-operated museum in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), the former capital of South Vietnam, primarily documents atrocities U.S. and South Vietnamese militaries committed and challenges the legality of the U.S. involvement in the war.
4. *The Sơn Mỹ Memorial*, on the grounds of the 1968 Mỹ Lai Massacre where U.S. Army soldiers brutally killed an estimated 347–508 unarmed villagers.<sup>10</sup>

### **Hayden White's Metahistory Analysis**

In *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe*, Hayden White presents history as imaginative construction historians build using the raw materials—facts, chronicles, annals, events, and other artifacts—at their disposal.<sup>11</sup> Proposing a metahistory model,<sup>12</sup> White defines an historical account as “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them*.”<sup>13</sup>

White's argument for the metahistory model is based on several interpretive principles: 1) any historical work contains “a deep structural content which is generally poetic, and specifically linguistic, in nature, and which serves as the precritically accepted paradigm of what a distinctively ‘historical’ explanation should be”;<sup>14</sup> 2) this metahistorical

understructure is composed of three kinds of strategies historians use “to gain different kinds of ‘explanatory affect.’ [White calls] these different strategies explanation by formal argument, explanation by emplotment, and explanation by ideological implication”;<sup>15</sup> 3) for explanations by emplotment, western historians consciously or subconsciously choose from among four, western, literary-genre archetypes—Romance, Comedy, Satire, and Tragedy—to explain or represent their data;<sup>16</sup> 4) “there are no apodictically certain theoretical grounds on which one can legitimately claim an authority for any one of the modes over others as being more ‘realistic’”;<sup>17</sup> 5) therefore, the best grounds for choosing among contending interpretive strategies or “for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological”;<sup>18</sup> and 6) this choice historians make “represents only the statement of a preference for a specific modality of historical conceptualization, the grounds of which are either moral or aesthetic, but the epistemological justification of which still remains to be established.”<sup>19</sup>

Whether in the form of a textbook, biography, novel, or movie, the historical account results from the historian’s and author’s organizing a chronicle of events into a coherent story or plot which then becomes history when the historian makes it conform to his or her individual preferences thereby making it meaningful *as history*.<sup>20</sup> This conforming means choosing, consciously or subconsciously, an emplotment or literary genre—Romance, Comedy, Satire, Tragedy—through which to frame the history telling; selecting a mode of argument or means of explaining the narrative; and choosing an ideology through which to establish point of view.<sup>21</sup> White explains:

Narrative accounts of real historical events, then, admit as many equally plausible versions of their representation as there are plot structures available in a given culture for endowing stories, whether fictional or real, with meanings.... The demonstration that a given set of events can be represented as a comedy implicitly argues for the possibility of representing it with equal plausibility as a tragedy, romance, farce, epic, and so on.<sup>22</sup>

In this analysis, I focus primarily on analyzing the four museums through the four kinds of emplotments—literary genres or archetypes—into which historical narratives fall (Romance, Satire, Comedy, and Tragedy<sup>23</sup>) with some attention to the ideologies the museums’ designers and curators project through the emplotments they consciously or subconsciously select. White defines the four emplotments in his metahistory as follows:

The Romance is fundamentally a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero’s transcendence of the world of

experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it.... The archetypal theme of Satire is the precise opposite of this Romantic drama of redemption; it is, in fact a drama of diremption, a drama dominated by the apprehension that man is ultimately a captive of the world rather than its master, and by the recognition that...human consciousness and will are always inadequate to the task of overcoming definitively the dark forces of death, which is man's unrelenting enemy.<sup>24</sup>

In Comedy, hope is held out for the temporary triumph of man over his world by the prospect of occasional *reconciliations* of the forces at play in the social and natural worlds.... In Tragedy, there are no festive occasions, except false or illusory ones; rather there are intimations of states of division among men more terrible than that which incited the tragic agon at the beginning of the drama.<sup>25</sup>

The four-genres model provides investigators a form through which to describe the ways in which historians and, in the case of this study, museum designers work to distill a judgment, "truth," or value imperative from the chronicle of events and the plot the chronicle weaves.<sup>26</sup>

### **Hall's Knowledge Construction Meets Foucault's Power-Knowledge Tension**

I draw my assumptions in this inquiry from cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall's<sup>27</sup> theory of knowledge construction and representation. Hall extends knowledge-construction beyond theorizing that the natural and social world is a matter of human and social meaning making<sup>28</sup> to explain that the constructionist researcher "recognizes [the] public, social character of language...acknowledges that neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language. Things don't *mean*: *we construct* meaning, using representational systems—concepts and signs."<sup>29</sup> In turn, these constructed knowledges and truths relate to the exercise of power, to Foucault's<sup>30</sup> proposition that knowledge, truth, and power are linked. Hence, the relation among constructed knowledges, truths, and power explains how museum designers and curators use the sites' exhibits and presentations to promote the knowledge and truths they have constructed from the historical data and artifacts to which they have access.

