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Prosthetic Memory: Children Remembering the Remnants of Suffering

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ABSTRACT

This study draws on site observation and worksheets from a field trip to examine children's narratives of the exhibitions at the War Remnants Museum in Hô Chí Minh City, Vietnam, with a specific focus on the portrayal of the victims of Agent Orange through both "photographic" and "life" exhibitions. In applying Landsberg's concept of "prosthetic memory," the findings reveal how the photographic exhibition with its visual documentary evidence, and the life exhibition, through its interactive engagement, play important roles in the formation of children's prosthetic memories of the US war in Vietnam. These exhibitions provide context, depth, and immediacy to the portrayal of the ongoing suffering of the Agent Orange victims, enabling children to integrate historical and personal memory. This dual approach influences their perceptions, interpretations, and remembrance of the war, enhancing their learning experience by offering a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the historical event.

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Introduction

Warfare tourism is a specific form of dark tourism and the "darkness" element primarily centers around war and conflict (Biran et al., 2011; Henderson, 2000; Lema & Agrusa, 2013; Lischer, 2019; Suntikul, 2013). War-related attractions such as battlefields, memorial trails, former war zones, war camps, military cemeteries, war monuments, and museums are the elements of the tourism industry (Butler & Suntikul, 2013; Light, 2017). Visitors travel to war-related sites to experience places where significant loss of life has occurred, to learn about military history, to participate in battle re-enactments, to explore heritage and cultural interests, to embark on a pilgrimage, to commemorate and remember historical events, and to acquire or affirm personal and/or collective identities (Butler & Suntikul, 2013; Dunkley et al., 2011; Hartmann, 2014; Packer et al., 2019). Dark tourism sites of war and conflict provide visitors with the opportunity to engage not only cognitively and emotionally, but also with the moral and ethical dimensions of warfare (Iles, 2008; Lee, 2016). Warfare tourism constitutes one of the

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largest categories of dark tourism (Butler & Suntikul, 2013; Henderson, 2000; Light, 2017; Schwenkel, 2009; Smith, 1998; Winter, 2012).

Central to understanding dark tourism are the processes and practices of representation, commemoration, and remembrance of historical events. Of particular interest is how representations of the historical past are produced, reproduced, and maintained. Dark tourism sites serve as representations of place by exhibiting artifacts and communicating meanings that reflect certain political ideologies and their associated social relationships (Kim et al., 2007; Lischer, 2019). They serve a social function linked to specific groups and their political stances underpinning their representation. For example, war museums select their artifacts, imbuing them with meanings, and establishing them as representations to validate the museum's position in relation to the past. Museum narratives have the capacity to connect shared beliefs and values among individuals. This influential process can act as a bonding agent, strengthening a collective sense of national identity (Park, 2010; Roppola et al., 2019). However, active participation from the visitors is necessary to co-create both the narrative construction and collective memory (Chronis, 2012; Schwenkel, 2009). In experiencing a dark site, visitors carry with them their preexisting knowledge related to the historical past. Hence, this prior knowledge shapes visitors' interpretation of the site's narrative (Chronis, 2012). This blending of personal narrative with the historical narrative of one's social group is central to group memory.

Memory continuously negotiates a precarious relationship with the past. As a social process, it involves not merely recording the past, but rather constructing representations of the past in the present. This process involves a negotiation in pursuit of specific goals (Hajek, 2013; Kansteiner, 2002) and is socially constructed within the context of social relationships organized by social groups (Halbwachs, 1992). Therefore, presentations of the past are not fixed but are instead subject to ongoing negotiation and interpretation. Schwenkel (2009) made an interesting observation on war-related tourism sites in Vietnam, "public spaces of national memory become sites of disjunctive memories and conflicting truths with the influx of international tourists" (p. 12). Due to the divergence of collective memories among different groups, dark sites serve as places where both affirmation and contestation of these memories take place. These dark sites have become not only spaces for constructing identity narratives but also for collective remembrance.

