



## Article

# Dominions of Dark Tourism and 'Ghosts' of the Significant Other Dead

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**FOREWORD**

**Dominions of Dark Tourism and ‘Ghosts’ of the Significant Other Dead**

‘Ghosts’ of the significant Other dead who haunt our collective conscience have been increasingly commodified through memorials, museums, and visitor attractions – and, consequently, the dead now occupy touristic landscapes. In other words, the term ‘dark tourism’ (or thanatourism) has been branded into an internationally recognised taxonomy to denote travel within visitor economies to sites *of* or sites *associated with* death and ‘difficult heritage’. As contributors to this ATLAS special interest group conference have pointed out, dark tourism is a broad, provocative, and contested concept; dividing opinion both within academic circles as well as in empirical practice. While dark tourism as a scholarly term may have been imposed upon the tourism sector by academia, touristic sites of death and disaster across the world often blur the line between commemoration and commercialisation. Yet, despite its historical foundations, dark tourism as a multi-disciplinary field of study attempts to capture contemporary (re)presentations of the noteworthy dead. Hence, dark tourism allows us to examine issues of dissonance, politics, and historicity, as well as furthering our sociological understanding of death, the dead, and collective memory. Dark tourism permits the dead to become contemporary commodities, and for tragic memories to be retailed in socially-sanctioned tourist environments. Nonetheless, the semi-compulsive nature of

consuming dark tourism ensures we do not encounter the actual corpse, but instead a ‘difficult heritage’ industry present narratives of the known and unknown dead.

In turn, the dominion of dark tourism offers a selective voice and records tragedy across time, space, and context and, subsequently, can provide reflectivity of both place and people. Different cultural, political, and linguistic representations of dark tourism and varying interpretive experiences are complex and multifarious and cannot be taken at face value. Instead, dark tourism in its many guises offers visual signifiers and multiplicity of meanings within touristic landscapes, as global visitor sites function as retrospective witnesses to acts of atrocity or tragedy. Contemporary memorialisation is played out at the interface of dark tourism, where consumer experiences can catalyse sympathy for the victims or revulsion at the context. Despite the cultural complexity and moral dilemmas of dark tourism, we disconnect a (tragic) past from the (fretful) present for our (hopeful) future. We gaze at dark tourism in the knowledge that the victims are already dead, though the precise context and history of the victims can never be truly understood. Ultimately, dark tourism and its difficult heritage is about death and the dead, but through its current production and ephemeral consumption, it perhaps tells us more about life and the living.

Yet, despite a long history of people visiting sites of death, contemporary dark tourism evokes notions of mass ‘dark tourist’ hordes that may learn little from heritage that hurts. The idea of a so-called ‘dark tourist’ raises issues of visitors consuming touristic traumascapes. However, semantic insinuations of ‘darkness’ in dark tourism simply render the tourist to a reductionist, if not macabre, leisure seeker who is somehow deficient in requisite morals, historic comprehension, and cultural codes, and who possesses an innate inability to be elucidated by memorial messages. All-too-common scholarly tropes of tourism responding to manufactured stimulus and, more importantly, tourists as fundamentally gullible passive consumers of packaged experiences is simply an indolent argument. Notwithstanding utility of

the term and its contentions, to categorise diverse people who visit sites associated with pain or shame as *dark* – and perhaps in some way deviant – is not only misleading, it is fruitless as a typological exercise. In other words, there can never be a so-called ‘dark tourist’ as a defined taxonomy because to consume tourism is to consume experiences.

Consequently, there is no such thing as a ‘dark tourist’ in dark tourism – only people engaged in the historic and social reality of life-worlds. Indeed, if we are living with the forgetting of history – a prevailing postulation of the postmodern – then some critical engagement with dark [tourism] sites might go some way towards our understanding. Furthermore, it matters little if agreement cannot be reached amongst the intelligentsia of what is or what is not *dark* in dark tourism. Arguably, what matters more is scholarly recognition of difficult heritage sites that seek to interpret historic cultural trauma that perturbs our collective consciousness. It is here that the tourist experience becomes paramount, rather than initial commitment of learning tragic history through tourism encounters. It is perhaps, therefore, less important to focus upon motives of why people participate in dark tourism but, rather, focus on emergent corollaries of the tourist experience.

Hence, questions of how, why, and where particular cultural trauma is remembered and experienced within the visitor economy remain at the crux of dark tourism scholarship. This ATLAS conference has sought to illuminate some of these questions, particularly those focussed on dark tourism as both concept and empirical practice, as well as bringing into focus broader processes of memorialisation and memory multiplicities. If difficult heritage is the production and presentation of tragic history, then dark tourism is the consumption and experience of that history. In turn, the dominion of dark tourism becomes an institution of mortality mediation where co-creation of meaning between heritage-producer and tourist-consumer is made. It is within this intersection of heritage and tourism that traumatic

(his)stories are exposed and, consequently, 'ghosts' of the significant Other dead offer counsel to the living.