**Title**
Western Tourism at Cu Chi and the Memory of War in Vietnam: Dialogical Effects of the Carnivalesque

**Abstract**
In this article we analyze the social memories of the Vietnam War afforded by tourism at the Cu Chi battlefield. Specifically, we explore the experiences of tourists at the site in order to address the under-theorized relationship between carnivalesque and dialogical discourses. Drawing on field interviews and ethnographic engagement with young adult Western tourists who took tours led by Vietnamese guides, we document how the tourists' playful engagement with the past at Cu Chi facilitates the development of new dialogical memories of the war. Our interviews reveal a strong concern with the suffering of both occupying forces and the Vietnamese communist forces, a finding that points to the need for scholars to better appreciate the multiplicity of ways that social performances function in shaping social memory. Ultimately, we challenge social performance theories whose explanations reduce shifts in social memory to audience interpretations of authenticity.

**Keywords**
Vietnam War, carnivalesque, dialogical, memory, tourism

**Contact Details**
Todd Madigan, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, email: toddmadigan@gmail.com
Brad West, University of South Australia, email: brad.west@unisa.edu.au

**Introduction**
This article analyzes tourism at the Cu Chi battlefield[1] in Vietnam and its role in reshaping the social memory of the Vietnam War.[2] Critically engaging with theories of social performance, particularly those developed within what Alexander and Smith (2010) call the "strong program" of cultural sociology (Alexander, 2017; Eyerman and McCormick, 2006; Mast and Alexander, 2019), we point to the need for greater appreciation of how tourist experiences can become culturally significant beyond the question of whether they are interpreted as authentic representations of reality. In particular, our concern is with how the experiences of Western tourists at Cu Chi facilitates new understandings of the war that challenges Eurocentric memory frames. As we demonstrate, these new understandings are generated despite the fact that a) the tours are characterized by a playful engagement with the past and b) the visitors themselves are relatively skeptical about the manufactured character of historical portrayal at the site. Ultimately, we argue that this case highlights the need for cultural scholars to more fully

[1] So-called due to its location within the Cu Chi district of Ho Chi Minh City (formerly *Saigon*, the capital of what was South Vietnam during the Vietnam War). The site is also commonly referred to as the Cu Chi tunnels.

[2] While the war is known in the West as the *Vietnam War*, in Vietnam it is often referred to as the *American War* (Laderman, 2009; Schwenkel, 2009; Tai, 2001)

appreciate the polysemic ways in which social performances can become consequential for social memory.

In our analysis of the relationship between tourism and social memory at the Cu Chi tunnels, we utilize Mikhail Bakhtin's conceptual framework of carnivalesque experiences and dialogical discourses. The *carnivalesque* refers to a carnival-like ritual experience that is distinct from "serious official … ceremonials," an experience involving "people who are all participants, actors, not spectators" and offering an "extra political aspect of the world" (Bakhtin, 1984a: 5-7). The carnivalesque, as it relates to the Cu Chi battle site (and to thanatourism[3] more broadly), is characterized by an environment where laughter, playfulness, and explicit ritual displays of symbolic violence are sanctioned and establishes the conditions whereby the powerful can be mocked and brought low (Bakhtin, 1984a). While Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque has been a central theme in theories of ritual and social performance, within the analysis of tourism it has rarely been examined in relation to the dialogical, despite Bakhtin's having made the connection, himself. For Bakhtin, discourses are dialogical when they are both 1) a response to previous utterances made by others and 2) a reply to the imagined future responses of others. Bakhtin states that a dialogical discourse is "constructed while taking into account possible responsive reactions, for whose sake, in essence, it is actually created" (Bakhtin, 1984a: 91, 94). In Bakhtin's view, there is a perpetual dialogue regarding the meaning of any particular subject, and new meanings are conditioned by both prior meanings and our anticipation of a future "response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth" (Bakhtin, 1984b: 69). In the case of tourism at the Cu Chi battle site, the carnivalesque is significant in that it allows dialogical discourses to emerge, "a situation in which diverse voices are heard and interact" (Robinson, 2011). The resulting discourse then serves to dislodge existing authoritative monological discourses—ones that operate as if they were a "hermetic and self-sufficient" wholes, presuming "nothing beyond the borders of its own context" (Bakhtin, 1981: 671).

The empirical focus of our research draws on ethnographic observation at the Cu Chi battlefield and 25 semi-structured interviews with tourists between the ages of 20 and 40 from Australia, Great Britain, Europe, and the United States. Consistent with Halbwachs's insights (1950: 70), we argue that the empirical focus on young adults is significant as it provides an indicator of emerging social memories. Each informant had undertaken one of the commercially available tours of the battlefield, all of which are led by Vietnamese guides. In total the authors participated in 10 different tours of the Cu Chi tunnels, each having a different tour guide and run by five different local tourism agencies. The interviews were conducted in Ho Chi Minh City the evening following the informants' participation in the tour. We also draw on ethnographic fieldwork on other war-related tourism sites in Vietnam, pointing to the distinctive character of social performance at Cu Chi.

## War and tourism in Vietnam

[3] *Thanatourism* is a term coined by A.V. Seaton, who defines it in the following: "Thanatourism is travel to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death, particularly, but not exclusively, *violent death*" (1996: 240 italics in the original).

