



Saigon's penalscape: interpreting colonial prisons in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how purpose-built museums interpret the story of colonial imprisonment in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Prisons integral to the 100-year French colonial occupation, and the subsequent American War, have been re-purposed, destroyed, or obscured. In response, memorial museums have an important role presenting prison history to international tourists and local visitors alike. Our approach interprets artefacts relating to restraint and torture, the reconstruction of prison cells, and the use of photography in three museums in the city—the War Remnants Museum, the Ton Duc Thang Museum, and the Museum of Southern Vietnamese Women—each featuring recreations of the Tiger Cages from a further notorious prison site, some 200 kilometres southeast of HCMC on the *Côn Đảo* archipelago. Memoirs, photographs, objects, and plaques from prisons in HCMC and Côn Đảo offer domestic and international tourists narratives stories of Vietnamese resistance to imprisonment. Considering the way former prison sites and museums memorialising prisons can be taken together as a series, we use the concept of the “penalscape” to indicate the contextual links between prison, education, and political struggle in an abolitionist framework.

KEYWORDS

Prison museum; Vietnam; French colonialism; penal colony; guillotine

Introduction: Vietnam's colonial carceral heritage

At the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, there is a photo of the old French colonial prison, the *Maison Centrale de Saigon*, once located on the street known as Rue La Grandière, now *Lý Tự Trọng*.¹ This prison was notorious for its brutal treatment of those who resisted the colonial occupation, with several early communists executed in its courtyard, among whom one is now honoured with a commemorative statue, standing defiantly in that same courtyard. The former prison site today houses the General Sciences Library, a building in a 1970s style that is quaintly and quietly modernist, yet still imposingly functional, as a library should be. Having Lý's statue stand in front of the library acknowledges the French colonial past of Ho Chi Minh City even as its architectural heritage and urban infrastructure is renovated, replaced, or rebuilt (Kim 2015; Harms 2011, 2016; Doling 2019) This is part of the story of the infamous extensive prison system that operated as part of France's hundred-year occupation that, across the city, is told in complex and variegated ways via purpose-built memorial museums.

This article considers the specific and cumulative impact of different forms of museum interpretation across Ho Chi Minh City. We argue that these museums work together but independently of

one another, focusing upon different modes of display and selecting different histories and objects to reconstruct the colonial penalscape. It may seem that because of a necessary “fabrication of penal history,” the specificities of the colonial penalscape are actively forgotten, erased, or simply ignored by many of the city’s current residents, despite considerable domestic and international tourist interest (Hoang and Lee 2020, xiii). Consequently, our effort here is to recall a longer-term history of colonial violence that is too frequently annexed, especially for international visitors, as a footnote to interpretations of the American War. Where Zinoman (2001a) provides an extensive historical study of French colonial use of imprisonment in Indochina, academic studies on memory, identity, and representation in post-conflict Vietnam have focused almost entirely on recollections of the American War and its aftermath (Nguyen 2017a; Kwon 2008; Schwenkel 2008). This understandable but significant bias is particularly true in relation to Vietnam’s numerous museums and memorial sites. Scholarly work looking at the cultural legacy of French colonialism has tended to analyse the romanticised reimagining and repackaging of the occupation from without.² An exception might be The War Remnants Museum, which in Kim Hong Nguyen’s proposal is considered a “postcolonial” museum in contra-distinction to other (Western) war museums in its critique of war as a colonial concept rather than as human pathology (Nguyen 2017b).

In adopting the term “penalscape” to describe a historical urban landscape which now exists mainly as traces and reconstructions—first in the form of memorial plaques and artefacts, and then especially in recreation of the Tiger Cages from Côn Đảo—we seek to offer a new reading of a term first coined by Joy James in her work on education, social inequality, and mass incarceration in the United States (James 2007). We claim that the memorial landscape of Ho Chi Minh City offers a critical, alternative perspective on connections between education and imprisonment. In expanding the concept of penalscape beyond a very specific U.S. context,³ we propose that the concept be developed to emphasise the different local stakes of the global phenomenon of mass incarceration inextricably linked to an ongoing history of Western colonialism. The almost repetitive appearance of two photographs at each of the HCMC museums, depicting the moment of release of a prisoner from Côn Đảo greeting her elderly mother (photo by Lâm Hồng Long), and the Vietnamese Navy vessel welcoming detainees back from Côn Đảo after the 1 May 1975, order of General Vo Nguyen Giap, seem to us to stress decarceral moments in a victory of resistance to the prison system.

The penalscape we identify in Ho Chi Minh City incorporates sites that may or may not be still in operation, those that are now museums, parts of museums reconstructed as prisons, as well as sites once associated with justice and punishment in the colonial occupation but now serving other, better, uses. We question what happens to the idea of sitedness when spaces have been erased, reified in films, replicated in multiple versions, or turned to other purposes. We ask what role these sites have in education about the past, the resistance to colonial occupation, and questions of the role of place of memorials of atrocities committed under colonisation. How should we respond as citizens, domestic or international visitors, or even as concerned academic commentators? How do these museums work to contain and reframe the history of colonial imprisonment while creating a new penalscape across the city? How is the penalscape both a visible and invisible terrain of punishment and persecution, memory and interpretation, resistance imagery and meaning, revolutionary history and reconstruction, and a multi-dimensional archive of the afterlives—remnants and revenants—of colonial prison and war? And, while we would develop the discussion of the American War period and of contemporary prisons in a subsequent essay, we ask here if redirecting the carceral gaze to colonial contexts can revitalise debates around processes of abolition and decarceration?

