

*Tours of Vietnam: War, Travel Guides, and Memory.* By Scott Laderman. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. 312 pp.

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

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

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

The second (and related) problem lies in the book's treatment of travel guides. Laderman does not interpret travel writings as expressive, *literary* texts and offers no analysis of travel writing as a distinct genre, beholden to its own formal conventions, commercial motivations, and assumptions about audiences. Too often Laderman condemns travel guides for failing to meet the standards of academic history writing: they ignore scholarly debates, reduce complexities, and do not consider competing narratives. At the same time, the book is focused quite narrowly on guidebooks, without adequately situating them within larger cultural discourses about Vietnam that may include alternative or competing representations. Although Laderman at times gestures towards this cultural milieu, he rarely brings it into focus with any depth. As a result, there are jarring moments when the travel texts under consideration utterly fail to illuminate — or even connect to — a given historical situation. For example, towards the end of the chapter on Defense Department guidebooks of the 1960s and early 1970s, which Laderman argues

served to instil “in military personnel the ideological assumptions of American global anti-Communism” (p. 55), Laderman notes that by the early 1970s the U.S. Army was in a state of near collapse, with rampant drug use, racial tensions, “fragging”, and insubordination. But he can’t connect the guidebooks and their work of ideological indoctrination to this state of near mutiny. Did the guidebooks present an internally flawed or unpersuasive ideological message to the troops? Were soldiers coming to see their presence in Vietnam through other, more potent interpretive frameworks? If this is the case, what were those frameworks and how were they circulating? In the absence of a sophisticated model of ideology that can account for the multiple, competing, and fluid explanations for the U.S. presence in Vietnam, Laderman can only introduce, but not explain, this seeming contradiction.

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

*Tours of Vietnam* becomes much more impressive when it steps back from travel writing to foreground the larger questions of historical memory and the construction of historical narratives. The chapter on Hue becomes fascinating when it undertakes a rhetorical analysis of how the myth of the Hue massacre has been invoked by a range of political actors to achieve a range of different ends. Laderman traces how the Nixon administration used Hue to justify the U.S. intervention in Vietnam, how right-wing activists used it in the 2004 presidential election campaign to discredit John Kerry, and how members of the Vietnamese diaspora used it after the war to educate their children about the communist government they

fled. Laderman suggests persuasively how constructions of the past can play a vital role in negotiating diverse political dilemmas in the present. While ideology is still central to this argument — Laderman proposes that the myth of the massacre worked as a “salve for America’s wounded collective conscience” (p. 122) by diverting attention away from the much larger violence perpetrated by the United States during the war — Laderman is able to address a series of more nuanced questions. These include: How are memories of traumatic historical events constructed? Who produces and invokes these memories and to what ends? How can they remain available for retrieval and re-use decades later? How do diverse social groups invoke the same memory for a variety of purposes?

The final chapter, on the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, is a masterpiece of cultural analysis. Laderman is able to explore the Museum as a rich cultural artefact that extends beyond the exhibit itself and includes comments written in the museum’s guestbook and the reflections of scores of museum visitors, as well as the framing of the museum in the requisite guidebooks. Laderman brings the question of historical memory vividly to life as he shows real people struggling in diverse ways to reconcile competing versions of the origins of and rationales for the war. Here we finally get a sense of the complexity and diversity of American perspectives that is largely absent from the earlier chapters. Leaving behind stale notions of monolithic ideologies, Laderman undertakes a far more productive exploration of how the museum provokes crises in visitors that are both historical in nature (Did the United States engage in a counter-revolutionary war or a defensive war against external aggression?) and moral (How can we make sense of the horrors that U.S. policy and American soldiers perpetrated?). This chapter also finally engages with the broader body of American cultural representations of the war, raising questions about the diverse sources of popular historical knowledge and interrogating what happens when competing versions of the past come into conflict. Finally, Laderman brings the Ho Chi Minh City exhibit into productive conversation with similar memorials that Americans have constructed at home. He notes

incisively that while American visitors to the War Remnants Museum often bitterly critiqued the lack of attention to American suffering during the war, virtually no American guidebooks even noted the complete absence of Vietnamese names and experiences from the war memorials in Washington, DC. Laderman observes with great insight that to locate the Vietnamese people at the centre of the historical narrative was, for many Americans, “to reveal an ideological bias”, while placing Americans in that position was regarded as “ideologically neutral” and even “normative” (p. 165).

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

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