Since the 1975 fall of Saigon, the Vietnam War has been an important event for thinking about the power of commemorative practices. Indeed, a great deal of social memory literature has been written regarding the social and psychological consequences of the conflict, particularly in light of the war's ambivalent status within established Western traditions of remembrance (Eyerman, Madigan, Ring, 2017 and 2023). At times this has included scholarship that acknowledges the significance of tourism-like logics in shaping the ongoing cultural significance of the Vietnam War (Reston, 2017; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, 1991); however, this scholarship has largely concerned commemorative activities in the United States and other Western nations. In contrast, we point to the significance of commemorative practices in Vietnam that dialogically bring forth new historical understandings of the war.

The growth of war-related tourism in Vietnam is indicative of the rapid international expansion of thanatourism in the late twentieth century (Cohen, 2011; Light, 2017; Welch, 2015). For Vietnam this "dark tourism" corresponds to the emergence of international tourism more broadly, as it is only since the early1990s—and with the 1995 official normalization of relations with the United States—that Vietnam emerged as a mass international tourism market. Since that time Vietnam has seen a dramatic increase in foreign tourist receipts, with some of the most frequent visitors coming from countries that fought against the Vietnamese communists, including the United States and Australia, ranking fourth and eighth respectively in terms of the numbers of inbound international visitors to the country (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2015). While war tourism in Vietnam is frequently overseen by the state, Western tourist agencies have for the most part taken a different approach. In the early 1990s, Vietnamese authorities decided to outsource the marketing of the country to foreign visitors. This decision led to a framing of the country as one that is essentially pre-communist (Kennedy and Williams, 2001: 136; Tai, 2001). This marketing involves symbolic emphasis of Vietnam's colonialist traditions, such as East-Asian exoticism and the country's unique natural environment, particularly its long sandy beaches, lush tropical jungles, broad rivers, and dramatic mountain formations. Within this marketing regime, war tourism was marginalized, despite the fact that sites connected to the war in Vietnam proved to be among the most visited places by foreign tourists, something recently acknowledged in official government tourism strategies.

The Cu Chi tunnels are one of the most prominent war-related tourism sites in Vietnam. Other popular places include the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the Son My Memorial (the memorial dedicated to the victims of the infamous "My Lai Massacre"), the Museum of the Revolution in Hanoi, and the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City. We note that each of these sites has a distinctive historical framing and social performance of the past. For example, the Hoa Lo Prison—more famously known as the "Hanoi Hilton"—contrasts the North Vietnamese Army's kindness shown to French and American captives with the cruelty visited on communists and other dissidents under the French and South Vietnamese governments. The War Remnants Museum, previously named the Exhibition House for U.S. and Puppet Crimes, focuses on war atrocities by the South Vietnamese, the United States, and the French occupiers with exhibits relating to the use of Agent Orange and Napalm, as well as the My Lai Massacre.

Western depictions of the Vietnam War in popular culture are a significant cultural frame for young adult Western visitors to Cu Chi, while perceptions of the war also often derive from personal connections to those who fought in the conflict. Consequently, Western visitors often find it difficult to make a distinction between "Vietnam the war" and "Vietnam the country," for the country is generally experienced through the prism of the war. As demonstrated in the quotes below, such beliefs meant that the tourists we interviewed were often surprised by Vietnam's contemporary socio-spatial reality.

> As Americans what you know is what you see on the Vietnam TV show or war movie, and you don't know anything about the culture or, you know, I thought it was a great big jungle. (American woman, age 35, investigator)

> … the whole country's different, because if you think about Vietnam as it's portrayed, it's like a sort of sleazy, like brothels, GIs roaming the streets, and women in silky … everything you see is a departure from that. (American woman, age 24, university student)

The souvenirs on sale throughout Vietnam also encourage viewing the country through the prism of the war. This includes the sale of reproductions American soldier dog tags[4] and Zippo lighters (complete with faux wartime engravings on the sides), North Vietnamese Army helmets, prints of war-time communist propaganda posters, and Viet Cong sandals made from recycled car tires. There are even Vietnam War-themed bars and restaurants that target Western tourists, such as the DMZ Bar in Hue (with its Westernized *Apocalypse Now!* atmosphere) and the chain of Cong Cafes (with their drab communist decor and military-themed uniforms and merchandise for sale).

While our focus is on how the Cu Chi tunnels are experienced by young adult Western tourists, it is important to note that this experience is influenced by the fact that Cu Chi is also a significant site for domestic tourism and Vietnamese state remembrance. Many Vietnamese from around the country—including groups of students on field trips—visit the same exhibits and wonder around the battlefield, rubbing shoulders with the Western tourists. The battlefield itself was recognized by the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture as a national and cultural historical site in 1979 (http://en.diadaocuchi.com.vn) and is situated on what was during the war a 250km network of tunnels and subterranean barracks, commissaries, field hospitals, and weapons caches. From this underground complex the Vietnamese communist fighters in South Vietnam—known as the National Liberation Front (NLF or colloquially in the West, the "Viet Cong")—waged continuous battle against the Republic of Vietnam Military Forces, the U.S., and other allied forces. Today the complex is called a "heroic wonder" (http://en.diadaocuchi.com.vn), and among other structures, the Cu Chi tourist complex houses the Monument Temple for the Martyrs of Ben Duoc, which was completed in 1995 and opened to visitors both foreign and domestic "to commemorate, to burn incenses and to contemplate about a vital thing that created the holy soul of the nation" (http://en.diadaocuchi.com.vn): that is, to honor the more than

[4] The thin metal identification tags worn on a light chain around the neck by American military personnel.