Our exploration coalesces around three main sites: The War Remnants Museum, the Tôn Đức Thắng Museum, and the Museum of Southern Vietnamese Women.⁴ The significance of these sites lies in the fact they were purpose-built and, accordingly, unlike much prison heritage, do not rely on “sitedness” to facilitate the different affective experiences they offer to visitors.⁵ War Remnants Museum was built on a former French villa site and opened in September 1975 under the name The Gallery of American War Crimes. The name was changed to the Gallery of War Crimes in 1990 and has had its current name since 1995.⁶ Tôn Đức Thắng Museum is dedicated to the life of Vietnam’s second president Tôn Đức Thắng, 1888-1980, opening on what would have been his 100th birth anniversary in 1988. Until October 2020 the museum was housed in the enlarged premises of the second last prime minister of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, or the comprador South Vietnam regime). Tôn Đức Thắng museum closed in October 2020 for a 3-year, over USD 11 Million, renovation and expansion on the same site. Rehangng of the exhibits has also been underway within the Museum of Southern Vietnamese Women, itself housed in a four-story building extending behind the former home of the RVN Director General of Police, Nguyễn Ngọc Loan.⁷

Observing the before and after versions of the Museum of Southern Vietnamese Women meant that the floor dedicated to anti-colonial struggle and wartime resistance could be compared in two incarnations, providing an opportunity to consider interpretive changes adopted in the reconfigured exhibition. Thus, our reflections on these modifications and the planned rethinking of the displays in the Tôn Đức Thắng Museum act as a kind of evaluative place-marker, acknowledging that debates about museum interpretation mean that exhibitions must and will change (Grewcock 2013, 55; Duncan 1995, 96). Responsive curatorial interpretive innovations are perhaps most evident at the War Remnants Museum, where the floor dedicated to the effects of Agent Orange has been revised over the years, shifting emphasis from images depicting horrific suffering and deformities towards a narrative that affirms the country’s recovery and the work undertaken to support survivors.

Alongside ethnographic observations at each of these Ho Chi Minh City museums, we also draw on archival research and visits to heritage sites closely associated with colonial prisons. As already indicated, the most notable of these is the prison complex of the Côn Đảo archipelago, 200 kilometres from mainland Vietnam, where the notorious penal colony known as the *Bagne de Poulou-Condore* (Angleviel 2020) was established by the French in 1861, roughly contemporaneously with France’s decision to transport convicts to French Guiana and New Caledonia.⁸ Across its history, Côn Đảo’s prisons held both regular criminal and political inmates. As an island prison, it has become infamous for its employment of extra-legal penal technologies including torture and the use of “tiger cages” and the *barre de justice*—a widely used long metal pole attaching several prisoners with single or double leg irons.

A 1970 *Life* magazine exposé showed the tiger cages still in operation as detention and torture continued throughout the American War (Harkin 1970, 26-29), and indeed, expanded with the construction of new, equally oppressive cells. The tiger cages are in several locations across the island, with signposts for visitors to “The American Tiger Cages” (*trại Phú Bình*) and to those of the French in Camp 4, also called sub-*bagne*-3 (*trại Phú Tường*). The detention (and far too often death) of dedicated anti-colonial and communist fighters has unsurprisingly imbued the island with national significance, encapsulated in a series of memoirs written by former prisoners and supporters. Evocative texts such as the prison poetry collected by Huỳnh Thúc Kháng (discussed in Zinoman [2001b]) can be supplemented by more formal reports such as that of Amnesty International in 1973, including harrowing accounts of prison conditions and profiles of dozens of prisoners in an appendix.⁹ Other collections of note include the reproduction of prisoner-

assembled newspapers from Camp 6 (Bùi 2014), memoirs of Khmer Cambodian nationalists also interred on Côn Đảo (Chanmol 1971), new editions of memoirs such as *Hồi Ký Trần Huy Liệu* recounting an example of recruitment to the communist party during internment from 1928 to 1934 (Phạm 2020, 10), through to more well-known histories of Tôn Đức Thắng, who ran the Party School, and other leaders like future General Secretary Lê Duẩn, imprisoned there until 1945.

The French used Côn Đảo to contain “dangerous” revolutionaries up to the takeover by the American client state, which ran the prison until liberation in 1975. Today, Vietnamese families undertake quasi-pilgrimages to the island, often on national holidays, as a form of heritage tourism described as a “return to the source” (Dang 2021). These trips include tours of the French and American prison camps, the purpose-built Côn Đảo Museum and, most importantly, a midnight visit to the memorial cemetery in order to leave offerings at the graves of the most famous martyrs, including the nineteen-year-old female freedom fighter, Võ Thị Sáu, executed by firing squad at the island’s police station in 1952 (Nguyễn 2014).

Within Ho Chi Minh City itself, several former prison sites connect directly to Côn Đảo, including the above-mentioned Maison Centrale de Saigon. Maison Centrale was the departure point for many of those exiled to Côn Đảo. The journalist Jean-Claude Demariaux writing for *La Dépêche d’Indochine* in 1939,¹⁰ describes how he arranged to visit a prison guard for an “aperitif” in order to ensure a decent view of the prison courtyard on the morning of a transfer to the islands. Memoirs such as that of Bảo Lương (real name: Nguyễn Trung Nguyệt), related by marriage to Tôn Đức Thắng, tell of waiting to see what their fate would be, securing cigarette butts from the French prisoners held far more comfortably upstairs (Tai 2010, 150) and otherwise enduring torture and unsanitary conditions. The French admitted overcrowding in the prison as early as 1905 (Doling 2015b), though it was still in operation during WWII and not demolished until 1968.