Memory is dynamic and varies depending on historical and cultural contexts, resulting in diverse interpretations, carrying different meanings for different people across different places, cultures, and times. Landsberg (2004) introduced the concept of prosthetic memory as a form of public cultural memory that arises when individuals engage with historical narratives that are not their own direct lived experiences. Prosthetic memories are not natural, inherited, or lived experiences. Instead, they emerge from engaging with mediated representations, such as films and museum exhibits. Landsberg (2004) refers to activities like watching a film or visiting a museum as "an act of prosthesis" (p. 34). As such, prosthetic memories serve a specific purpose by presenting viewers with events that they have not directly experienced. These mediated representations serve as experiential sites, enabling individuals to connect with the past. Similar to watching a film, exhibits in museums enables visitors to come "into intimate contact with a set of experiences that fall well outside of their own lived experience and, as a result, are forced to look as if through someone else's eyes, and asked to remember those situations and events" (Landsberg, 2009, p. 222).

Prosthetic memories, similar to artificial limbs, are often associated with experiences of certain past traumatic events. They are produced through “a person’s mass-mediated experience of a traumatic event of the past” (Landsberg, 2004, p. 19). Landsberg (2004) suggests that “commodities and commodified images are not capsules of meaning that spectators swallow wholesale but are the grounds on which social meanings are negotiated, contested, and sometimes constructed” (p. 21). Prosthetic memories are not dependent on lived experience and are not owned by any particular individual or group, thereby offering increased accessibility to individuals from diverse national, ethnic and religious backgrounds. This form of memory is situated within specific historical contexts and notably differs from other forms of collective memory as it is not confined to the ownership of any particular group.

Learning in dark tourism

The educational importance of places associated with atrocity, death, and suffering is widely recognized (Biran et al., 2011; Dunkley, 2015; Light, 2017). Many dark tourism sites operate as educational service centers, with a focus on promoting their educational mission and providing history-centric information about the past to visitors. These sites play a crucial role in preserving and transmitting historical knowledge, while also serving as places for commemorating and remembering the victims of the atrocities. Additionally, they facilitate dialogues about difficult historical subjects, fostering meaningful connections between visitors and the historical past. Notably, many dark sites are striving to connect with new and younger audiences, who do not have personal memories of the historical events depicted (Apsel & Sodaro, 2019). Research indicates that many tourists are motivated to visit dark tourism sites for education, learning, and understanding of the historical events associated with these locations (Biran et al., 2011; Kang et al., 2012; Packer et al., 2019; Winter, 2012). Educational elements are integral to the overall tourist experience.

Stone (2006) proposed a darker-lighter tourism spectrum based on varying levels of darkness with an emphasis on educational orientation within its framework. The darker sites are characterized by higher political and ideological influence, delivering greater educational and commemorative experiences compared to the lighter sites. Many dark sites are designed as alternative teaching spaces, providing valuable educational resources for children. While there is an assumption that children learn from visiting dark sites, and a recognized need for educational services to meet a diverse range of learning objectives for children (Israfilova & Khoo-Lattimore, 2018; Kerr & Price, 2018), research directed toward understanding how meanings are constructed, transmitted, and remembered through the educational dark sites remains limited. Notably, exhibitions at dark sites are considered central to the educational process, serving as the medium through which historical events are narrated to visitors. As such, it is vital to understand the relationship between exhibitions and the teaching of history in children. For researchers, educators, and site managers, it is essential to explore the specific ways exhibitions enhance the educational experiences of children. This includes examining how children perceive, engage with, and derive meaning from the exhibitions.

Although war-related dark tourism has received considerable academic attention (Butler & Suntikul, 2013; Henderson, 2000; Light, 2017; Schwenkel, 2009) and previous

studies have specifically focused on children's visits to dark tourism sites associated with wars (Israfilova & Khoo-Lattimore, 2018; Kerr & Price, 2018), there remains a gap in our understanding of how these experiences influence children's remembrance of war. When considering children's experiences at war-related sites, the notion of cultural memory becomes particularly important. It enables us to understand their perceptions of war, their understanding of socio-political context, and their interpretation of its causes and outcomes. This significance derives from the way cultural memory emphasizes that identities are narratives that are socially constructed and negotiated within larger cultural and institutional contexts. Understanding cultural memory is crucial, as it helps us to comprehend how children perceive themselves and interpret historical events. It also emphasizes the importance of examining how exhibitions at dark sites contribute to the shaping of these cultural memories, as these are central to the narratives children construct about historical events. This enquiry is crucial not only for understanding the educational impact of dark tourism on children but also for enhancing the design and presentation of exhibitions to better serve their educational needs.