44,000 Vietnamese people who lost their lives in Cu Chi and whose names are carved in the temple's granite stele.

**Anatomy of the Cu Chi tour**

Despite the use of the Cu Chi site for official Vietnamese commemoration of the War (and the fact that it is run by the paramilitary National Parks Service), Western visitors are invited to engage in activities on the battlefield that one typically associates with a theme park, or indeed, a carnival. The Vietnam National Administration of Tourism in 2019 advertised that at the Cu Chi battlefield tunnel complex, "Above-ground attractions include caged monkeys, vendors selling souvenirs, and a shooting range where visitors can fire a number of assault rifles." One can also enjoy a meal at a restaurant on the premises, as well as have fun kayaking or skimming along in swan-shaped pedal boats on what is described as a lake simulating the East Sea (a.k.a., the South China Sea), which includes miniature replicas of ancient temples and fortresses along its shore. What's more, for additional thrills, tourists have been encouraged by the Cu Chi tunnels website to "split into two teams to play a pretending fight of paint shooting."

The first stop for international tourists visiting the Cu Chi tunnels is the Visitors Center, though the tone of this exhibit is somewhat out of keeping with the general carnivalesque atmosphere of the battlefield, itself. Here visitors view traditional museum exhibits, after which foreign tourists are subject to a compulsory viewing of a government propaganda film from the 1970s dubbed into English. The film depicts how an idyllic rural lifestyle enjoyed by villagers in the area was nearly lost due to American occupation, with villages mounting a successful resistance to this invasion in order to restore their sense of home. Following the film, a member of the Parks Service provides a brief lecture on the structure of the tunnels and their strategic importance. As illustrated in the quote below, Western tourists typically respond with skepticism to the overt political propaganda of the film, the museum exhibits, and the lecture.

> … in the museum today, well I noticed how some of the photographs, you know, there were some American soldiers getting on a helicopter and I liked the way they put [in the caption] 'American running away from the….' (English male, age 28, forestry worker)

However, there are other parts of this historical narrative that have greater resonance with Western visitors. One of these is the portrayal of the events depicted at the site as forming part of a larger episode extending from 1945-1975, a portrayal that promotes dialogical discourses. This narrative provides a postcolonial frame around the American involvement in Vietnam, emphasizing that the war was part of a broader national liberation movement. This is something that frequently challenges prior understandings of the war held by Western tourists. While in most cases these tourists previously comprehended the war in terms of America's involvement and American hegemony, the focus of the tourist experience turns to Vietnam's long struggle for independence, with the fight against the United States being only one component. This narrative of national liberation is significant for its capacity to generate cultural empathy toward the Vietnamese.

Within Western nations the Vietnam War is typically understood in binary and dialectical ways, with the Vietnamese communists and Americans positioned as the primary antagonists. At the Cu Chi tunnels site, the focus on the Vietnamese independence movement strikes a chord with tourists, for in many cases it is a trope similar to that celebrated in their own nations. For example, most national narratives contain evolutionary notions of nationhood, standardization of ethnicity, totalization of national culture, and the characterization of a national type. As the tour of the Cu Chi Tunnels progresses (especially when this is paired with the tourists' other experiences the country), so too does the dialogical dimension of the Vietnam War narrative. One example of this is the fact that Western tourists are commonly surprised that the locals are not more focused on the war and antagonistic towards Westerners. As demonstrated in the quotes below, this not only relates to experience at war-related sites, but also in the tourists' everyday cultural interactions and experiences in Vietnam.

> … it's amazing how past it they are, how far removed the war seems here, whereas it's the first thing that comes to mind in the United States … there's very little unless you seek it out, I mean about the war blatantly in your face. (American woman, age 24, university student)

> I mean it is pretty impressive that they can say "Oh yeah, welcome to Vietnam, I hope you enjoy it, let me take you here, let me take you there." (American male, age 29, security consultant)

The most significant element of the Cu Chi battlefield experience for Western tourists—and that which has the greatest influence on the promotion of dialogical discourses—is the time spent in the tunnel complex, itself. This is an area of the tourist compound that is not heavily overseen by the Parks Service, in part because most of these government workers are not fluent in English (Rosen, 2015). Instead, tours of this substantial outdoor area are led by guides from private tour companies who have, in many cases, also transported the tourists to the Cu Chi battlefield site, which is about an hour's drive from downtown Ho Chi Minh City. These private tour guides are particularly important to the Western tourist experience at Cu Chi. When successful, the guides are considered by many foreign tourists as representatives of civil society from which they wish to receive an insider's—or in Goffman's (1959) terms, a "backstage"—insight into history. The identity of the tour guides themselves is significant in this regard, with many of the initial guides having been English-speaking translators within the South Vietnamese Army who were shut out of government positions following the war. As illustrated in the quote below, one such guide even tells his tour group that he was a double agent in the war. In this way the guides are important in providing not only a narrative account of the war, but also a performance in the telling of history, becoming reputational entrepreneurs in giving discursive meaning to the tunnels. In terms of dialogical meaning-making, we can think of these guides as cultural mediators (Macdonald, 2013) who help to piece together different cultural understandings of the past.