The erasure of the Maison Centrale is significant in the absence of any other historical inner-city site that might act as a focal point for stories of imprisonment and torture. This contrasts with Hanoi, where the vestiges of *Hỏa Lò Maison Centrale* now comprise a museum telling the story of its use by the French, the Japanese Kenpeitai during the occupation between 1940-45, and from 1955 onwards by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the North to imprison American soldiers (including one-time presidential candidate John McCain). Logan has provided extensive discussion on Hỏa Lò emphasising how the shifting interpretation is driven by both international tourists (particularly those from the United States and France) and the evolving stakes of both local and national memorial practices. Moreover, there is a double irony in the prison’s colloquial nickname “Hanoi Hilton” since, as Logan points out, most of the area once comprising the prison has been redeveloped as a luxury hotel and apartment complex (Logan 2009, 188; 2003, 27-31).

Other possible memorial sites in Ho Chi Minh City include the inaccessible basement dungeons of the former *Bót Catinat* Police Station, and the *Bót Dây Thép* (“Steel Wire”), another former police station in District 9. The latter saw horrendous atrocities and multiple executions, and while the station has been preserved as a small memorial shrine it is quite far from the centre and only available to at present visit by appointment.¹¹

Finally, there is a shadowy backdrop to the stories foregrounded by the museums we discuss. This is the continued operation of *Chí Hòa* prison, located in the north of District 10. Mentioned in several of the memoirs, built in radial style with a central watchtower, Chí Hòa functions as a maximum-security prison, making its relation to the past difficult to sort out. Construction began in 1943 under the Japanese occupation, but was not completed until 1953 under the French (Doling 2015b), and was thereafter administered by the comprador regime. Some 1,600 prisoners

from Maison Centrale were marched to Chí Hòa, and so conditions in the new jail were immediately cramped and did not improve. In 1975 it was taken into the control of a re-unified Vietnam and became a prison for regular criminals. After 70 years of operation, we assume it is well past its use-by date, but visits there are of a different order and decidedly not for tourism. Until recently, the prison has received cursory attention in exhibitions on the colonial prison system. The War Remnants Museum, for example, includes a single small photograph of the prison. More recently, as we shall explore, the prison does take on a much larger role in the new interpretation at the Museum of Southern Vietnamese Women. While this repositioning does not offer direct commentary on the prison's operation today, or indeed prison more generally, it is one of several ways in which the Women's museum's reframing of well-established narratives on imprisonment, education and resistance might indicate the need for further discussion and debate around decarceration and the colonial legacy of contemporary forms of punishment.

This article situates the notion of the penalscape within current research on prison heritage that acknowledges geography, anthropology, and indeed museums as repositories of colonial acquisition, as inherently colonial and carceral (Moore 2020), and as institutional sites of contested interpretation and political education.¹² We examine museum interpretations found at our selected sites according to three key themes: the use of “reconstructed” cells, the presentation of artefacts of violence, and the shifting role of photography and “framing.” Having considered these ongoing processes of museification, we will also explore why some structurally intact sites remain largely unremarked as heritage, the Bót Catinat and Bót Dây Thép police stations, reflecting on their limited role alongside the purpose-built museums in narrating the story of colonial imprisonment and police violence. Our concluding section takes the form of a coda, returning to the Maison Centrale de Saigon and the transformation of the site from colonial prison to national library.

Global and local definitions of the penalscape

Our concept of the penalscape as a part of tourism and heritage studies might be situated as an intervention in the particular form or configuration of a term that emerged independently to what Dominique Moran and others have recently defined as “carceral geography.” This academic sub-discipline emerges in criminology and human geography as a response to what its proponents refer to as a “carceral turn” in welfare and justice policymaking (Moran, Turner, and Schliehe 2018, 666). The carceral turn is most notable in the United States. However, research interests worldwide are triggered where new technologies of surveillance shift conventional perceptions of incarceration beyond the prison's fixed architecture, where containment persists as the dominant model of punishment. Applying the term geography provides scope to consider the many and complex spatiotemporal configurations of the “carceral,” enabling multi-scalar approaches to foster transnational comparison (Glick-Schiller and Çağlar 2011). Carceral geography also enables deeper understandings of how the carceral is shaped by more expansive geographies of both built infrastructure and the natural environment as determined by climate and topography.

The penalscape, in this sense, means rethinking the landscape of confinement, such that where carceral geography emphasises the enclosed space of the prison, even when its perimeter walls are contested, the penalscape emphasises the underpinning ideology of punishment in much broader socio-historical contexts. Furthermore, viewing the penalscape from a distance does not remove us from its effects but instead requires that we “own” the view and take responsibility for what we see (Mitchell 2002). This call applies to how we engage with incarceration and understand the “penalscape” in terms of a “landscape” beheld from afar, something we seem to possess at a distance. As tourists, residents, visitors, or

academics, we observe and consume images of incarceration, both fictional and documentary, and these have political and social consequences whether they directly impact our immediate lives or not.