I apply Hall's<sup>31</sup> theory of constructivist meaning-making and knowledge-production in conjunction with Foucault's<sup>32</sup> knowledge-power tension to three context groups in my analysis: (1) to the museum designers and curators, (2) to the museum audiences, and (3) to me as researcher making and analyzing these observations and here reporting

my results. In the first context group, the museum designers and curators have construed and derived *their* knowledge, meaning, and truths from their experiences, expertise, and informed or uninformed biases. They exert influence—exercise power—by using the historical data and artifacts comprising the sites' exhibits, participatory events, and other presentations to advance their individually constructed knowledges and meanings as truths they want the public to accept and embrace. Per Foucault's knowledge-power argument,<sup>33</sup> the discourse in the sites' presentations carries an authority of truth and the clout to *make itself true* by means of public presentation.<sup>34</sup>

The museum audiences in turn make meaning out of *their* experiences of shared memories, retold narratives, and reinforced truths or falsehoods they see in the exhibits. By entering the museum and engaging in the exhibits, visitors are participating, consciously or subconsciously, in the museum's initiation of power relationships inherent in the institution's public presentation of knowledge as Foucault asserts: "We should admit...that power produces knowledge...that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge."<sup>35</sup> Museum visitors individually choose how open they are in their viewing, listening, and learning the information, meanings, and messages museum designers and curators have presented. The understandings they gain and the meanings they make in accepting, challenging, or revising the museum designers' intended meanings and messages also connect to visitors' personal power in the knowledge-power equation.

Third, the patterns I identify, analyze, and interpret as researcher become *my* constructed knowledge, meanings, and truths. Just as each museum's narrative emerges filtered through the designers' and curators' biases, so my research narrative, this article, emerges as the third context group of constructivist meaning-making and knowledge-production I present. Such personal and cultural biases as my being a short-term, foreign visitor in Vietnam choosing to study these four, war-museum memorials with my still-unforgettable memories of being an anti-war advocate and draft-age, Asian-American, conscientious objector during the American-Vietnam war filter my observations, interpretations, and, as a result, my knowledge construction, meaning-making, and truth derivation. As investigator-researcher, I *construct* the patterns I observe, the themes I identify, and the conclusions I draw and then present them in this article and journal. Similar to designers and curators, I present *my* truths wanting readers to accept and embrace them. I am aware I exercise power over readers by virtue of the legitimacy (which is also

constructed and open to challenge) I project through my Asian-American heritage, my anti-war advocacy, my physical presence at the museums, my analysis of visitors' blogs, and my status as university professor and scholar publishing in a scholarly journal. That is, the very biases that filter my knowledge construction and meaning-making help legitimize for readers my research narrative.

Others cannot objectively verify the knowledges and meanings museum designers and curators, audiences, and researchers construct and make respectively as truths since they all construct their own knowledge, make their own meanings, and derive their own truths—just as readers here do—based upon their backgrounds and how they perceive and interpret the events and facts to which they have access.<sup>36</sup> As a result of their knowledge construction, meaning-making, and truth derivation, museum designers and curators, audiences, and researchers exercise power, albeit differently: “there is no...knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations.”<sup>37</sup>

### **Museums, Memorials, and War-Memorial Museums**

In the 19th century, museums shifted from private “cabinets of curiosity”<sup>38</sup> showcasing their owners' wealth and experiences to public purveyors of the national history, culture, and values. The museum as public purveyor, particularly one that focuses on the history and memory of past events, places, or people, is, then, an institution that conserves and exhibits a collection of culturally or historically important artifacts.<sup>39</sup> Communication studies and social thought scholar Miranda J. Brady applies Foucault's concept, *heterotopia*,<sup>40</sup> to characterize museums as places that reflect, distort, and influence reality.<sup>41</sup> Brady argues that in museums' attempts to represent reality, they tend to reflect the mainstream, historical narratives at the time of their creation.<sup>42</sup> Sociologist Myriam Sepúlveda dos Santos<sup>43</sup> moves beyond narrative to representation: museums “have been described as powerful social elements in the building of national symbols.”<sup>44</sup> French cultural history scholar Daniel J. Sherman<sup>45</sup> combines Brady's notion of narrative with Santos' idea of representation postulating “the museum's founding fiction, [is] that an arrangement of heterogeneous objects can constitute a logically consistent representation of the world.”<sup>46</sup> Infused with meaning, the museums' objects and artifacts weave a plot that claims legitimacy as historical truth positing “this production of memory as history seeks not to annihilate memory but to transform it, to produce in visitors a new and different set of memories as a basis for a collective identity.”<sup>47</sup> Sherman views visitors' *own* memories of the museum as henceforth connecting them to the collective identity the museum exhibits and narratives offer.<sup>48</sup>

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, museums' role again shifted, this time to converge with that of memorials and historical monuments. Designers now construct museums and memorials to define and promote collective and individual memory, identity, and practices.<sup>49</sup> This converging of museums' and memorials' roles supports Sherman's contention that the visitors' own memories of the museum connect them to the collective identity the museum exhibits and narratives promote.<sup>50</sup>

In *Memorial Museums: The Gold Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*,<sup>51</sup> museum studies scholar Paul Williams suggests a different means of establishing collective identity, defining the *memorial museum* as "a specific kind of museum dedicated to a historic event commemorating mass suffering of some kind."<sup>52</sup> If one considers war to be a form of "mass suffering," then one might apply Williams' definition of *memorial museum* to the four institutions I examine in this study. Hence, the Vietnam war-memorial museums I analyze in this article are examples of cultural institutions that sociologist Lorena Rivera-Orraca describes as seeking to play a "central role in the construction of a coherent historical national discourse that reinforces a sense of collective identity and social cohesion through common understandings of order, aesthetics, and symbols."<sup>53</sup> Although the four war-memorial-museum sites may each be in a position to create a common, collective, Vietnamese national identity emerging from the war experience, there is yet to be consensus for a singular or unified national identity narrative. In turn, I examine each of the four museums in light of the scholarship I have summarized from Brady, Santos, Sherman, Williams, and Rivera-Orraca to demonstrate how they illustrate and thereby support these scholars' hypotheses.