> Especially when the tour guide was saying that it was very much, it wasn't so much the North Vietnamese Army but it was people on the ground who won the war for the Vietnamese. Yeah, and I think he actually said at the end that he was a double agent. (Australian woman, age 31, Christian missionary)

> … he's lived with it, he's dealt with it, he talks about it, it's part of his life … that he was able to share … and how he doesn't have any animosity towards any race. (American male, age 35, teacher)

The guides also tend to reinforce the propaganda film's interpretation of the war as involving a struggle by locals in the Cu Chi area, though in a way that pulls the conflict and victory down from the macro/geopolitical realm to that of the ordinary soldier's experience of the war. For example, the guides say little about ideological clashes between capitalism and communism or the broader Cold War context in which the Vietnamese were supported and armed by China and the Soviet Union. This focus on local struggle works for the Vietnamese in that it embeds the war in a national context out of which emerged a national character. It also draws attention away from the idea that the conflict was a civil war. As illustrated in the quote above, this localized focus also serves to explain to Western tourists the military defeat of what—from the Vietnamese perspective—were occupying nations in such a way as to shield the tourists from the charge that their own national character is somehow inadequate.

In many ways these portrayals and interpretations have a contingent quality, relying on a performance of history that requires the guide to successfully act out a script whose tone is complementary to the Cu Chi tunnels' carnivalesque engagement with history. The contingency around the tourists' experience is most evident when the script and the acting associated with the telling of history fails, at which point the intended narrative is rejected by the tourists. Examples of when there was disappointment with the guides are illustrated in the quotes below.

> He was informative, he was interesting. He could have been … a little bit more informative about his role; what was his function with the South Vietnamese Navy or the U.S. Navy?… I found myself being polite in listening to what he had to say, but taken with a grain of salt. (Australian male, age 36, teacher)

> Yeah, he was pretty witty. He was pretty funny. I think he let a lot of the propaganda stuff go … and he was witty enough for me to kind of expect to say something.… I expected him to say something like "how about that 40-year-old movie?" (American woman, age 29, teacher)

Tourists develop these impressions of their guides as they proceed through the heavily narrated Cu Chi tunnel area, as well as on the drive to and from the tunnel complex. While the order in which tourists visit the main areas of the tunnel complex will depend on the tourist numbers and congestion on any particular day, the main exhibits and experiences involve the following: tourists searching for the opening of a hidden tunnel; a viewing and presentation of how the

tunnels in the area were booby trapped; the viewing of a destroyed American tank; a walk through an enlarged—but still cramped—tunnel network (which includes various subterranean rooms, such as a make-shift hospital, command post, kitchen, and armory); and a visit to a rifle range where tourists can shoot the same kind of weapons used during the conflict. While each site illustrates a different part of the campaign, all are narrated in ways in which the emphasis is on a "living history" mode of heritage and tourism involving an attempt to understand history from the perspective of how ordinary people experienced it (Hart, 2007; Tivers, 2002). In relation to the Vietnamese communists, this includes attention paid to the food they ate and the clothing they wore, as well as how they ingeniously made traps out of the natural surrounds and reused American shells to make their own weaponry. While the living history genre typically reinforces gender stereotypes and is associated with political orthodoxy (West, 2014), at the Cu Chi tourist site it is used to demonstrate the active involvement of local women in the resistance. This claim is reinforced by the female mannequins on display in the rooms of the tunnel network, dressed in the same black, guerrilla uniforms as the men, rather than in the traditional female attire such as the *ao dai.* In contrast, many other museums in Vietnam portray women primarily as domestic caregivers and victims of war, rather than as active participants (UNESCO, 2011: 23).

**Carnival and Symbolic Violence at Cu Chi**

Once tourists have passed from the more official areas near the entrance to the Cu Chi complex, areas where they are expected to act as a passive audience, they move into a far more participatory area of the park. For example, there is a prominent working display of some of the various traps designed by the NLF fighters to maim and kill South Vietnamese and American soldiers. Neatly arranged in a single row beneath a permanent rooftop and dug into the ground, these traps are surrounded by a small rail that allows the tourists to get very close. Behind the traps is a large, gaily-colored mural in what can only be described as a disconcertingly cartoonish, light-hearted style. But despite the mural's childlike style (one is reminded of a mural one might see at an elementary school), the images are actually depictions of bloodied American GIs falling into sundry traps and being impaled by their deadly spikes. Cu Chi guides will take the opportunity to stroll along the row of traps on the side opposite the tourists, pausing at each to give a brief description and demonstration of how they operate. These working models—whose mundane names only hint at their gruesome function—include the "rolling trap," "clipping armpit trap," "tiger trap," "folding chair trap," "swinging-up trap," "see-saw trap," and "door trap." Each of these traps features sharpened bamboo stakes or rusted iron spikes, which, as the guides inform the tourists, the designers would urinate and defecate on in order to cause infections to the enemy soldiers who were lucky enough to survive having fallen into them. The guide illustrates how each trap works, typically by poking it with a wooden pole, which often sets spiked cylinders spinning rapidly, or causes spiked jaws to slam shut or swing into what would have been an unsuspecting GI. We observed frequent gasps from the tourists as they watched these demonstrations, but just as frequently, these demonstrations elicited giggling, joking, and laughter. This is a prime example of Bakhtin's carnival, where "Grotesque-comic elements prevail" (Bakhtin, 1984a: 230). Often the guides themselves joke and laugh with their

tour groups during these demonstrations, even as they describe the terrible wounds inflicted by the traps on the United States soldiers.