The penalscape is something at once highly visible but also more discretely embedded within the infrastructure and architecture of cities and towns as well as extended beyond the city limits into rural areas and across stretches of water, such as to the (former) prison islands of Côn Đảo and *Phú Quốc*.¹³ Considering its earliest manifestations, it is possible, even imperative, to map the idea of the penal onto the wider landscape to identify and understand how restraint, confinement, and corporal violence, are embedded in the colonial right up to the present. Thus considered, the penalscape responds to resistance to colonial authority and exists as a complex backdrop to all forms of colonial and heritage activity and the ways history is remembered and represented.

The closure of colonial prisons and the penal colony on Côn Đảo at the end of the American War did not signal the end of prison in Vietnam, *but* it does constitute a significant moment of decarceration and a viable, sustained challenge to the colonial-carceral nexus.¹⁴ What can we learn from the way this defunct system (rather than individual prison buildings) is re-presented by Ho Chi Minh City's museums? How might we offer an alternative perspective to the dominant focus of debates around abolition emanating from the United States? Or, to paraphrase Brown, might these museums offer one manifestation of the *prison museum of abolition*? (Brown 2017, 163)

Ex-situ atrocity museums, reconstructing prison cells

Empty or sparsely furnished prison cells often take on the role of *tabula rasa* upon which different stories and, indeed, visitor fantasies might be projected. In some former prison sites, such as Lincoln and York prison museums in the United Kingdom and Melbourne Old Gaol in Australia, this projection takes on a literal form with holograms and films projected onto cell walls, evoking stories of the prisons' former inmates and the reasons behind their incarceration. The empty cells found in former police stations, dedicated prison museums, and other defunct sites of detention and internment, can offer visitors an embodied experience of the intimate and claustrophobic architecture of incarceration. Much tends to be made of the former prison site as *in-situ* heritage, especially if these once housed famous prisoners. This is equally true of sites that held political prisoners such as Robben Island (where Nelson Mandela spent eighteen years) or notorious criminals such as Al Capone, in Alcatraz. However, cells can often appear generic and the specific experiences and stories of a site of incarceration can be displaced by more abstract, creative and, indeed, theatrical representations.

While there is, of course, no blueprint as to how curators and heritage professionals should interpret or even repurpose a prison cell, existing approaches invite ongoing questions as to the ethics of penal spectatorship and the extent to which the burgeoning industry of prison tourism might foster constructive debates around the ongoing role of prison in contemporary society. What are we to make of the *ex-situ* reconstructions of cells found in purpose-built museums in this context? Referring to the interpretation at Hỏa Lò Maison Centrale in Hanoi, Sutherland has suggested it is much easier to "manipulate" narrative in the "neutral space" of a purpose-built museum than in a former prison (Sutherland 2005, 157). Yet museums are never neutral spaces (Fleming 2016, 73–79), and moreover, the ability to carefully shape narratives does not necessarily mean difficult histories are glossed over in purpose-built museums as specific aspects of these histories can be brought into clearer relief as required.

The Tôn Đức Thắng Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, for example, includes a significant portion of its ground floor to a reconstruction of the *décortiquerie* (rice mill) grinding room where prisoners on Côn Đảo worked in a confined, dust-filled space, with attached sleeping cell, and where many

were worked to death. The installation features piped sound and several emaciated mannequins, emphasising the conditions under which those exiled to Côn Đảo were required to carry out labour. Work in the rice mill was one of the worst punishments within the penal colony (Demariaux 1956, 89–93).

Throughout French Indochina, transportation, confinement, and corporal punishment, all define the operation of the colonial regime. Workers who challenged the conditions of labour on the rubber plantations would find themselves locked up and starved. Those involved in organised strike action, such as the general strike at the Michelin plantation in Phú Riềng in 1930, were the ones sent to Côn Đảo (Trần 1985). The rice-grinding labour was not the only example of work—an ironic addition of injury to insult for the Michelin agitators was that their imprisonment included forced labour on the island’s plantation. We are reminded of the role of penal labour under French colonial occupation, imposed over above any corrective use of imprisonment and we consider this brutality one of the main reasons for the effective politicisation and anti-colonial and subsequently communist education of prisoners that thrived with the mixing of regular and political prisoners. The “Party School” educational context was facilitated by legal codes that were deliberately left open to interpretation, not least via the use of the category of “semi-political prisoner” (Zinoman 2001a, 263).

The worst cells, however, have become key exhibits. In both War Remnants Museum and Tôn Đức Thắng Museum there are reconstructions of the tiger cages (*cages à tigre*) found on Côn Đảo. The original cages were built on the island in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Correspondence dated March–August 1937 discusses the construction of additional cellular imprisonment to ensure the separation of political prisoners from the rest of the convict population.¹⁵ They resemble those built about a decade earlier in French Guiana at the *Centres Pénitentiaires Spéciaux* (CPS)—three camps built for prisoners transported from French Indochina in 1931.¹⁶ On Côn Đảo, the tiger cages have been restored and, on occasion, reconstructed to appear as they did during their use up until the 1970s when the *Life* exposé caused international controversy. The *Life* photographs are reproduced and displayed at the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City. One particular photograph offers an enduring image of this specific form of imprisonment where several women are looking up at the photographer through the ceiling bars.