This study aims to examine how Vietnamese children perceive, interpret, and remember the US war in Vietnam. It explores their ideas about the historical past, their interpretation of the exhibitions, and their relationship to the memory of the war. The research question for this study is: How do Vietnamese children view the exhibitions at the War Remnants Museum? This study contributes to the dark tourism literature by providing valuable insights into children's views and experiences about war.

Methods

The context of the study: the War Remnants Museum

The field trip to the War Remnants Museum (WRM) in 2019 provided the context for this research. The aim of this field trip was to introduce a group of Vietnamese school children to the historical event of the US war in Vietnam, an integral part of their school curriculum. This visit was a routine field trip organized by the school, providing students with an educational experience linked to their studies. The research team utilized the opportunity to collect data for the study, but they had no involvement in the planning or organization of the field trip itself. There were no interactions between the members of the research team and the children before, during, or after the field trip. This study was part of a larger research project, and some details of the methods have been described elsewhere (Dresler, 2022).

The WRM is one of the most popular dark tourism destinations in Vietnam, attracting both international and domestic visitors. The WRM presents a variety of exhibitions and artifacts that focus on the US war in Vietnam, its causes, outcomes, and the broader historical and political context. These exhibits include US military hardware and vehicles, a photographic exhibition on Agent Orange and chemical warfare, scientific reports on the environmental and health impacts of the conflict, documents from the global anti-war movement, artifacts related to Vietnam's resistance movements, personal items from both American and Vietnamese soldiers, maps and models of underground structures used during the war. Additionally, a life exhibition

displays individuals with deformities and illnesses, highlighting the ongoing suffering of victims affected by Agent Orange. Purposefully designed as an educational center, the WRM aims to provide information not only about the war but also about its outcomes to visitors who did not experience the war and who have limited historical knowledge of it. As such, the WRM has “a higher degree of political influence in its design and interpretation, and as such promotes a product of remembrance, commemoration, and education” (Stone, 2006, p. 150). Hence, the site is positioned at the darker end of the dark tourism spectrum.

Data collection

This study has adopted an inductive qualitative design with two stages of data collection. The first stage involved site observation conducted by two members of the research team. This approach allowed for a visual exploration of the exhibitions, facilitating a deeper understanding of their social context within this dark tourism site. The second phase of data collection involved participants completing a field trip worksheet, which encouraged reflection and provided insights into their personal interpretations and experiences. The use of a worksheet is a common educational practice to support children’s learning in museums (Mortensen & Smart, 2007). The worksheet approach allows for a combination of child-centered activities and self-directed exploration of the museum (DeWitt & Storksdieck, 2008).

In the worksheet, the children were asked three questions. The first two questions focused on exploring which aspects of the field trip stood out to them: “What were the most striking aspects about the visit?” and “What were the most surprising aspects about your experience?” The children were informed that these questions would not be part of their field trip assessment and would not be graded. Additionally, they were made aware that the question, “After the field trip to the War Remnants Museum and the guided tour what are your thoughts about the war? Are these thoughts different from before the trip?” was included in their field trip assessment and would be graded out of 10 marks. For this question, children provided answers varying in length, ranging from 29 to 210 words. These broad questions were designed to encourage children to reflect on their experiences. The worksheet questions were completed by the children in a classroom setting, as being overly preoccupied with the worksheet during the museum visit might interfere with their capacity to fully experience the museum. This approach also allowed children time to reflect and construct their answers to the questions, rather than requiring them to verbalize immediate responses to questions in an interview situation. Moreover, completing the worksheet post-visit allowed us to capture the children’s reconstructed memories of the visit to the WRM.

The data were obtained from nine classes in a secondary school located in the southern region of Vietnam. The three-phased consent process was applied to gain access to the students’ worksheets. First, the school principal was approached to gain consent to collect data on the field trip. Second, parental consent was obtained. The parents were informed that if they did not wish their child to participate in the study, their child’s worksheet would not be given to the research team for analysis. Third, the students were informed that they would not have to answer any questions and that they could withdraw at any stage of the research process. Taken together, there

were 395 Vietnamese students aged 14 years old participated in the field trip. There were 30 parents and/or children who declined the invitation to participate in the study. To maintain anonymity, a random letter with a number was assigned to each of the 324 students' direct quotes (for example, "G-241" indicated the student was in the G Class and was number 241 from the 365 students). Ethical approval was granted by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

Data analysis

As this study is qualitative, it is important to recognize the subjectivities within the research team, particularly considering its composition, which includes members from different nationalities. Their interpretations can be shaped by a variety of factors, including their cultural perspectives, professional experiences, theoretical orientations, and research objectives. Similarly, children's interpretations of the exhibitions can be influenced by various factors related to their personal experiences of the war. This includes their cultural background, social identity, and personal connections, all of which shape their understanding and interpretation of the exhibitions (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003; Stylianou & Stylianou-Lambert, 2017).