In a carnivalesque atmosphere, the powerful are brought low. Clearly, at the Cu Chi tunnel site, it is the Americans who are considered powerful and in need of ceremonial degradation, while the Vietnamese communists are depicted as small and poor, but also cunning and courageous. Here is an example from the Cu Chi tourist website to this effect:

> Just going under a tunnel section, you will understand why the small Vietnam could gain victory over the enemy, a big country and the world's richest. Why Cu Chi, the poor land was able to cope uninterruptedly for 21 years with a much larger army, warlike, equipped with modern and updated weapons and means of warfare. (http://en.diadaocuchi.com.vn/gioi-thieu-ve-khu-di-tich-lich-su-dia-dao-cu-chi-37.html)

And we see how, in the following remark during one of our interviews, this narrative is effectively communicated and absorbed by tourists. The dialogic process begins to unfold immediately, even while the tourists are still at the park.

> the bear traps they were using … booby-trapped stuff, I think that was amazingly creative and courageous … just local village people were fighting against a superpower … the rallying around a cause … it's pretty impressive to see how it was done from their perspective. (American male, age 29, security consultant)

The boobytrap display exemplifies Bakhtin's carnival, where the one in power (i.e., the Americans) "is abused and beaten when the time of his reign is over, just as the carnival dummy of winter or of the dying year is mocked, beaten, torn to pieces, burned, or drowned" (Bakhtin, 1984a: 197). Another permanent display in the park where carnival is readily apparent is the wreckage of an American M1 tank. Sitting in a cleared area of the woods, the guides often point out that it was a handmade Vietnamese mine that destroyed the heavily armored war machine. The exhibit is significant as tanks, more than any other weapon, symbolize modern warfare and the Western victory culture that emerged from the Second World War (Wright, 2001). For those that emotionally respond to the tank, it is not so much because it is being used to symbolize Vietnamese victory over America, but because this war remnant has become a tourist object, one lacking any particular signage or restriction of access to it. Visitors are allowed and often encouraged by the guides to climb on it, which often leads to children laughing and playing on it as if it were schoolyard play equipment. This differs from the more traditional restricted museum mode of presentation and experience with which Western tourists are familiar, a presentation that demands a deference to material culture through establishing a distance between the spectator and the sacred (Bennett, 2013; Macdonald, 2013). During one of our visits, an older Englishman uttered—not really loudly enough for those climbing on it to hear—"Show some respect!" Similarly, our respondents noted the following:

> So it's an American tank sitting in the middle of the woods, near the tunnels, and then there are people climbing on it…. Sitting on the top of the tank, little kids and their parents are taking pictures, it was so strange! I mean we'd just been to Pearl Harbor, and so it was kind of the same thing, all these Japanese tourists taking pictures…. (American woman, age 29, teacher)

> And that tank that everybody was clambering all over and sitting on, taking pictures on, and people died in that tank I'm sure, and its just being treated like a jungle gym.… It's sad and it's being on victor's soil, you know, North Vietnam won so they're going to treat relics or any leftover artifacts that were left behind by the States as something to be joyous about and to celebrate. But being an American and thinking about the kid that died on that and its just being mocked or being trivialized is sad, it makes me sad. (American woman, age 24, English teacher)

And yet, despite these reservations, the dominant atmosphere around the ruined tank is one of playfulness. And this presence of playfulness and flippancy in the midst of what would in almost any other context be considered sacred is what concusses the monological discourse of the Western memory of the war. This sort of behavior and response would be unthinkable in other venues, including those in Vietnam, such as the "Hanoi Hilton." But the fact that this horseplay and merriment does occur here is what jars the official Western narrative enough to open up the possibility of dialogue with what are radically alternative—and in other circumstances—subversive perspectives.

The actual tunnels themselves provide another important opportunity for tourists to participate in the Cu Chi carnival. Before entering the 70-meter-long tunnel that is open to visitors, tourists are informed that this once much smaller tunnel has been enlarged from its original dimensions in order to accommodate the larger bodies of Western visitors. And here the guides' playful teasing about the "fat Americans" often begins. The open tunnel as it exists in the park today is about two-feet wide and three-feet high. The tourists who opt to go through the tunnel generally have to crouch near to the ground as they shuffle, bent-over, through the passage's twists and turns. This inevitably leads to lots of laughter and hi-jinx as people's heads often bump into others' backsides. Voices are amplified in the tight quarters, and many report twinges of claustrophobia as they make their way deeper and deeper into the structure. Periodically throughout the length of the tunnel, tourists will encounter various rooms—some completely underground, some open at the top. In some of these, as well as in other above-ground areas of the park, mannequins are set up to depict what life in the tunnels might have been like. They are dressed as NLF guerrillas and are shown engaged in various wartime activities. This experience of being underground promotes a dialogical narrative by tourists dually imagining what it would be like for both the Vietnamese communists and American soldiers—the so-called "tunnel rats" whose job it was to enter the tunnels in order to capture or kill the enemy—to be in this space.