The prison exhibition part of the War Remnants Museum is located in an outdoor section past the various captured U.S. tanks and helicopters.¹⁷ A stone wall topped with barbed wire recreates the perimeter of the former prisons within the museum. Nguyen suggests that the chronology charting the use of prisons under French colonial and U.S. military occupations presented on the wall “is reinforced” by the “linear hallway that organizes the cells and exhibits” (Nguyen 2017, 312). In the centre of the exhibition, the prison cells have been reconstructed in concrete. Visitors are invited to look down into the cells from above, climbing up steep steps. Bats hang on the upper interior wall, adding to the sinister atmosphere. Unlike Côn Đảo, the cell doors remain closed, and the mannequins on display can only be viewed through a small opening (or from above). There is no option of stepping inside the cage to identify with the prisoners by taking their place. Looking down at mannequins that are substitutes or surrogates creates a distance between visitors and the figure of the prisoner, even as the presentation of cell space emphasises heroism and martyrdom.

The exhibition space at the Tôn Đức Thắng Museum dedicated to the fifteen years Vietnam’s second president spent on Côn Đảo (1929–1945) also reproduces the tiger cages. Different again to other installations, here the cages are understated rather than set up as a centre-piece display. Visitors simply walk over metal bars covered in perspex just beyond a larger display. As if having to use every spare space, a

very cramped but conventional prison cell is constructed at the back of the display which visitors can enter if they wish. Rather than offering an accurate reconstruction, this simply works to emphasise the carceral dimension of exile.

The postcolonial museum, displaying artefacts of violence

In contrast to the reconstruction of prison cells intended to recreate scenes of life within the colonial prison network, the display of instruments and technologies within the penal system are subject to a different type of interpretation. Exploring how torture tools are presented offers insight into the complex task of these museums as anticolonial institutions responsible for telling the story of colonial and imperial violence that prefaces Vietnam's independence. To what extent can the Eurocentric concept of the museum be challenged as an inherently colonial institution established to display the spoils of conquest? Might we consider instead that the use of conventional or even starkly realist forms of object display, with minimal interpretation, provide an effective alternative to Françoise Vergès' notion of a postcolonial museum as a "museum without objects"? (Vergès 2014).

Of particular note is the guillotine on display in a small room within the prison enclosure at the War Remnants Museum. In a similar fashion to the grounded helicopters and other vehicles once belonging to the U.S. military that visitors can see not only at War Remnants but also the Ho Chi Minh City Museum and elsewhere, there is a neutralisation of the guillotine's threat. Housed in its small concrete room, the guillotine can only be viewed close-up. Somehow this seems to limit the power of spectacle associated with dominant iconography, which often presents the guillotine in use as a foreboding silhouette on the horizon. The spectacle is simply not possible in a small room with multiple entrances and a constant stream of visitors wandering in and out. This is not to say that its presence does not shock, and visitors come into the space and confront the blade largely unprepared.

The guillotine on display is a smaller Berger model (the design of which dates from the 1860s) which would have once stood in the courtyard of the Maison Centrale de Saigon. However, its presence in the museum is also important in relation to France's own problematic relationship with its former death machine. Given ongoing anxieties around its display in France, the War Remnants Museum, as Vietnam's most popular museum, is perhaps the most likely place one might encounter a guillotine in proximity to its original site of operation. Likewise, Hoa Lo Museum has two guillotines on display.¹⁸ The guillotine's significance as a museum artefact extends beyond the sensational, shock-value of the machine itself. It represents an insistence of sitedness within the city even as the carceral landscape has given way to a museal one, a material reminder that has largely been effaced from France's penal heritage at home and across its former colonies. Yet, its repositioning also refuses continuity with its earlier iconographic role both within and beyond the walls of Saigon.¹⁹

Immediately following the room with the guillotine, there is a rusted hutch known as a "barbed tiger cage" (in contrast to the tiger cage cells with overhead bars described in the previous section). This is perhaps the most disarmingly brutal of the objects associated with France's colonial rule. Barely larger than a pet rabbit run, this type of cage would contain two prisoners together at a time, unable to sit up or lie down fully within the space, placed outside, and subjected to direct sun without food or water for days. In some respects, the hutches are a counterpoint to the tourist experience created at sites like *Củ Chi* where the tunnels have been expanded and stabilised to allow well-fed Western visitors to explore in relative comfort. There is no comfort zone here. Unlike

prison museums elsewhere, the museums we have visited in Ho Chi Minh City, and those on Côn Đảo or Phú Quốc, do not use shackles or leg irons as interactive forms of display. Instead, all privilege the use of traditional glass-topped vitrines containing objects of restraint and weapons such as the rattan lathi used to beat prisoners. These displays, in some cases, resemble dated cabinets of curiosities showcasing the violent and horrific. While there is no doubt such objects can be shocking, it is also hard to avoid the impression that these macabre tools have been placed out of harms' way, as if confiscated and disarmed.

Reframing women's experiences

In the earlier exhibit on women's imprisonment at the Museum of Southern Vietnamese Women, the vertical display cabinets used to present a small collection of objects were designed to resemble prison cell bars. While this offered a visual evocation of the prison without the need for the cell reconstruction found in the other museums mentioned above, this technique was not particularly effective in showing artefacts intended to represent women's experience under colonial and U.S. regimes. The exhibition closed for renovation in 2019 and re-opened (in late 2020) with new interpretations reliant on the same small collection of objects and similar sets of images. However, these were now more clearly organised, and it is possible to see the adoption of an aesthetic approach found in other atrocity museums. Interpretive panels are, for example, grey and black with white text and a single colour scheme with a dark orange palette (as opposed to the more commonly used red) is used sparingly.