The *Ho Chi Minh Museum* exemplifies Santos' assertion that museums are "powerful social elements in the building of national symbols."<sup>54</sup> The Ho Chi Minh Museum achieves this national symbol building through its primary function as an extended tribute to Vietnam's revered leader, Ho Chi Minh. Museum visitors observe the museum's elevating Ho Chi Minh into a national symbol; Foucault's claim museums reflect, distort, and influence reality;<sup>55</sup> and Sherman's notion museums weave plots that claim to be historical truths<sup>56</sup> as evidenced by visitors who describe the museum as "a propaganda tool of the Vietnamese communist regime, used to whitewash both the Communist Party and Ho Chi Minh's legacy and historical image."<sup>57</sup> This idealized memory assembled in the museum of Ho's persona spins a specific meaning for contemporary visitors: this museum's surprising, sometimes unexpected, and occasionally creative exhibits<sup>58</sup> suggest an

allegory depicting President Ho loathing the widespread corruption and totalitarian tendencies in the current Communist national and local governments.<sup>59</sup>

The *Củ Chi Tunnels War Memorial Park* also illustrates national symbol making—not of an individual, but of the memories associated with the Củ Chi Tunnels. By providing visitors with narratives of how the Viet Cong heroically lived and fought the U.S. military through these tunnels, the park’s designers created the memorial park as a symbol of heroism, glory, and victory.<sup>60</sup> The portions of the tunnel complex preserved for visitors to crawl through as part of their park experience illustrate Sherman’s thesis that these experiences “produce in visitors a new and different set of memories as a basis for a collective identity.”<sup>61</sup> It exemplifies Williams’ suggestion *memorial museums* serve to build a collective identity from commemorating mass suffering.<sup>62</sup> As the blogs’ text I examine in the next section indicate, the Viet Cong’s courage and determination impress some visitors who then accept this collective national identity the park designers advance. Other visitors, including some local Vietnamese and some international visitors, question or reject the park’s moral imperatives to join the collective identity and embrace the values of patriotism, heroism, courage, and defiant determinism.

In contrast to the glorified, warrior-as-hero, nationalist ideals the Củ Chi Tunnels advance, the *War Remnants Museum* primarily documents examples of atrocities the U.S. military and their allies committed and challenges the legality of U.S. involvement in the war. The museum recounts the story of a collective, Vietnamese citizenry a brutal, vicious, immoral, and inhumane enemy invaded and the international community betrayed. This identity narrative aligns with Foucault’s observation that museums reflect, distort, and influence reality,<sup>63</sup> with Brady’s view that museums reflect the historical narratives at the time of their creation,<sup>64</sup> and with Rivera-Orraca’s contention that museum designers try to construct “a coherent historical national discourse that reinforces a sense of collective identity and social cohesion.”<sup>65</sup> The argument is: although the U.S. violated international laws, treaties, and policies, the global community and the international justice system neither stopped this bully nation nor prosecuted it for committing such war crimes as using illegal chemical weapons—napalm, Agent Orange, and white phosphorus bombs, for example—among other war-time atrocities.<sup>66</sup> One sees the museum’s preserving the history of mass suffering (Williams) both through its documenting of war crimes and other atrocities and through its plea for visitors to recognize the on-going, Vietnamese anguish stemming from the international community’s betrayal. The War Remnants Museum appears to shape a collective

memory of the international justice and security systems' failure to uphold and enforce internationally agreed-upon legal, ethical, and humanitarian principles. Anthropologist Christina Schwenkel concludes: "The War Remnants Museum...demonstrates how museal institutions and the historical truths they produce are entangled in webs of global interdependencies and uneven relations of power that affect and shape the representation of knowledge and memory."<sup>67</sup> Hence, from within this context, the museum projects an agonistic national identity: the Vietnamese citizenry remains uncertain about its nation's sovereignty and membership in the international community.

Finally, the *Sơn Mỹ Memorial*, on the grounds of the 1968 Mỹ Lai Massacre, stands as witness and reminder of U.S. Army soldiers' killing over 500 villagers, slaughtering their livestock, and torching their homes and other buildings in the hamlet.<sup>68</sup> Instead of elevating a leader or a memorial park into a national symbol, this memorial's designers built the memorial to transcend nationalistic interests: it symbolizes human solidarity, remembrance, peace, and reconciliation—all transnational values—spinning a transnational identity narrative memorializing the villagers' suffering, healing, and reconciliation. The memorial evokes emotional responses that move visitors to reflect upon the madness that occurred perhaps inspiring them to search for paths toward healing, reconciliation, and solidarity with the Mỹ Lai victims. As a result, the Sơn Mỹ Memorial exemplifies both Williams' assertion that memorial museums function to build collective identity by memorializing a historic event involving mass suffering<sup>69</sup> and Sherman's notion that "this production of memory as history seeks...to transform it, to produce in visitors a new and different set of memories as a basis for a collective identity."<sup>70</sup>

### **Metahistorical Analysis: Visitor Blogs and Memorial-Museum Narratives**

I examine postings on travel blogs and social networks<sup>71</sup> to discern how visitors experience the memorials and museums; which messages and meanings visitors perceive; and what they think and feel about them. These visitor comments help to confirm or disconfirm patterns that emerged through analysis and kind of emplotment typology that the designers and curators chose, how the visitors read their narratives, and then the emplotment visitors' comments reveal. Such social media as *TripAdvisor* and *Blogger* are platforms where visitors share experiences, reflections, and interpretations of the museums. By doing so, the visitors accept, reinforce, or challenge the designers' and curators' intended messages and agendas narrated through the museum.