> You know, being at the tunnels … it's just people, it's not like, "oh the crafty war mongers" … South Vietnamese or Viet Cong or … the Americans. (American woman, age 29, teacher)
>
> The thing that really freaked me out was just imagining yourself being a GI and having to go into those tunnels with a flash light and a .45 [pistol] and try and find somebody, and imagining how scary that would be … it just kind of does spark up a little bit of "I can't believe this, I can't believe I'm really here, in this tunnel, and who knows what happened here." (American male, age 29, security consultant)
>
> … putting yourself in another time and on both sides. Thinking, "oh my God, if I was a person digging those things, like are you joking!" And crawling around in those and living underground for years. I don't know, I don't think I would have the resolve to do that … just an amazing display of human spirit. And … with the GIs, you know, how do you get the balls to go in there and you know, I would just be crying my eyes out. (American woman, age 24, English teacher)

Not far from the tunnel is the spot where the most iconic photos of the park are taken. A very narrow opening in the ground—simulating an entrance to the tunnel system—is presented to volunteers to slide into (of course, these volunteers must be fairly slim in order to squeeze through the opening into what is essentially a small pit). Once inside, the guide will have the volunteer pick up a small wooden lid laying on the ground next to the hole that fits flush over the opening of the pit. The lid's top is covered with packed dirt and leaves, and once in place, the would-be tunnel opening becomes virtually invisible, even to those standing nearly on top of it. Again, the tourists are prompted to imagine that they are American GIs searching the area for tunnels, or that they are NLF fighters trying to avoid detection. After a few moments in the darkness of the camouflaged pit, the person in the pit typically pops up, holding the cover above his or her head, which is usually met with laughter and applause by the rest of the tour group. Photos are taken, and the whole experience, which is usually repeated by several members of any particular tour group, is one of amusement and frivolity.

This embodied imagining continues at the rifle range situated on one of the very Cu Chi battlefields where soldiers fought and died during the war. Here tourists can pay to fire a variety of weapons that were commonly used by soldiers on either side of the conflict, including the AK47 rifle used by the NLF and North Vietnamese, the M16 used by the Americans and their allies, and larger caliber guns like the M30 or M60. This participation in the ritual firing of weapons is a crucial step in the dialogical process facilitated by carnival, for "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people … everyone participates" (Bakhtin, 1984a: 7). What's more, most Western tourists choose to fire the AK47—the weapon of the Vietnamese communists. Roles are reversed in this way (as they typically are in carnival), and the ability of the tourists to respond to the unfamiliar war narrative they have spent the past hour or two experiencing is put on display. Within the social commentary on the Cu Chi tunnels, the rifle range is the most critiqued dimension of the tour and an aspect of the site that scholars often describe as postmodern, part of

a hyperreal environment lacking in cultural depth. This is a criticism that is shared by some of the tourists, as well. But at least half of those in the tour groups we observed over the years did fire the weapons, and amongst these there is a fairly even gender divide. Many who shoot do not have previous experience with guns, with the decision to fire often motivated by a tourist's openness to undertake activities they would typically avoid at home. Shooters typically reflect on how difficult it would have been for soldiers to handle these weapons and that it was such weapons that accounted for much of the war's loss of life. For those who do not shoot, waiting for others to do so while watching them engage in the experience is also significant, with the noise providing a sensory representation of the war.

> And then to fire the gun was something I wanted to do.… I guess more so to put myself in the perspective of what it would have been like to pump one of these around … you see these guys in movies … you just can't do that in real life … the historical perspective interrupts the Hollywood perspective. (American male, age 29, Security Consultant)

> I was like, "Oh whatever, shoot guns, I'm not going to shoot any guns." And as soon as we got into Saigon, I was like, "Maybe I'll shoot the guns." I don't know, just for the experience.… I was really awkward with it, and I was really uncomfortable doing it. It didn't make me feel powerful or strong. It was an unpleasant experience, and I hope I never have to do it again.… That's probably some dead GI's gun … thinking about it that way was unsettling. (American woman, age 24, English teacher)

> It completely catered for the person who is ok with guns.… And I had opposite feelings.… But I was actually quite interested to hear the gun sounds and to hear the bullets whistle through. (Australian male, age 36, School teacher)

Such interactive tourist experiences are dialogically framed in relation to preconceptions about the war. But what is significant, as demonstrated by the quotes above, is that they challenge—rather than reinforce—the dominant Western warrior culture that was so powerfully influenced by the American experience in the Vietnam War. However, there is another cultural frame outside of the tourists' experiences of the Cu Chi tunnels, one that also influences the way they are interpreted. Early in the article we noted that previous tourist experiences in Vietnam affect how tourists interpret the tunnels. Even more broadly, visitors also view Cu Chi in relation to tourism experiences in other countries, expressing a broader conceptualization about the role of tourism in understanding warfare and the world. As an illustration of this phenomenon, consider the quotes below.

