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2014

# Dark Tourism and Dark Heritage: Emergent Themes, Issues and Consequences

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# Dark Tourism and Dark Heritage: Emergent Themes, Issues and Consequences

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CATHERINE ROBERTS AND PHILIP R STONE

## INTRODUCTION

The ways in which societies (re)present death, dying and their dead has long been symbiotic with particular cultural representations of mortality. These representations are often bound up with heritage and tourism, whereby travelling to meet with the dead has long been a feature of the touristic landscape. Examples of early travel to sites of death and the dead can be found in medieval pilgrimages and their reliquary associations, or in Grand Tour visitations to tombs and petrified ruins of the ancient world, or in touristic visits to deceased authors' homes, haunts and graves during the Romantic period of the 18th and 19th centuries. The historical precedent of how travel (and tourism) provided compelling techniques for imaginatively contacting the dead is well founded (Westover 2012). Thus, despite an increasing academic and media focus on contemporary 'dark tourism' – that is, travel to sites associated with death, disaster or the seemingly macabre – the act of travel to such sites is not a new phenomenon (Stone 2011). Nonetheless, the practice of present-day dark tourism has the capacity to expand boundaries of the imagination and to provide the contemporary visitor with potentially life-changing points of shock. Consequently, sites of dark tourism are vernacular spaces that are continuously negotiated, constructed and reconstructed into meaningful places (Sather-Wagstaff 2011). Furthermore, dark tourism can represent inherent political dichotomies of a 'heritage that hurts' and, in so doing, offer a socially sanctioned, if not contested, environment in which difficult or displaced heritage is consumed. Given its transitional elements and potential to influence the psychology and perception of individuals, dark tourism as a rite of social passage occurs within constructivist realms of meaning and meaning making. Arguably, dark tourism as part of a broader (dark) heritage context provides a contemporary lens through which the commodification of death may be glimpsed, thus revealing relationships and consequences of the processes involved that mediate between individuals and the societal frameworks in which we reside. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to offer an overview of key themes, issues and consequences of how dark tourism can construct and disperse knowledge through touristic consumption of traumascape that, in turn, can help make contested heritage places salient and meaningful, both individually and collectively. Firstly, however, a review of dark tourism and the tourist experience provides a context for subsequent discussions.

## DARK TOURISM AND THE 'DARK TOURIST' (EXPERIENCE)

Dark tourism as a field of academic scrutiny is where death education and heritage tourism studies collide. Consequently, the scholarly attention on dark tourism and the inherent visitor experience it entails has generated a wealth of typologies, including a surge in descriptive additions to heritage and tourism vocabularies, including thanatourism (Seaton 1996), black spots (Rojek 1993), grief tourism (West 2004) and morbid tourism (Blom 2000). However, despite often-protracted debates over what is and what is not 'dark tourism', the contested term of *dark tourism* has been increasingly applied to a diverse range of global heritage sites, attractions and exhibitions that showcase death. Developing the idea that particular touristic sites of death can either be subjectively lighter or darker (Miles 2002), Stone (2006) offered a dark tourism classification or 'spectrum' that outlined a qualitative set of site-related factors, including political ideologies, educational orientations and interpretation authenticity, that influence 'shades' of touristic experience. Subsequently, there have been concurrent tendencies towards an expansion of the dark tourism typological base, as new locations are brought into the body of research. Correspondingly, there has been a distillation of research within specific subsets of dark tourism, particularly toward the 'darker' poles of positional spectrums: graveyards and cemeteries (Seaton 2002), Holocaust sites (Beech 2009), places of atrocity (Ashworth and Hartmann 2005), prisons and crime sites (Wilson 2008; Dalton 2013) and slavery-heritage attractions (Dann and Seaton 2001; Rice 2009). These subsets of dark tourism are frequently symbolised by iconic landscapes that are often instantly recognisable as well as being recurrent in the academic literature as case studies. For example, Holocaust sites such as Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland, or Ground Zero in New York – site of the 9/11 attacks – or the Killing Fields in Cambodia where the former Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot committed genocide against his own people, carry extraordinary semiotic weight. Hence, this uncanny significance may influence not only public perception and visitor behaviours, but also research approaches and processes. While discussion of such influences is beyond the scope of this chapter, impacts and consequences of consuming dark tourism may relate to deep-rooted psychosocial concerns about appropriateness, deviance and the taboo (Stone and Sharpley 2013).

The juxtaposition of sites where historic and human significance is of particular magnitude (for example, death camps of the Holocaust) with less socially consequential sites (such as dungeon visitor attractions in the UK and elsewhere) further problematises the dark tourism 'brand', especially within broader heritage terms. Concern about seemingly arbitrary correlation of remarkably different experiences leads some commentators to highlight the risk of dark tourism research findings becoming ambiguous (Stone 2011). Continuing efforts to finesse dark tourism definitions find resonance in Crick's (1989, 313) comment that touristic taxonomies 'separate phenomena that are clearly fuzzy or overlapping'. Meanwhile, Stone's (2006, 146) reservation – 'whether it is actually possible or justifiable to collectively categorise a diverse range of sites, attractions and exhibitions that are associated with death and the macabre as "dark tourism"' – highlights the inherent vulnerability of conceptual frameworks founded on positional spectrums with a limited set of potentially deeply subjective axes – these being, firstly, place/product and, secondly, light/dark qualities. Nevertheless, this vulnerability can be reduced when focus on place attributes is matched by scholarly interrogation of the tourist experience, to inform a more holistic and, crucially, a consequential societal approach, rather than simply a tourist motivation research perspective.