The worksheet comments and related field notes from the site observation were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis to identify patterns across textual data, capturing meanings that the children attributed to the field trip experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytic process involved the following phases: (a) familiarizing with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, and (e) defining and labeling themes. This allowed patterns to emerge, sub-themes were categorized, and key themes were identified accordingly. To ensure rigor, three research members analyzed the data and, through group discussion, reached consensus on the codes, themes, sub-themes, and labels, to ensure that the contents were suitably represented. In the event of contradictions, the team reevaluated and redefined the themes accordingly.

Results and discussion

The WRM carries a mission to educate visitors about the consequences of the war, offering an educational program for postwar youths who have only known Vietnam in peacetime. The main challenge for the WRM is to establish a personal connection between these young visitors and a war they have not directly experienced. The WRM employs creative approaches by framing "suffering" as a central narrative, offering a compelling testimony to the enduring impact of Agent Orange on both the population and the environment. The display of the suffering has been grouped thematically into two main themes. The first centered on the "photographic exhibition" with a subtheme of visual evidence. The second theme involved the "life exhibition" with the subtheme of direct engagement. Through the interaction between the children and the historical narrative of the war, providing an experience in which "individual spectators suture themselves into history, developing prosthetic memories" (Landsberg, 2004, p. 14). The WRM acts as a critical space where the history of the US war in Vietnam is selected, constructed, and remembered.

Presenting suffering through photographic exhibitions

The observation reveals that the Agent Orange exhibition room, located on the first floor, displayed numerous photographs documenting the use of Agent Orange and its impact on both the Vietnamese population and the natural environment. During the conflict, the US military sprayed Agent Orange, leading to the exposure of millions of Vietnamese people. As a consequence of this exposure, many Vietnamese people continue to suffer from health issues today (Martin, 2009; Ngo et al., 2006; Stellman et al., 2003). An important aspect of the WRM's presentation is its emphasis on the devastating impact of Agent Orange. For many children, "The most striking aspect of the visit would be the victims of Agent Orange" (H238). Some children reported that "The pictures of the people who were infected with Agent Orange" (C191) emphasized the power of visual representation in making traumatic historical issues accessible to children. Children were able to connect the disabilities with Agent Orange exposure: G200 observed "Agent Orange caused disfigurement in the next generations of infected people." Sharing similar thoughts, A28 noted, "The war left effects of the poisonous Agent Orange that caused many people to have deformities." The children used descriptors such as "deformed," "disfigurement," "bodily impairments," "abnormalities," and "malformation" to align with disabilities. Through the photographic exhibits, the children provided contextualization, illustration, and evidence to construct their narratives on the consequences of the war.

The observation also shows that the WRM employs a series of portrait photographs to display evidence of the impact of Agent Orange. By spotlighting individual victims and detailing their names, birth dates, and diseases, the museum transforms the narrative from mere abstract historical evidence into a deeply personal experience. This approach not only humanizes the victims but also invites visitors to engage with their stories. Through intimate glimpses into the lives of those affected by Agent Orange, the museum compels visitors to confront the harsh realities of its impact. The personal information serves as a reminder that each portrait represents a real person with a history, a family, and a community, rather than just a faceless statistic in the broader narrative of the war. Additionally, by detailing the diseases caused by exposure to Agent Orange, the photographic exhibition provided further evidence not only of the chemical's immediate effects but also of its long-term health implications: B86 reflected, "These thoughts are different from before the trip because I did not think it would affect people so much like the case of Agent Orange infection, it spreads to the next generation." Photographs, as a form of visual documentation, play a role in cultivating historical understanding, which are central aspects of prosthetic memory. Landsberg (2004) suggests that photography has the capacity to "open up a world of images outside a person's lived experience, creating a portable, fluid and nonessentialist form of memory" (p. 18).