> I mean, I think if anything, of all the things we've been seeing today, [it is] like seeing the museum in Hiroshima, or going to concentration camps in Germany. It just kind of drives home the point of how awful humans can be to each other.… I don't think the majority of Americans learned any lessons from all this kind of stuff. Which is why museums, especially [here in Vietnam], and traveling, and seeing other parts of the world and seeing other people's pain is just invaluable. (American woman, age 24, English teacher)

> We were at the rifle range, and I said 'do you think our great great grandchildren will be in Iraq doing this in however many years time?' It's really scary to think that it's not that different, the conflict, it's really not that different. (English woman, age 28, insurance broker)

Prompted by their tourist experience at Cu Chi, this symbolic linking of the Vietnam War to other transnational historical narratives is significant. It serves to elevate the conflict to a level of cosmopolitan memory where it becomes a site used by various nations to reflect on ideas of militarism, justice, and organized violence (for a discussion of the unique Vietnamese-American representation of the war, see Madigan, 2021).

**Dialogical Reimagining and the Carnivalesque**

The relatively detached involvement of the state in Vietnam's war tourism, the propensity for reflexivity from Western tourists about the politics of history, and the atmosphere of irreverent frivolity make it difficult on the surface to conceive of the Cu Chi battlefield as either a sacred site of civic pilgrimage or a conventional escapist tourist compound that works to sever serious engagement and dilute meaningful reflection on the past. However, using Bakhtin's conceptual framework we have argued that the socio-political significance of thanatourism for social memory should not be judged solely in these ways. More often than not, Western tourists experience the Cu Chi tunnels as carnival, and this rite is consequential to social memory in that it promotes a dialogical re-orientation of the Other. As we saw above, Western tourists frequently come away from the battlefield with an understanding that the war was an event where both sides suffered. This new realization is prompted by a living history mode that—through its dual perspective on how otherwise-ordinary individuals experienced the past—engenders empathy for soldiers from both sides of the war. This dialogical mode of engagement also encourages tourists to view the war in transnational ways as part of a broader lesson the world needs to learn about warfare. However, this reimagining of the past occurs without the tourists wholly accepting the authority and authenticity of the related social performance. Given the connections between the carnivalesque and the dialogical, the cultural significance of the rite is possibly even predicated on such critical distance.

From this perspective we highlight the multiple ways in which social performances can be meaningful beyond—in Alexander's (2004) terms—an experience that establishes a performer's "fusion" with their audience. Alexander argues that a key dimension of a successful performance involves an audience's identifying "psychologically with the characters on the stage and projecting themselves into them" (Alexander, 2004: 531), and through this process, experiencing a "loss of self-consciousness and a lack of concern for—even awareness of—the scrutiny of observers outside the action itself" (Alexander, 2004: 548). However, as Ringmar (2020) argues, Alexander's theory of social performance analytically privileges audience interpretations over a concern with the affects of ritual experience itself. A certain level of perceived authenticity at the Cu Chi tunnels is necessary for Western tourists to accept a dialogical reimagining of the war, and in this way we differentiate the Cu Chi tourist experience from other more mundane tourist

experiences. That said, much of the emotional energy (cf. Collins, 2004) of the tourist experience is not primarily traceable to a "mutual belief in the descriptive and prescriptive validity of the communication's symbolic contents" (Alexander, 2004: 527). Rather, at Cu Chi the ritual-like significance of the tour derives mostly from the presence of the carnivalesque and its connection to the dialogical, activity that involves shaking "up the authoritative version of language and values, making room for a multiplicity of voices and meanings" (Elliot, 1999: 129). As such, the dialogical reimagining of the dominant Western narrative of the war comes when the "authoritative voice of the dominant discourse loses its privilege" (Robinson, 2011). But this is only possible because the Cu Chi battlefield involves a carnivalesque ritual mode.

In reflecting on the cultural significance of the Cu Chi tunnels site and how it influences the social memory of the past and cultural difference, it is important to note that international thanatourism is contingent on a global mobility that is not a factor for other remembrance forms. As we saw at Cu Chi, the structure and historical interpretation of the performance was not a reflection of domestic cultural structures. Instead, the ritual advanced new understandings of the past due to the presence of two different audiences. In Victor Turner's terms, this can be understood as different ritual structures allowing for contexts of "possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (Turner, 1967: 97). It is within this frame that the performativity and creativity of actors is significant, highlighting issues of agency, multiplicity, and contestation. As such, the dialogical meanings of the war advanced at Cu Chi would be unlikely if the tradition of Western tourist visitation were to cease. And with the Covid-19 pandemic (ongoing at the time of this writing in 2022), this has indeed occurred, and cultural scholars must come to a greater appreciation of the ways in which immobility can shape the culture of post-industrial society (Turner, 2007). In this regard we note that the meanings and effects of tourism at Cu Chi are important in establishing the parameters for analyzing shifts in the remembrance and memory of the war. If the presence of the carnivalesque diminishes with the decline in international tourism, then so might the potential for dialogical discourses and reconciliation narratives that counter social memories of the warrior in the West (Logan and Witcomb, 2013).

**Conclusion**

Based on fieldwork at the Cu Chi battlefield in southern Vietnam, this article has drawn on social performance theory and Bakhtin's conceptual framework of the carnivalesque and dialogical in order to provide an alternative way of understanding the social and political significance of tourism memory rites. While the meanings Western tourists take away from Cu Chi significantly challenge the dominant Western narrative of the Vietnam War, the ritual form differs significantly from that typically associated with social performances that are socio-politically significant. This is due on one hand to the fact that tourists do not completely suspend disbelief as they process the portrayal of the past at Cu Chi, and on the other to the fact that this particular tourist ritual lacks the sort of reverential aura often found at other thanatourism sites, an aura many cultural scholars assert is consequential to social memory. However, we argue that in the Cu Chi case it is not the degree of acceptance of the historical portrayal that is most significant, but rather the meaning tourists give to the carnivalesque ways that history is engaged with at the site.