Where other parts of the larger exhibition celebrate women's competent handling of weapons and tools including one large and unwieldy pair of bolt-cutters, the tools and technologies of punishment used against prisoners are downplayed. Similarly, there is a subtle but significant shift in how commemorative artworks including sculptures are presented. Previously these took centre stage in the exhibition. Now they are located more discreetly against the walls and provide a more purposeful and wider illustrative narrative. Of particular note here is the small sculpture of Võ Thị Sáu which has been repositioned to be a part of a display focused more generally on women who died in prison. The embodiment of youthful sacrifice, Võ Thị Sáu has become one of the most enduring symbols of the anti-colonial struggle. Today there is a small museum dedicated to her at the former police station on Côn Đảo. Her grave at the *Hàng Dương* memorial cemetery on the island is the focal point of visits by Vietnamese tourists to Côn Đảo.

The new exhibition at the Museum of Southern Vietnamese Women does not deny this quasi-legendary status but instead situates Võ Thị Sáu alongside the story of many other women who sacrificed their lives in the struggle for communism and freedom. This marks a shift in emphasis upon individual heroics to one celebrating collective organising across different occupations. This is further affirmed by the central positioning of archival documents on collective organisation, including documents produced by the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) on the topic of (so-called) "Viet Cong organized foster care and [who] contacted the political prisoners at prisons and penitentiaries."²⁰ Bringing this type of document into relief over against more prosaic presentations of resistance and suffering invites nuanced discussions around revolutionary organising and the networks operating both inside and outside the prison.

At the same time, it is telling that it is within a museum dedicated to women that such questions are possible. Conversely, the dominant narrative within other museums still focuses primarily on the precocious asceticism of many of the male victims (and survivors) of the colonial prison system. The youth of many of those celebrated as martyrs assumes their celibacy as does their intellectual

dedication to the struggle. It is interesting that the aforementioned memoir of Bảo Lương does stress a fierce chastity as a criterion for cadre recruited for party work (Tai 2010, 31), and indicates then, as now, women faced a double jeopardy where the tension between undervaluing the necessary care work involved in organising ran up against over-privileging of male-dominated intellectual and adventure discourse, both inside the party as in society.

Along with the artefacts, photographs at the Museum of Southern Vietnamese Women have been re-organised in the new exhibition. Incorporated into newly designed panels, photos have been rescanned, cropped, and filtered to create neater, uniform collections. The overall effect is undoubtedly more professional, but the photo as object seems eroded when framed in a formal collection. The earlier exhibition featured photographs printed on stock photographic paper and the white paper labels were laminated. As such they offered a path back to the original event of photography as well as to the human labour of gathering, printing, and displaying images, and even the precarious and precious character of photography in a time of war.

However, if the photo as object is in some senses lost, what is evident in the new framing of images is a contemporary recalibration of their role. The use of portraits is ubiquitous in Vietnam's prison museums. Maryse Tennant has written on the powerful use of mugshots and other portraits in the Côn Đảo museum producing a visual narrative that moves from suffering to resistance to emancipation as one progresses through the museum (Tennant 2018). However, at the Museum of Southern Vietnamese Women, the change that most struck us is not the portraits but the production of two enlarged photographs of Chí Hòa prison placed almost opposite one another. A small panel in Vietnamese and English informs visitors that the prison was designed and built by the French and at one point in 1969 over 342 women were imprisoned in just four of the prison's 238 cells (cells OB1, OB2, OB3 and OB4). The listing of the specific cells is unusual and creates a precision link to the site. On the left-hand side of the exhibition, the image of the prison comprises an enlarged black and white aerial view. Facing this at an angle on the opposite side, is a photo of a group of women standing in front of the prison.

Given the cursory mention of Chí Hòa prison at the War Remnants Museum, the reframing here which repositions the prison centre stage is significant. It was not the only prison in the region or even the city to hold women and there are panels listing the sites that did so under both the French and American occupations. The exhibition features images of other prisons including the Côn Đảo tiger cages. However, we would like to propose that the enlarged aerial image of Chí Hòa prison works to emphasise Saigon's penalscape not only as forgotten heritage but also in terms of its overlooked contemporary carcerality.

Off the museum trail, repurposed prisons in HCMC

What impact do these purpose-built museums have on the remaining built heritage belonging to Saigon's colonial penalscape? While the War Remnants Museum and Museum of Southern Vietnamese Women both lay emphasis on the extensive network of colonial prisons, the few sites that remain within the city are largely unknown and unexplored by international tourists and domestic visitors alike. The former French Police Station on Rue Catinat, renamed *Đông Khởi*, now houses the offices of the Department of Culture, Information, Sport and Tourism. Formerly this building was the sinister Police headquarters in which Vietnamese revolutionaries were subject to interrogation and torture. It was used in the same way by the Japanese during WWII and then again by the French on their inglorious return and the RVN Government, as Interior Ministry, until 1975. The

French called the headquarters their *Direction de la Police et de la Sûreté* and it was known in Vietnamese as the *Bót Catinat* (Doling 2014b).²¹

Across from the “hideous pink cathedral” of Notre Dame, as mentioned in Graham Greene’s novel *The Quiet American*, it is where Inspector Vigot had his office and past which the narrator takes daily walks, heading “back by the dreary wall of the Vietnamese *Sûreté* that seemed to smell of urine and injustice” (Greene 2002 [1955], 42). Apparently, the dungeons have been flooded, but they were significant enough to warrant a commemorative plaque and feature in the memoir of Nguyễn Thị Bình, known as Madame Binh, the National Liberation Front delegate to Paris and head of the Provisional Revolutionary Government. Madame Binh tells of being beaten and interrogated within the headquarters. Followed by several years in Chí Hòa, she was released only after the defeat of the French at *Điện Biên Phủ* (Nguyen 2015, 100–104). Her younger brother Nguyễn Đông Hà survived seven years in Côn Đảo’s tiger cages.²²