The photographic exhibition makes the historical event more tangible and emotionally impactful: J314 described, "Seeing the photos in the gallery helps me feel the pain in a very real way." Photographic exhibition can be visually striking, evoking powerful and immediate emotional responses: E184 observed, "I was shocked to see pictures of all the innocent people, children and babies who were pitifully poisoned with Agent Orange" and E182 expressed, "I was very touched to see the photos of people infected

with Agent Orange poison.” The photographic exhibition fosters a sense of empathy and connection between the viewers and the victims, humanizing the victims as individuals with personal stories of loss and suffering: G201 expressed, “I am deeply saddened by the loss, hurt and suffering from Agent Orange.” Essentially, the photographic presentation of suffering at the WRM serve the purpose of helping visitors obtain a “deeply felt memory” of the war (Landsberg, 2004, p. 222). As sensory prosthetic device, photographs enmesh with individual memories, evoking affective responses through their imagery. The resulting prosthetic memory is deeply felt as though it were a genuine, lived experience. This process allows visitors to access past events that are beyond their personal experience (Bate, 2010).

Presenting suffering through life exhibition

The observation highlights that in addition to displaying numerous photographic images of disabled individuals, the WRM prominently features the victims of Agent Orange as “life exhibition” within the museum. They were located next to the Orange room, in the souvenir shop operated by the charitable organization Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (VAVA). Some children reported “Not only the images of Agent Orange but the people present, who are sitting in the souvenir shop room” (E178). Others reported that “The most striking aspect about the visit was seeing a man who is disabled, he sat in the wheelchair and made toys and key chains” (J313). Children made specific references to the disabilities of the victims: “The souvenir shop has people with disabilities because of Agent Orange” (J319). Besides making and selling their wares, disabled people also perform music and sing for the visitors: “The most surprising aspect was the blind man playing the piano” (G218).

The display of disabled people serves as another approach to illustrating the impacts of the war. Unlike photographs, which capture a moment in time, the life exhibition portrays the ongoing and intergenerational nature of the suffering: G205 explained, “Before this trip, I just thought that the war was not so terrible, and if there were casualties, it would be fast and would not affect the next generation.” Many children had the opportunity to witness and interact directly with the victims of Agent Orange: A28 expressed, “The war left the poison of Agent Orange that caused many people to be born with deformities, making their lives difficult from birth because they are not as normal as everyone else.” For children, the war and the use of Agent Orange may seem like the distant history. However, the life exhibition renders the historical event more immediate and relevant. The victims of Agent Orange serve as a tangible link connecting Vietnam’s past to its present. The disabled body acts as a repository of prosthetic memories, providing interpretive avenues for understanding the outcomes of the US war in Vietnam.

The life exhibition enables personal stories and testimonies from the victims of Agent Orange, providing a human face to the war. These narratives offer insights into the daily struggles, health challenges, and economic hardship faced by individuals affected by Agent Orange: “So many people are affected by Agent Orange. How difficult it is for them to sit around making each bracelet. It is truly different from my previous thoughts” (G245). The life exhibition thereby reinforces the authenticity of the victims’ experiences by integrating prosthetic memory, derived from life exhibition.

This process involves blending historical and personal memory for a deeper understanding of the historical event. Essentially, prosthetic memories “are privately felt public memories that develop after an encounter with a mass cultural representation of the past, when new images and ideas come into contact with a person’s own archive of experience” (Landsberg, 2004, p. 19).

Such direct engagement with the life exhibition has the capacity to deepen the witnessing experience by providing the contextual associations of suffering. The life exhibition promotes more than just the imagined relationships between children and the victims depicted in the photographs by encouraging real interactions between them. This, in turn, helps construct prosthetic memories through secondhand witnessing of suffering. The life exhibition of disabled bodies amplifies the impact of suffering, making it more compelling. Secondhand witnessing facilitates meaning-making by establishing connections between the displayed bodily suffering and the interpretations of both the victims of Agent Orange and the children. This secondhand witnessing of suffering, facilitated by the life exhibition, enables children to incorporate these memories into their own historical narrative, contributing to a national memory of the event. In this way, prosthetic memory becomes “part of their own archive of experience” (Landsberg, 2004, p. 30).