Examining the narratives the four museums tell through the lens of White's<sup>72</sup> metahistory-model reveals the following emplotments for the four museums I analyze.

### **Romance and Comedy: The Ho Chi Minh Museum**

The Ho Chi Minh Museum illustrates White's Romantic and Comedic emplotment typologies exemplifying White's contention that "a given historical account is likely to contain stories cast in one mode, as aspects or phases of the whole set of stories emplotted in another mode."<sup>73</sup> The Ho Chi Minh Museum's apparent aim to have viewers honor and revere President Ho Chi Minh as hero and icon fits White's definition of *Romance* "as a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it."<sup>74</sup> Here, the drama depicts President Ho's thinking and vision through modernist, art-gallery-style exhibits and traditional photo and story posters. The museum's designers and curators arrange the artifacts to highlight the "drama of the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness, and of the ultimate transcendence of man over the world."<sup>75</sup> Visitors reviewing the Ho Chi Minh Museum on *TripAdvisor.com* reveal an ambiance of honor and reverence from locals juxtaposed against ambiguity from international visitors. The following post gives a critical, tongue-in-cheek description:

The first floor is a collection of photos of HCM in various places staring at things or chatting with Russians. Overall, it's pretty dull. The 3<sup>rd</sup> floor is the most interesting. It's full of post-modern weird exhibits including a walk around HCM's brain, metal displays that wouldn't look out of place in Superman 2, partial recreations of Picasso's work and a Cadillac driving through a wall.... There are English explanations for most things, so you don't need a guide. Just a sense of humour.<sup>76</sup>

Another visitor says the museum:

...appears to be wholly dedicated to the adulation of Uncle Ho and his achievements, whilst taking a swipe at capitalism.... Have your photo taken beside a large painting of Uncle Ho. There's a real mix of wry humour and confronting historical concepts.<sup>77</sup>

The Ho Chi Minh Museum as *Comedy*—"the temporary triumph of man over his world by the prospect of occasional *reconciliations* of the forces at play"<sup>78</sup>—especially emerges in the playfulness and lightness bloggers observe. One calls the museum "weird and wonderful; serious and silly."<sup>79</sup> Their reading the museum's narrative as Comedy contrasts with

those visitors reading the narrative as Romance. Examining this museum's visitor responses in the blogs and briefly in the museum itself, I observe visitors reading the Ho Chi Minh Museum as either Romance or Comedy to be determined individually rather than determined according to a cultural pattern.

Although the Ho Chi Minh Museum primarily serves to reinforce the nation's collective adoration of its hero, the non-stereotyped exhibits and unexpected presentations draw visitors' attention to President Ho's multidimensional persona and perhaps a more nuanced agenda: the art-deco juxtapositions or the "unexpected wacky postmodern installations,"<sup>80</sup> the tongue-in-cheek playfulness, and the subtle, ironic subtext criticizing the current government apparently invite open discussion and even debate about President Ho's Chi Minh's life and legacy.

### ***Romance: The Cu Chi Tunnels War Memorial Park***

Similar to the Ho Chi Minh Museum's narrative, The Cù Chi Tunnels War Memorial Park uses *Romance* as its storytelling genre; Viet Cong soldiers are the heroes and heroines. Imploring viewers to remember and emulate the Viet Cong's courage and perseverance, the museum calls today's Vietnamese youth to rally, again to be ready to fight the "evil Americans" or any foreign invader. Viet Cong soldiers used the tunnels as hiding spots, supply routes, food and weapon caches, and living quarters. The tunnel systems helped the Viet Cong achieve ultimate military success against U.S. forces.<sup>81</sup>

The Vietnam government has turned the tunnels of Cù Chi into a war-memorial park lauding the soldiers'—including children and adolescent soldiers—patriotism, heroism, courage, and defiant determination. According to the site's orientation film, one, girl soldier, "lost her parents to a cowardly attack from the air by the Americans, but she came back with a strong hatred and fought valiantly and killed many Americans in return."<sup>82</sup> The rebuilt jungle area is designed like an amusement park so visitors may crawl through the narrow tunnels, gawk at instruments of torture, walk among life-sized, Viet Cong, warrior models dressed in fallen, U.S.-troops' GI gear, and fire actual rounds from an M-16 rifle or AK-47 machine gun. Blog accounts corroborate the memorial's effectively stimulating visitors' imaginations by creating thrilling simulations of Viet Cong warriors' experiences:

Tourists are encouraged to try crawling through the tunnel for about 200 meters only. I tried and am proud I made it! After experiencing the crawl through the dark, dingy tunnel, you just can't imagine how these Vietcongs survive in this guerrilla

warfare! I salute their determination and perseverance! ... After this visit to the Củ Chi Tunnel I can understand the hardship these guerrillas had to endure during the war and their profound aspiration for independence and the love for their country. Hail the Vietcong!<sup>83</sup>

The shooting range is also a popular attraction:

...we had several options of weapons to choose from: M 16 rifle, M 60 machine gun, carbine, K 59, etc. I already had my heart set on the AK-47, and paid roughly \$17 USD for the opportunity to shoot off just 10 rounds. All the guns were harnessed in place, which was an extreme disappointment. I envisioned shooting freely at my target all proper and tough, which isn't really how it turned out. I still ended up properly bruised afterwards, so it was well worth it.<sup>84</sup>