Writing in March 2015, Doling ruminated on the possibility that the lesser-known site of Bót dây thép would before long be incorporated into the growing list of “dark tourist” sites as a veritable “house of horrors” (Doling 2015a). While prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnam’s international tourist industry was enjoying rapid development, it seems nevertheless unlikely that this police station associated with the worst police executions of civilians would gain the popularity of sites such as the *Củ Chi* tunnels. Moreover, there seems to be little interest in developing the site in this direction. We did visit the small museum housed there in September 2019, on arrangement with one of the caretakers. The cells where torture and execution routinely took place have been preserved in the basement, while an upstairs exhibition runs across two rooms. This includes historic photographs of the prison, display cases of weapons, and restraints, as found in other museums we have visited. Most prominent, however, are the extensive photo displays of victims (and on occasion their mothers) and survivors. First and foremost, the space is a commemorative one with limited opportunities for the novelty experience that has come to be defined as dark tourism.

Coda: close a prison, open a library

At the end of Summer 2018, we met several colleagues for dinner at an outdoor BBQ restaurant located in the car park of the General Sciences Library. It was Vietnamese Independence Day and the following morning some of us would head out to the archipelago of *Côn Đảo* to visit the vestiges of one of France’s most notorious colonial prisons. The modernist tower of the General Sciences Library loomed over us and invited conversations about the link between education and the site’s former function as the city’s *Maison Centrale*. The library was initially conceived by the South Vietnamese leader Diệm, built in 1968, opened 1971 and only after 1975 inherited and maintained by the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Doling 2015b). Nevertheless, the library does become a part of the story of resistance that shapes the penalscape in Ho Chi Minh City. A small plaque acknowledges the site of the former *Maison Centrale de Saigon*, pointing to the guillotine and brutal French colonial rule since its inauguration in 1865–66, and the long history of resistance within the prison, exemplified by young fighters and tragic martyrdom. We started this paper at Lý Tự Trọng Street renamed to remember the Vietnamese revolutionary who was held in the prison before being executed by the French at the age of 17. The prison was demolished in 1968 but had been slated for closure since the opening of Chí Hòa in 1953.

Close a prison, open library. Our understanding of the penalscape means we cannot concede that the closure of a prison necessarily means less prison and even less the end of prison. The displacement of over 1,600 prisoners to Chí Hòa maximum security prison was an extension of the

penalscape, and Chí Hòa remains in use today and continues to draw criticism for its conditions. Yet to replace a prison with a library nevertheless makes an important statement. Surely cities should be famous for their libraries and education, not their prisons or even their prison museums. And surely where sites of former prisons are remembered either in-situ or in new, purpose-built museums, such remembering should be focused on the history of resistance and collective organising over above the spectacle of suffering. This is something we believe can be found in Ho Chi Minh City's purpose-built prison museums especially the renovated exhibition at the Museum of Southern Vietnamese Women.

The direct link often drawn between poor educational infrastructure and the phenomenon of mass incarceration in the U.S. has been problematised for its simplicity, for example by Harkins and Meiners, but there is merit in raising the question as one of institutional and museological planning (Harkins and Meiners 2016, 405–408). In a more recent article, Meiners cites as her epigraph Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's contention that "the slogan of the Left, then, universities, not jails, marks a choice that may not be possible" and that "perhaps" the "relation between the University and the Prison" is more than a "family resemblance" (Meiners 2018; Moten and Harney 2013). The suggestion being made here is that within neoliberalism, education and incarceration co-exist but are not thought together. The penalscape allows us to see how the existence of one does not imply the absence of the other. Critical thinking must recognise how reliant the neoliberal university is upon existing structures of social equality that have resulted in the overburdened rates of incarceration in the U.S. What James (2007), and after her, Harkins and Meiners (2016), term the American "penalscape," indicates how an unexamined relation of education and incarceration continues to uphold an ideological narrative where individual endeavour and meritocracy is foregrounded over a myth of moral weakness and failing.

Part of our contribution to the difficult, ongoing work of decarceration lies in the recognition that while the problem of prison and detention is a global phenomenon, its relationship to institutions of education including the museum is not the same everywhere. When we use the concept of penalscape in Vietnam we necessarily raise comparative questions about the penalscape and its forms elsewhere. Our research does not change the fact that prison continues to constitute a default response globally to dealing with offenders but it does imply that decarceration can and should be a collective project, the outcome of an understanding of historical memory and community knowledge as collective responsibility. Thus, while the history of anti-colonial struggle in Vietnam locates the school at the heart of the prison, we also want to reverse the formula proposed above: open a library, close a prison.