Educational values

The observation indicates that the WRM provides educational programs, including school guided tours for students across a range of educational levels. These guided tours narrate a history that the children did not experience. For many children, the field trip to the museum was their first exposure to the war: A18 shared, “For the first time, I saw myself so close to the war.” Some children admitted to having limited knowledge of the war: B32 described, “Before the trip, I thought I knew everything about the war and lacked interest. But after the trip, I realised how limited my knowledge was.” Likewise, J316 explained, “Before this trip, despite being told a lot, what I knew about the war was very little and vague.” Other children admitted to having simplistic ideas of the war: D148 stated, “I thought the war was just soldiers with guns shooting each other.” The observation reveals that the WRM presents the historical events of the US War in Vietnam from a Vietnamese perspective creating a narrative that emphasizes the nation’s experiences, struggles, and resilience: D135 declared, “After visiting the War Remnants Museum and the guided tour, I could feel the pain that the war brought” and J324 observed, “But after going through the museum, I noticed many aspects, such as the pains and losses that people have suffered and the ways they have overcome the war.” Through these tours, the museum connects young visitors to historical narratives specifically tailored to educate them about Vietnam’s memoryscape.

The WRM employs photographs and life exhibition to present the impact of Agent Orange, providing contextual learning experiences that are difficult to replicate in traditional classroom settings. According to A39, “The field trip is more helpful than sitting in the classroom.” At the WRM, these exhibits provide visual cues and narratives that effectively capture a sense of “what it was like” for the people impacted by the war, enabling children to imagine the past: D143 reflected, “This field trip has helped me to

gain a deep understanding of the pain inflicted by war.” Some children reported visceral experiences, including physical sensations indicating deep affective engagement with the site: J315 reported, “The museum horrified me and gave me goosebumps.” By being physically present at the museum and engaging with the exhibitions, children can encounter artifacts, read personal testimonies, and even interact with the Agent Orange victims. This direct engagement enables children to connect the abstract concept of war with its tangible human consequences. As prosthetic memory depends on the physical “proximity” to the victims (Landsberg, 2004, p. 125), the presence of the victims of Agent Orange themselves offers another glimpse into the ongoing reality of their suffering. As such, it allows the children to move beyond mere observation to a deep understanding of the war, where they do not “simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event” (Landsberg, 2004, p. 2).

The photographic exhibition presents visual cues of suffering, enabling children not only to view the displays but also to feel the suffering depicted. These exhibits provide children with emotional experiences of the war. The WRM has become a dark site where children learn through the experience of feeling: D135 described, “I felt the embodiment of war still nearby, causing me to choke and sob.” Children’s reactions suggest that the photographic exhibits are deeply sensory and affective, integrating into the body in ways that feel real and immediate. As such, viewers attach themselves to photographic images prosthetically, and like “an artificial limb, these memories are actually worn on the body; these are sensuous memories produced by an experience of mass mediated representations” (Landsberg, 2004, p. 149). The visceral experiences of suffering enabled children to gain “an experience that positions their bodies to be better able to understand an otherwise unthinkable event” (Landsberg, 2004, p. 131). In this way, children develop a different form of understanding, aligning with “the experiential as a mode of knowledge” (Landsberg, 2004, p. 130). That is, images of suffering have the capacity to engage individuals “not only intellectually, but in affective ways as well” (Landsberg, 2015, p. 2). This engagement enables children to not only cognitively process their learning but also to deeply connect emotionally with the site (Mulcahy & Witcomb, 2018; Witcomb, 2013), thereby experiencing the felt reality of the past (Violi, 2012).

The life exhibition shifts from passive learning to active engagement with the people directly impacted, transforming abstract historical concepts into tangible, lived experiences. Children interacting with the life exhibition may evoke a deeper emotional response than photographs alone, as it allows them to interact with the stories of those directly affected. This direct engagement not only enhances the understanding that the effects of Agent Orange are ongoing but also adds a layer of urgency and empathy to the visitor experience: “I felt extremely empathy in the face of these unfortunate circumstances” (J324). Moreover, the life exhibition elicited sentiments of admiration and respect: “I admire the disabled” (E181) and “to show respect to them” (J316). Thus, it fostered positive emotional responses and a deeper appreciation for the resilience of individuals living with disabilities, urging children to alleviate their suffering: “I want to help the Agent Orange victims” (A49) and “I want to support those affected by disability” (E169). By presenting the life exhibition alongside photographic evidence, the WRM effectively raises awareness of the ongoing needs of Agent Orange victims and can potentially inspire visitors to support advocacy and aid efforts.