These accounts resonate with the park's agenda to promote the Vietnamese as strong, determined, and loyal warriors. Bloggers express excitement about being close to the deadly weapons and the thrill of firing them. However, other visitors recognize that this is the park's particular agenda, and they object to its artificiality. For example:

What a total waste of a full day. Very anti-american and very fake. Not sure this was a disney created place just to show how a few soldiers killed lots of americans and how proud they are about it. Don't do this one.<sup>85</sup>

Others object to the glorification of brutality:

Well, the Americans may be blamed for their Vietnam War but the Vietnamese (who tried to defend their country) were not sweethearts themselves.... When you see and get demonstrated what possible booby traps they had for their invaders, you can't believe your eyes.... Moreover, our Vietnamese guide still has pretty lights in his eyes when he describes what the boobytraps did with the bodies of the Americans.<sup>86</sup>

### **Satire: The War Remnants Museum**

In contrast to the warrior ideals advanced at the Củ Chi Tunnels Memorial Park, the War Remnants Museum appeals to the primacy of international law and justice narrating how international law and world opinion reveal US policies' illegality and immorality, giving many examples of U.S.-committed war crimes and atrocities. Named the Exhibition House for Crimes of War and Aggression before the normalization of relations with the U.S. in 1995,<sup>87</sup> this museum demonstrates a *Satiric* emplotment because no redemption exists in this war story: one could not overcome "the dark force of death, which is

man's unremitting enemy.”<sup>88</sup> Depressing and pessimistic in viewpoint, the museum communicates that even international law and world opinion could not stop the U.S. from their illegal and immoral actions. Continuing to document examples of U.S. and South Vietnamese atrocities and to challenge the legality of U.S. involvement in the war means, to some observers, the museum is thick in distorted information and propaganda:

Many exhibits in the museum contain a heavy dose of anti-American propaganda. Even simple displays of U.S. weapons used during the Vietnam War are displayed against backdrops of displaced villagers and civilian victims. Quotes from leaders and historic photographs are commonly used out of their original context. Exhibits not openly portraying anti-American sentiment tend to showcase the overwhelming U.S. firepower used against the Vietnamese during their “Resistance War”.... Although the exhibits are blatantly one-sided and need to be taken with a grain of salt, they do graphically portray the horrors of war.<sup>89</sup>

Many visitors specifically focus on these horrors of war, as did the blogger in the post below, “speechless, but worth going!”<sup>90</sup>:

We were taken by our guide Tony, to visit this museum which gives you an idea of the Vietnam War. The graphic visuals were truly mind-boggling, and would leave you stunned about the bitter truth that happened during the war. The moving part for me was about learning the after effects of “Agent Orange” that were used during the war! Terrible and the people are suffering to date as a result. You have to visit this museum or your trip to HCMC is not complete. I’d advise that it’s not for young children or the faint-hearted as the graphic visuals may be disturbing to some. My heart goes out to the Vietnamese people as they have been through a lot.<sup>91</sup>

The War Remnants Museum narrates the story of the U.S. government’s illegally supporting the illegitimate, South Vietnamese government and its full responsibility for the horrors and war crimes documented in the museum. While most war museums base the victor’s rightfulness in their claim to national sovereignty, the War Remnants Museum boasts international consensus, the world press, international law, and even the protest movement in the U.S. to substantiate its “historical truths.” In this Satire the victory is bittersweet and hollow because the museum tells the failures of international law and justice: this history told through Satire portends a hopeless future for humanity in a world where internationally, agreed-upon laws, treaties, and policies

as well as overwhelming world opinion cannot prevent or sanction a bully nation from wrongfully attacking and committing war crimes on another.

**Tragedy: The Son My Memorial**

Exhibits at the Søn Mÿ Memorial ask viewers to bear the massacre that transpired in Mÿ Lai and several other hamlets in the Søn Mÿ village. The memorial inspires viewers to endeavor never to allow such horrors to happen again. It seems to ask visitors to reflect upon how one might prevent future massacres and other senseless violence. The Søn Mÿ Memorial's genre is *Tragedy*, for "there are no festive occasions.... Still, the fall of the protagonist and the shaking of the world he inhabits...are not regarded as totally threatening to those who survive the agonic test."<sup>92</sup> Hope rises, and one glimpses redemption when the sanctity of the place moves the visitor. The museum, built on the grounds of a preserved section of hamlet, documents the event and worldwide press coverage following the revelation of the incident. Tour guides who recount the event are themselves relatives of victims and survivors.

Visitors to the Søn Mÿ Memorial are moved to reflect on the madness that occurred and may be inspired to search for paths toward healing, reconciliation, and solidarity with the victims. Writes one visitor:

I was only seven years old when the My Lai massacre occurred, but I still remember seeing disturbing photos of it in *Life* magazine. Now I was standing at the irrigation ditch where over one hundred of the bodies were found. My Lai is an emotionally tough place for anyone to visit.... Standing there I tried to contemplate the madness that occurred on this peaceful spot. Roosters crowed in the distance and the pungent smell of burning brush wafted over the village. It was an ordinary day, just like the one when the massacre occurred. Then I looked down and noticed hundreds of bare footprints along the path, many of them the tiny footprints of young children. They were interspersed randomly with imprints of army boots.<sup>93</sup>

Another blogger describes his emotional response and his reflections upon what he resolves to do with the meaning he has made from his experiences:<sup>94</sup>