Notes

1. We have tried to be consistent with Tiếng Việt diacritics, but this is difficult and somewhat arbitrary. For example, we Romanise Ho Chi Minh City as a global city but refer to Vietnam's first president as Hồ Chí Minh, while for other names, we include the diacritics unless authorial practice indicates otherwise, with non-English place names italicised only on first use.
2. Focusing on museums in Hanoi, Sutherland has commented on a "certain lack of focus" and often absent history of French colonial oppression within exhibitions dedicated to Vietnam's past (Sutherland 2005, 154). See also Jennings and Lat (2003); Norindr (1996).
3. For a review, see Coulson (2021).
4. While the War Remnants Museum has been a focus of scholarship around Vietnam's post-war museums, we have been unable to identify studies looking at Tôn Đức Thắng Museum. Giebel makes a point of limiting his study of the "museum-shrine" to memorial sites located in and around

- Tôn Đức Thắng's birthplace in An Giang Province (Giebel 2001, 78). There has been some study of the Southern Women's Museum, notably Enloe's problematisation of earlier curatorial decisions and the absence of a more critical narrative about the selective visibility of women within narratives of the French and American wars, see Enloe (2004).
5. Slade provides insight into the different agendas at stake in creating purpose-built museums dedicated to histories of confinement and exile (Slade 2017, 37–54). While Dalton and Oleson both explore the problems of creating taxonomies and catch-all definitions around carceral and penal (See Dalton 2017; Oleson 2017).
 6. Translation can be political. Wikipedia perhaps works overtime to translate *Nhà Trưng bày tội ác Mỹ - Ngụy* as the “Exhibition House for U.S. and Puppet Crimes” and *Nhà trưng bày tội ác chiến tranh xâm lược* as “Exhibition House for Crimes of War and Aggression.” Both seem excessive in a way that War Remnants Museum for *Bảo tàng chứng tích chiến tranh* is not.
 7. Nguyễn Ngọc Loan is notorious for the summary street execution of a captured (and handcuffed) communist fighter Captain Bảy Lốp, real name Nguyễn Văn Lém, in February, 1968, filmed by NBC cameraman Võ Sứu, and photographed by Eddie Adams—and for which Adams won a Pulitzer Prize, see Hutnyk (2014).
 8. Convict transportation to French Guiana began in 1852 and to New Caledonia in 1864, see Pierre (2017).
 9. As well as reporting the Peace Agreement release of at least 26,000 National Liberation Front prisoners, Amnesty in 1973 also described “overwhelming and conclusive” evidence of widespread torture and executions of “tens of thousands” under the CIA's Phoenix programme (Amnesty International 1973, 15, 26, 33-36).
 10. Reproduced in Jean-Claude Demariaux (1956, 2).
 11. We also cannot omit a reminder that the carceral is everywhere even at the Hoang Anh Gia Lai 1 apartment complex in District 7 where one of the authors lived between 2018 and 2020. As we were informed by one of the neighbours, the site was once used as an overflow prison for women. Unsurprisingly, residents were uncomfortable or uninterested in discussing this, perhaps because of the ghosts of war (Kwon 2008) but also to do with real estate prices.
 12. The first museums in Vietnam were opened by the French: technically, the Museum of Imperial Antiquities in Hue in 1923 was the first, according to Tai (1998, 188). In Hanoi, the archaeological research institution of the French School of the Far East (*École française d'Extrême-Orient*) established in 1910, eventually became the *Musée Louis Finot* in 1932, now called The Vietnam National Museum of History (*Viện Bảo tàng Lịch sử Việt Nam*) (Sutherland 2005, 156; Doling 2014a). For Ho Chi Minh City, the *Musée Blanchard de la Brosse*, now the History Museum, opened in Saigon in 1926, and Hue-Tam tells this history while raising questions about the coherence of any “single national narrative” for the museums of the country, calling for rethinking but acknowledging that “history remains a politically explosive subject” in Vietnam (Tai 1998, 198). While not a separate institution, Doling (2015b) claims an earlier date for the first museum in Ho Chi Minh City, in 1888: “two rooms of the *Société des Études Indochinoises* headquarters building—a Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP) villa ... housed a collection of Chăm sculptures donated to the Society by the Resident-Superior of Annam.”
 13. Phú Quốc is another sun-drenched island, now dominated by pleasure tourism, but chosen by the French as a site for a war-time prison.
 14. MacLean uses the prison museum on Phú Quốc to set the scene for an exploration of contemporary human rights issues in Vietnam (MacLean 2018, 157–179).
 15. ANOM HCI 694. Folder marked “Principe de l'organisation du Penitencier de Poulo-Condore.”
 16. In French Guiana these structures, where they still exist, are part of a site largely reclaimed by secondary rainforest. As such they attest to both the longevity of imprisonment and evoke a mysterious bygone age with little connection to the present day (Fuggle 2022).
 17. The War Remnants Museum overall attempts a different perspective on war, as denoted by many, such as Victor Alneng in a 2002 essay: “The War Museum deliberately tells a one-sided story which clashes with the Hollywood perspective. The propaganda aside, the museum ‘reveals’ the fact that war is not enjoyable—it's far too real to be—but from a touristic perspective that is debatable. Even though this asymmetrical arrangement of perspectives constitutes a potential for change” (Alneng 2002, 476).

18. After abolishing the death penalty in France in 1981 there was a 25-year moratorium displaying the guillotine in public. Today it is still contentious in mainland France and some of its overseas territories, with most guillotines dismantled and returned to France.
19. Executions that took place in Saigon were often reproduced on widely circulated postcards. While unofficial and produced by small-time entrepreneurs as souvenirs, postcards nevertheless assumed a pedagogical function transforming “rituals of maintaining colonial power into popular and easily understood images of white supremacy” (Vann 2010, 56).
20. Government of the Republic of Vietnam 1958.
21. Nicolas Catinat was Marshall de France in under Louis xiv in the seventeenth century. Bót refers to a garrison for soldiers.
22. Lady Barton, as cited in Nguyễn (2014, 16).

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