By witnessing the collective impact on numerous individuals and families, children gained an understanding that the suffering caused by Agent Orange remains a reality for many Vietnamese people: “The most obvious consequence of the war is the victims of Agent Orange” (J299) and “The national pain as well as the enduring hardships of Agent Orange victims, which are hard to heal” (G249). The WRM presents disability from Agent Orange not as an individual experience, but purposefully as a collective outcome of the conflict. By doing so, it conveys a unifying message of national suffering. Despite the official position that the war is over, the WRM does not portray postwar Vietnam as a nation that has fully healed from the suffering produced by the war, nor does it relegate such suffering to the past. The representations of the disabilities extend the national memory of the war, allowing for the construction of additional prosthetic memories that recognize the outcomes of the war, thus making prosthetic memory more pronounced. By engaging with disabilities and facilitating the merging of the past and the present, children are able to acquire prosthetic memories from those who have endured such suffering.

More importantly, the presence of children at the WRM, along their prosthetic memories, ensures that the war is not assigned to the forgotten past: J322 explained, “What makes this trip even more special is that I have had the opportunity to listen to the tour guide analyse and retell the historical events in great detail. I can see what is left from the war, and these details will ensure that I never forget the war.” Furthermore, their prosthetic memories serve as a communal experience as many children share with others through discussions with friends and family, thereby contributing to raising awareness among the broader public. The prosthetic memory acquired by these Vietnamese children illustrates that memories of the war are not solely owned by those who directly participated in the war, nor do they belong to those descending from victims of the war. Such memories of the war have acquired transgenerational significance (Văran & Crețan, 2018). This is crucial for the development of historical consciousness in postwar Vietnam, as the war’s legacy continues to shape national identity and the collective memory of the Vietnamese people. This enables postwar generations to learn from the US war in Vietnam (Sodaro, 2018).

Implications and directions for further research

While the history of the US war in Vietnam refers to past events, the memory of the war involves recollecting and reconstructing the past, which is transmitted across generations. The WRM presents both photographic exhibition and a permanent life exhibition of the victims of Agent Orange, providing a specific form of evidence that is rarely encountered at the dark sites. Through these exhibitions, the WRM incorporates memories of individuals with direct experiences of the war, and those with hereditary connection, aiming to provide experiential memories of the war to individuals with no direct memory of this historical past, thereby encouraging the development of prosthetic memory. These distinctive features of the WRM have provided valuable insights, which have important implications for both researchers and the management of war-related dark sites.

For researchers, the way a nation defines its shared sense of “nationhood” is conveyed through the choices it makes regarding how, what, and whom to memorialize.

This raises important questions about the modes of memory employed by dark sites and the purposes they serve. First, the official position of the museum itself influences the collection of artifacts, the presentation of exhibitions, and the interpretation of meanings that validate its perspective on the past (Upton et al., 2018). These exhibitions are performative, “for they are how museums perform the knowledge they create” (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 3), shaping memory into an official version of the past and contributing to the understanding of the establishment and continuation of a nation. This performative nature highlights the need for researchers to examine how exhibitions communicate ideas of collective identity and how people have come to be who they are (Winter, 2012). In particular, researchers need to explore how exhibitions at dark sites reflect and reinforce specific political ideologies and their associated social relationships, acting as vehicles for advancing the social and political agendas of certain groups, and shaping how history is both represented and remembered.

Second, researchers need to examine how both the photographic and life exhibitions contribute to the commemoration and interpretation of dark sites. This involves exploring how these exhibitions perform important pedagogical functions. Specifically, this pedagogical function elevates dark sites beyond just commemorative spaces—they serve as active learning environments that deepen visitors’ understanding of historical events and facilitate the development of their prosthetic memories. As such, “people who acquire these memories are led to feel a connection to the past but, all the while, to remember their position in the contemporary moment” (Landsberg, 2004, p. 9). A visitor with this new form of memory “does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live. The resulting prosthetic memory has the ability to shape that person’s subjectivity and politics” (Landsberg, 2004, p. 2). The acquisition of prosthetic memory emerges as an interplay between an individual, a historical narrative, and an experiential dark site. In essence, the dark site creates a powerful platform for visitors to acquire a memory that, while not their own deeply influences their understanding of both history and contemporary issues. This process can have important implications in fostering empathy, promoting collective identity, and facilitating political engagement (Landsberg, 2009).