One thing that struck me...was my emotional response, particularly at My Lai...one cannot help but to feel the spirit of the place—*hallowed ground*.... We can still hear the voices of the dead begging us to hear their suffering and remember so that war can be avoided in the future. There is so much suffering in

war, and particularly in this war on all sides—one cannot help but be affected and affected to say “never again.”<sup>95</sup>

### Discussion and Implications

Rather than a single story, the four, Vietnamese, war-memorial museums in this study project diverse narratives about events they describe in common. This diversity spawns divergent “truths,” conflicting lessons, and different value priorities wherein every museum appears to teach its own lessons, preach its own sermons, and sing its own national anthems. These observations support the view that history is not singular; multiple histories exist. To highlight these diverse, pluralistic, history narratives at a glance, I summarize my analysis of the four, war-memorial museums through the lens of White’s metahistory below table form. I include the metahistory employment type, the identity the museum seems to project, and the pedagogical or moral mission(s) the museum advances.

War Memorial Museums	Metahistory Emplotments	Identities Projected	Pedagogical/ Moral Missions
Ho Chi Minh Museum	Romance and Comedy	The museum projects the <i>united Vietnamese national identity</i> —North and South Vietnam politically, economically, linguistically, and culturally unified—that Ho Chi Minh worked toward throughout his life and work and that he exemplified in his nation-building efforts and labor to improve all Vietnamese citizens’ quality of life.	The museum aims to inspire and educate local and international visitors about President Ho Chi Minh’s multifaceted personality, intellect, leadership, and charisma. Its exhibits include playful juxtapositions and ironic allegories condemning Vietnam’s current local and national governments.
Củ Chi Tunnels Memorial Park	Romance	The memorial park projects a <i>valiant warrior identity</i> . It implores visitors to emulate the young Viet Cong soldiers’ heroism, patriotism, and defiant determination and to be prepared to fight courageously against another foreign invader.	The memorial park aims “to ‘move visitors’ and ‘stir their pride,’ as well as educate the youth and enhance their understanding of Vietnam’s ‘tradition of revolution’” <sup>96</sup>

War Memorial Museums	Metahistory Emplotments	Identities Projected	Pedagogical/ Moral Missions
The War Remnants Museum	Satire	The museum projects an <i>agonistic identity</i> : the international community betrayed and disenfranchised the Vietnamese people by failing to stop, to prosecute, and therefore to ensure international justice when the bully U.S. nation illegally invaded and committed inhumane, illegal, and immoral actions—war crimes and other atrocities—against the Vietnamese. <sup>97</sup>	The museum aims to instill in visitors distrust and skepticism concerning the global community’s willingness and ability to enforce agreed-upon laws and protections in war.
The Sơn Mỹ Memorial	Tragedy	The memorial projects a <i>global-citizen identity</i> : Vietnamese and international visitors alike join in solidarity with Sơn Mỹ’s dead, survivors, and perpetrators by reflecting upon which aspects in human nature moved leaders and foot soldiers to massacre civilians and by taking responsibility to ensure massacres and other senseless violence never repeat themselves.	The memorial aims for visitors to learn about, to mourn, and to reflect upon the horrific 1968 Mỹ Lai Massacre. It aims to recruit and unite visitors into a global citizenry resolving to prevent massacres and other senseless violence in the future so they happen <i>never again</i> .

Metahistory analysis provides a model for understanding the museums’ modes of emplotment, ideology, and argument/explanation thereby revealing the identities designers and curators project for the Vietnam nation and Vietnamese people, their pedagogical agendas, and moral missions. Visitors to these four, Vietnam, war-memorial museums (or other institutions) are free to accept, challenge, or revise the meanings and “truths” museum designers project through the museum’s displays and presentations. When visitors share their observations,

interpretations, and reflections on social media or in other fora, they not only validate or challenge the knowledge and “truths” the museum designers set forth, they cast their knowledge and truths upon fellow bloggers and others who read their postings; they actively participate in living history-making, knowledge-building, and cultural meaning-making conversations in and for the community.

To write Vietnam’s museum narratives as Romance, Satire, Comedy, or Tragedy is to accept these forms as universal enough to be credible, valid, and meaningful when applied to the non-European, 20<sup>th</sup>-century accounts emerging from Vietnam’s war-memorial museums. Similar to the three levels of knowledge construction I outline in connection to Hall’s and Foucault’s theories, using White’s theory of metahistory, I show the interplay of three, history-writing contexts: the museums’ designers and curators write history choosing an emplotment to frame their narratives (whether they are consciously aware they are choosing or not); the visitors, though having fewer raw materials than the museums’ designers and curators from which to draw their narratives, also write history choosing an emplotment (again, whether consciously aware they are choosing or not); investigator-researchers in their turn write history using the raw materials displayed at the museum and visitors’ stories to write still another history. Thus, it is possible for individuals at each level (the museum designer, the museum visitor, and the researcher-investigator) to describe a single war experience through different literary emplotments with each scripting a narrative that conforms to their individual aesthetic or moral preferences and with no one emplotment choice more epistemologically verifiable than the others. Together they make a new narrative, potentially a new history, a new interpretation of the events chronicled subject to biases and selective data inclusion and exclusion just as the museum designers and curators imposed their individual biases on the data as they selected what to include in and exclude from each museum’s repertoire. This process affirms museology’s and historiography’s currently embracing pluralistic, historical explanations.