Specifically, the carnivalesque generates an enchanted engagement with the past that works independently of the acceptance of a particular interpretation of history. This works to destabilize prior dominant conceptions while also allowing new dialogical understandings of the war to emerge in ways that engender both a concern with the suffering of both sides and a strong connection to cosmopolitan visions of the world.

**References**


Alexander, J.C. (2004) Cultural pragmatics: Social performance between ritual and strategy. *Sociological Theory,* 22(4): 527-573.

Alexander, J.C. (2017) *The drama of social life.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Alexander, J.C. and Smith, P. (2010) The strong program: Origins, achievements and prospects. In J.R. Hall., L. Grindstaff and M. Lo (eds.) *Handbook of cultural sociology.* London: Routledge: 13-24.

Bakhtin, M. (1981) *The dialogical imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, M. (1984a). *Rabelais and his world.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, M. (1984b) *Speech genres and other late essays.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bennett, T. (2013) *Making culture, changing society.* London: Routledge.

Cohen, E. (2011) Educational dark tourism at an in populo site: The Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. *Annals of Tourism Research,* 38(1): 193-209.

Collins, R. (2004) *Interaction ritual chains.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Elliot, S. (1999) Carnival and dialogue in Bakhtin's poetics of folklore. *Folklore Forum,* 30(1/2): 129-139.

Eyerman, R., Madigan, T., and Ring, M. (2017) Cultural trauma, collective memory and the Vietnam War. *Croatian Political Science Review,* 54(1-2): 11-31.

Eyerman, R. and McCormick. L. (eds.) *Myth, meaning and performance*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.

Goffman, E. (1959) *The presentation of self in everyday life.* London: Penguin.

Halbwachs, M. (1950) *The collective memory.* New York: Harper & Row.

Hart, L., (2007) Authentic recreation: Living history and leisure. *Museum and Society,* 5(2): 103-124.

Kennedy, L.B. and Williams, M.R. (2001) The past without pain. In Tai, H.H. (ed.) *The Country of memory: Remaking the past in late socialist Vietnam.* Berkeley: University of California Press: 135-163.

Laderman, S. (2009) *Tours of Vietnam: War, travel guides and memory.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Light, D. (2017) Progress in dark tourism and thanatourism research. *Tourism Management,* 61: 275-301.

Logan, W. and Witcomb, A. (2013) Messages from Long Tan, Vietnam: Memorialization, reconciliation, and historical justice. *Critical Asian Studies,* 45(2): 255-278.

Macdonald, S. (2013) *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today.* Oxford: Routledge.

Madigan, T. (2021) Epimilitary Culture: Vietnamese-American literature and the alternative to paramilitary culture. In West, B. and Crosbie, T. (eds.) *Militarization and the global rise*

*of paramilitary culture: Post-heroes reimaginings of the warrior*. Singapore: Springer: 169-191.

Mast, J.L. and Alexander, J.C. (eds.) (2019) *Politics of Meaning/Meaning of Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (2015) International visitors to Viet Nam in December and 12 months of 2015.

http://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/english/index.php/items/9968

Reston. J. (2017) *A rift in the earth*. New York: Arcade

Ringmar, E. (2020) How do performances fuse societies? *American Journal of Cultural Sociology,* 8: 29–44.

Robinson, A. (2011) In theory Bakhtin: Carnival against capital, carnival against power. *Ceasefire.* 9 September. Last accessed 1 November, 2018: https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-2/

Rosen, E. (2015) How young Vietnamese view the Vietnam War. *The Atlantic.* 30 April. Last accessed 2 October, 2015: http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/youth-vietnam-war-fall-saigon/391769/

Schwenkel, C. (2009) *The American War in contemporary Vietnam.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Seaton, A.V. (1996) Guided by the dark: From thanatopsis to thanatourism. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 2:4, 234-244

Tai, H. (2001) *The country of memory: Remaking the past in late-socialist Vietnam.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Tivers, J. (2002) Performing heritage: The use of live "actors" in heritage. *Leisure Studies,* 21: 187-200.

Turner, B. (2007) The enclave society: Towards a sociology of immobility. *European Journal of Social Theory,* 10 (2):287–303.

Turner, V. (1969) *The Ritual Process.* Chicago: Aldine.

UNESCO. (2011) *Reproducing gender in Viet Nam's museums.* UNESCO Hanoi, Vietnam. Last accessed 2 October: http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/images/Reproducing-Gender-in-VietNam-Museums_Study.pdf

Wagner-Pacifici, R. and Schwartz, B. (1991) The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a difficult past. *American Journal of Sociology,* 97: 376-420.

Welch, M. (2015) *Escape to prison: Penal tourism and the pull of punishment.* Oakland: University of California Press.

West, B. (2014) Historical re-enacting and affective authority: Performing the American civil war. *Annals of Leisure Research,* 17(2).

Wright, P. (2001) *Tank: The progress of a monstrous war machine.* London: Faber and Faber.