For managers, the photographic and life exhibitions contribute to the formation of prosthetic memory in distinct ways. Each medium offers a different avenue for visitors to engage with the historical past, influencing how we understand, learn about, and remember historical events (Landsberg, 2015). Photographs provide essential visual evidence connecting people not only to their personal histories but also to broader collective memories. They act as tangible links to events, places, and people beyond an individual’s direct experience, making history more accessible and meaningful across generations. In doing so, photographs enable visitors to engage with shared historical narratives, fostering a deeper understanding as well as an emotional connection to those stories. While photographic exhibitions can be deeply moving, their lack of physical presence, interactivity, and multidimensional context which may not achieve the same depth of personal connection as experienced through the life exhibitions. Life exhibitions provide multidimensional context can offer more comprehensive narratives, layering historical facts, personal stories, and artifacts in ways that encourage

visitors to explore complex histories on a more intimate level, fostering a deeper understanding and emotional connection to the events being represented. For example, at the WRM, the life exhibition provides a narrative depth that illustrates the disabilities caused by Agent Orange, displays the personal impact on victims and their families, and depicts the broader social and health implications. This narrative depth enables visitors to understand the complexities of the issues that highlights the multifaceted outcomes of Agent Orange use.

Notably, when presented together, the visual narratives of a photographic exhibition and the context provided a life exhibition add depth and background, offering the photographs additional meaning and significance. This combination creates a more multifaceted understanding of the historical events. A photographic exhibition allows visitors to view history “through someone else’s eyes,” offering interpretations of events that immerse them in the experiences of others and enable them to understand the past from another’s perspective. In contrast, the life exhibition offers an immersive experience, enabling visitors to engage with the historical past by viewing it “through their own eyes” and allowing them to physically and emotionally interact with the past. Both photographic and life exhibitions serve as valuable tools for historical engagement, offering distinct forms of interaction while complementing each other. Photographs serve as compelling entry points into the broader narrative explored in the life exhibition, while the life exhibition encourages personal interpretation, making the experience of history more intimate and immediate. Together, these two approaches offer a comprehensive strategy for historical engagement, creating a more layered understanding of history and a multifaceted connection to the past, in essence fostering a more nuanced prosthetic memory.

There are some limitations to the study that need to be acknowledged. Importantly, the current study is situated within the specific historical context of the US war in Vietnam. Centered on specific people, place, and event, the prosthetic memory focuses on the impact of Agent Orange. This study highlights how the life exhibition emphasized the lived experiences and ongoing impacts of the historical event, shaping the prosthetic memory of this dark site. Further research is needed to examine how different dark sites incorporate life exhibitions that focus on the survivors they commemorate, with the aim of fostering prosthetic memory. Additionally, further research should explore how life exhibitions at these sites influence visitor perceptions, emotional engagement, and understanding of the events and people being commemorate. Such research would offer valuable insights into how varying prosthetic memories are constructed and perpetuated across different contexts. Second, it is noteworthy that the WRM presents a “unitary” cultural memory of the US war in Vietnam. Further studies could benefit from comparative studies of life exhibitions at various dark sites that offer a “multifaceted” cultural memory, thereby illustrating the differing prosthetic memories of the war. For example, implementing life exhibitions that collect diverse narratives about the impact of Agent Orange, including those from veterans and civilians of other countries affected by the war, is important. By incorporating these narratives into life exhibitions, it may be possible to show how different narratives and prosthetic memories are formed, coexist, interact, and contested.

Concluding comments

This study provides valuable insights into the perceptions, interpretations, and remembrance of the US war in Vietnam among a group of Vietnamese school children with no direct experience of the war. The WRM employs both photographic and life exhibitions to illustrate the impact of Agent Orange, creating a multidimensional visitor experience that fosters prosthetic memory. Dark tourism sites hold cultural significance in terms of communicating knowledge, evoking emotion, and fostering a sense of identity. By preserving cultural heritage, these sites offer exhibitions that play a crucial role in cultural interpretation. This is supported by their operational functions, including acquisition, communication, and exhibition, which facilitate both learning and remembrance. Children engaging with war artifacts not only serve as a witness to a contentious past but also highlights the fluidity of meanings within the complex interplay of history, national memory, and museology.

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