By observing the exhibits and reading visitors’ comments, one can perceive the identities each site projects, its particular value priorities, and its pedagogical and/or moral missions. The “truth claims” carry validity, credibility, and veracity if the audience assumes or consciously accepts the legitimacy of the artifacts (e.g. photographs, weapons, diaries), the “historical facts,” and other data included in each museum’s presentation and narrative. By identifying, naming, and describing the chronicle of events; by uncovering and listening to the narratives, plots, and stories the sites and visitors tell; and by discovering the underlying

biases, assumptions, constructed meanings, and educational and power-motivated agendas each site projects, one not only constructs his or her own knowledge, history, and “truths” but comes to understand the knowledge-construction and history-making processes, the meaning and value of these sites’ narrative powers, and the meaning and value of each individual’s history-writing and history-making potential.

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### **Endnotes**

- 1 Asian-Nation. “The American/Viet Nam War,” <http://www.asian-nation.org/vietnam-war.shtml>; the war the U.S. calls the “Vietnam War,” Vietnamese call either the “American-Vietnam War” or the “American War.”
- 2 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).
- 3 Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1997).
- 4 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977).
- 5 White, *Metahistory*.
- 6 Hall, “The Work of Representation.”
- 7 White, *Metahistory*.
- 8 Hall, “The Work of Representation.”
- 9 Tom Mangold and John Penycate, *The Tunnels of Củ Chi* (London: Orion, 1985), 267–268.
- 10 Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2006).
- 11 White, *Metahistory*.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid., 2, emphasis in original.
- 14 Ibid., ix.

- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., x.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., xii.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 5–7.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 6–7.
- <sup>22</sup> Hayden White, “Historical Pluralism,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986): 489.
- <sup>23</sup> White consistently capitalizes the four literary genres or employments in his book, *Metahistory*, though not in his article, “Historical Pluralism.” I have chosen to capitalize the four employments throughout this manuscript as he does in his book.
- <sup>24</sup> White, *Metahistory*, 8–9.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 9, emphasis in original.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 10.
- <sup>27</sup> Hall, “The Work of Representation.”
- <sup>28</sup> Michael Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Science Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (London: Sage, 1998).
- <sup>29</sup> Hall, “The Work of Representation,” 25, emphasis in original.
- <sup>30</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.
- <sup>31</sup> Hall, “The Work of Representation.”
- <sup>32</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., 194
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., 27.
- <sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan M. Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1972); Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper (Brighton, UK: Harvester, 1980).
- <sup>37</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27.
- <sup>38</sup> Oliver R. Impey and Arthur MacGregor, eds. *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Cornwall, UK: House of Stratus, 2001).
- <sup>39</sup> Edward P. Alexander and Mary Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007).

- <sup>40</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Different Spaces," in J. D. Faubion, ed., *Aesthetic, Method, and Epistemology* (New York: The New York Press, 1967), 175–186, as cited by Miranda J. Brady, "The Flexible Heterotopia: Indian Residential Schools and the Canadian Museum of Civilization," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 19, no. 4 (2013): 408–420.
- <sup>41</sup> Brady, "The Flexible Heterotopia," 408.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 418–419.
- <sup>43</sup> Myrian Sepúlveda dos Santos, "Museums and Memory: the Enchanted Modernity," *Journal for Cultural Research* 7, no. 1 (2003): 27–46.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.
- <sup>45</sup> Daniel J. Sherman, "Objects of Memory: History and Narrative in French War Museums," *French Historical Studies* 19, no. 1 (1995): 49–74.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 50–51.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.
- <sup>49</sup> Lorena Rivera-Orraca, "Are Museums Sites of Memory?" *The New School Psychology Bulletin* 6, no. 2 (2009): 32–37.
- <sup>50</sup> Sherman, "Objects of Memory," 71.
- <sup>51</sup> Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: the Gold Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (New York: Berg Publisher, 2007).
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.
- <sup>53</sup> Rivera-Orraca, "Are Museums Sites of Memory?" 32.
- <sup>54</sup> Santos, "Museums and Memory," 42.
- <sup>55</sup> Foucault, "Of Different Spaces."
- <sup>56</sup> Sherman, "Objects of Memory," 50–51.
- <sup>57</sup> "Ho Chi Minh Museum in Hanoi, Vietnam," *Vietnamese Private Tours: Discover the Real Charm* (weblog), 25 September 2013, <http://www.vietnameseprivatetours.com/ho-chi-minh-museum-hanoi-vietnam>
- <sup>58</sup> zappagirl, "Weird and Wonderful, Serious and Silly," *Ho Chi Minh Museum* (weblog), *TripAdvisor*, 25 July 2013, [http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g293924-d311066-r168957345-Ho\\_Chi\\_Minh\\_Museum-Hanoi.html](http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g293924-d311066-r168957345-Ho_Chi_Minh_Museum-Hanoi.html)
- <sup>59</sup> I confirmed this observation with a local historian and senior tour guide, Ky, who worked for the Communist regime as a prison guard in Hanoi during the American-Vietnam War. After visiting this museum, I asked him, "If Ho Chi Minh were alive today, what would

- he think about the present government in Vietnam?" Ky replied that Ho would be so sickened by the corruption, he would commit suicide!
- <sup>60</sup> Tom Mangold and John Penycate, *The Tunnels of Củ Chi* (London: Orion, 1985), 267–268.
- <sup>61</sup> Sherman, "Objects of Memory," 50–51.
- <sup>62</sup> Williams, *Memorial Museums*, 8.
- <sup>63</sup> Foucault, "Of Different Spaces."
- <sup>64</sup> Brady, "The Flexible Heterotopia," 418–419.
- <sup>65</sup> Rivera-Orraca, "Are Museums Sites of Memory?" 32.
- <sup>66</sup> Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 163–167.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.
- <sup>68</sup> Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2006).
- <sup>69</sup> Williams, *Memorial Museums*, 8.
- <sup>70</sup> Sherman, "Objects of Memory," 50–51.
- <sup>71</sup> The quotations from blogs and other social media I cite in this article, I cite *verbatim*. I have not corrected spelling or grammar, although I have deleted some words, phrases or sentences within the quoted passages for brevity. These deletions are indicated with ellipses.
- <sup>72</sup> White, *Metahistory*.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.
- <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.
- <sup>76</sup> James T., "Exhibits That Look Like a Bond Villain's Lair," *Ho Chi Minh Museum* (weblog), *TripAdvisor*, 15 September 2013, [http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g293924-d311066-r177192997-Ho\\_Chi\\_Minh\\_Museum-Hanoi.html](http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g293924-d311066-r177192997-Ho_Chi_Minh_Museum-Hanoi.html)
- <sup>77</sup> zappagirl, "Weird and Wonderful." I observed parents snapping photos of their children reaching up to hold "Uncle Ho's" hand in his bigger-than-life-sized, cardboard, photo poster.
- <sup>78</sup> White, *Metahistory*, 9.
- <sup>79</sup> zappagirl, "Weird and Wonderful."
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>81</sup> Mangold and Penycate, *Tunnels*, 267–268.

- <sup>82</sup> Wandering Ken, "Making Like the Viet Cong," *What Not to Do When Traveling* (weblog), 12 September 2011, <http://scion1969.blogspot.com/2011/09/making-like-viet-cong.html>
- <sup>83</sup> Chritine L., "An Insight into Vietcong Guerrilla Warfare," *Cu Chi Tunnels* (weblog), *TripAdvisor*, 27 August 2013, [http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g303943-d2005826-r174320457-Cu\\_Chi\\_Tunnels-Cu\\_Chi\\_Greater\\_Ho\\_Chi\\_Minh\\_City.html](http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g303943-d2005826-r174320457-Cu_Chi_Tunnels-Cu_Chi_Greater_Ho_Chi_Minh_City.html)
- <sup>84</sup> wunderlustfullife, "Come for Some History, Stay and Shoot an AK-47," *Cu Chi Tunnels* (weblog), *TripAdvisor*, 9 August 2012, [http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g303943-d2005826-r136756988-Cu\\_Chi\\_Tunnels-Cu\\_Chi\\_Greater\\_Ho\\_Chi\\_Minh\\_City.html](http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g303943-d2005826-r136756988-Cu_Chi_Tunnels-Cu_Chi_Greater_Ho_Chi_Minh_City.html)
- <sup>85</sup> mostrow, Ho Chi Minh City Cu Chi Tunnels Excursion Reviews, *CruiseCritic* (weblog), March 2012, <http://www.cruisecritic.com/memberreviews/shore-excursions/excursion/2068>
- <sup>86</sup> chrisvandenbroucke, "The Torture Never Stops (Frank Zappa)," *Out of Saigon—Cu Chi Tunnels, Ho Chi Minh City* (weblog), *Virtual Tourist*, 24 February 2004, [http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/Asia/Vietnam/Thanh\\_Pho\\_Ho\\_Chi\\_Minh/Ho\\_Chi\\_Minh\\_City-1470720/Things\\_To\\_Do-Ho\\_Chi\\_Minh\\_City-Out\\_of\\_Saigon-Cu\\_Chi\\_Tunnels-BR-6.html](http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/Asia/Vietnam/Thanh_Pho_Ho_Chi_Minh/Ho_Chi_Minh_City-1470720/Things_To_Do-Ho_Chi_Minh_City-Out_of_Saigon-Cu_Chi_Tunnels-BR-6.html)
- <sup>87</sup> Schwenkel, *The American War*, 164.
- <sup>88</sup> White, *Metahistory*, 9.
- <sup>89</sup> Gregory Rodgers, "War Remnants Museum. Visiting the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam," About.com: Southeast Asia Travel, [http://goseasia.about.com/od/hochiminhcityvietnam/a/war\\_remnants\\_museum.htm](http://goseasia.about.com/od/hochiminhcityvietnam/a/war_remnants_museum.htm)
- <sup>90</sup> PriyaTawde, "Speechless but Worth Going!" War Remnants Museum (weblog), *TripAdvisor*, 27 September 2013, [http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g293925-d311103-r178787608-War\\_Remnants\\_Museum-Ho\\_Chi\\_Minh\\_City.html](http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g293925-d311103-r178787608-War_Remnants_Museum-Ho_Chi_Minh_City.html)
- <sup>91</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>92</sup> White, *Metahistory*, 9.
- <sup>93</sup> Michael, "Footprints at My Lai," *Changes in Longitude: Just Go Already* (weblog), 3 March 2012, <http://www.changesinlongitude.com/my-lai-massacre-memorial-son-my/>
- <sup>94</sup> thunderfromtheleft, "War and Remembrance," *Ben U Faculty Abroad* (weblog), 5 July 2013, <http://benufacultyblog.wordpress.com/2013/07/05/war-and-remembrance/>
- <sup>95</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>96</sup> Christina Schwenkel, "Recombinant History: Transnational Practices of Memory and Knowledge Production in Contemporary Vietnam," *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (2006): 17.
- <sup>97</sup> Christina Schwenkel, "Exhibiting War, Reconciling Pasts: Photographic Representation and Transnational Commemoration in Contemporary Vietnam," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 8, no. 1 (2008): 36–77.