Even so, while tourist motivation has connotations of impetus or attraction that may reinforce a reductive supply/demand paradigm, related research offers useful hypotheses around experiential, contemplative and/or psychological motivations, and corresponding mediating devices. Seaton (1996), for instance, proposes dark tourism as the desire to 'experience' a kind of death as a motivating factor, while later research by Stone (2012a; 2012b) theorises the consequences of visiting some dark tourism sites as a means by which individuals might contemplate their own life and mortality through the tourist gaze on death. Moreover, while Lennon and Foley (2000, 11) suggest dark tourism is an 'intimation of post-modernity', Seaton (2010) traces manifestations of what he terms 'thanatourism' throughout the history of Western civilisation, and its subsequent traditions of thanatopsis – that is, the contemplation of death. Whether seen as a linear consequence to or a distinct postmodern divergence from thanatopic traditions, contemporary dark tourism has some relevance to present-day thanatopic behaviours – especially when located within a thesis of death sequestration and mediating mortality within contemporary society (Stone and Sharpley 2008; Stone 2012a). Dark tourism and the sequestration of death proposition offer a significant context to lines of scholarly enquiry which, subsequently, proposes dark tourism as a contemporary mediating medium by which societies may negotiate notions of mortality. Unsurprisingly, however, given numerous variables and diverse factors influencing the socio-cultural framing of death and dying, the role of dark tourism as a contemporary mediating institution of mortality is not absolute, nor can it ever be. Moreover, while the treatment of death and dying rites and rituals have been used as a means of shielding society from a public consciousness of mortality, such processes have been medicalised and privatised which, in turn, suggests a collective drive to conceal or deny death in the public domain. Yet, robust critiques of the death-denial thesis challenge its discriminative qualities whereby antithetical increases in public (re)presentations of death within societal domains have been proposed (Kellehear 2001). Such arguments problematise research that suggests a supposed sequestration of death and a consequent dichotomy that death is publicly absent but privately present (Giddens 1991; Mellor 1993; Mellor and Shilling 1993). Howarth (2007, 35) goes on to argue that 'it may be that in their quest to uncover hidden death, social theorists have neglected to acknowledge the more public face of death'. Subsequently, dark tourism as a context to scrutinise and acknowledge a more public face of death takes its thanatological research cue.

Less absolute treatments of this absent/present death paradox acknowledge these ambiguities and suggest more nuanced mediations of mortality. Consequently, dark tourism research may be seen as directing traditional thanatopic discourse away from a schismatic argument in which death is *either* concealed *or* revealed, toward different mediations and even metamorphoses of death depending on multifarious societal needs – for example, via different behaviours, institutions and transactions. The proposal by Stone (2012a) that *certain kinds* of death are de-sequestered back into the public domain for contemporary consumption raises complex questions about the public presentation of death, and why and how certain kinds of death may be de-sequestered. Indeed, dark touristic praxis may itself function as a means by which certain kinds of death are de-sequestered and mediated and consumed in specific public domains (Stone 2009a). Moreover, dark tourism can provide transitory moments of mortality in which significant Other death is confronted and where death is rendered into *something else* that is comfortable and safe to deal with and to contemplate (Sharpley and Stone 2009).

Conversely, the motivations of so-called 'dark tourists' may correlate so closely with those of heritage, pilgrimage and special interest tourists (Hyde and Harman 2011) that to infer a

particular interest in death and/or mortality is merely speculative – though post-visit consequences of visiting sites that present the Significant Other Dead may indeed raise broader issues of mortality. Arguably, therefore, closed supply/demand paradigms represent the tourist experience as more culturally reactive to, than directive of, heritage institutions. Yet the designation and emergence of dark tourism locations is often influenced by a combination of public visitation, media scrutiny and political discourse. Indeed, Seaton (1996) privileges touristic demand over its sources and supply, thereby placing dark tourism in the context of behavioural phenomenology. Meanwhile, Sharpley (2009) conceptualises dark tourism as interplay between the characteristics of a site, with all the concomitant variables, and its touristic reception – including consideration of touristic drivers, expectations and perceptions. This invites a nuanced consideration of the tourist and their destination as collaborative agents, engaged in a range of transactional encounters that influence and are influenced by external meanings systems and cultural representations of death and dying.

Despite the diverse range of socio-cultural factors that affect points of access to, engagement with and exit from dark tourism experiences, political, logistical, materialistic and other causal factors help describe and comprehend the fundamental nature of (dark) touristic behaviour. Analysis of the so-called dark tourist experience can be critically validated only when such experiences are understood to exist beyond Seaton's proposed phenomenological 'vacuum', and instead located in a broader context of socio-cultural identities and roles. This is particularly so when researching dark tourism and concomitant visitor experiences and whether it makes sense at all to divide people into different types without taking into account their full life spans. Thus, within current dark tourism scholarship there is an obligation to, and indeed calls for, a more rigorous attention to wider socio-cultural and psychosocial contexts (Biran *et al* 2011; Stone 2013). Moreover, such scholarship might usefully be informed by consideration of broader heritage concepts, and it is to these relationships that this chapter now turns.

#### DARK TOURISM AND DARK HERITAGE: TOWARDS A COMMON GROUND

Lennon and Foley (2000) locate the concept of dark tourism within postmodernist contexts, highlighting its key characteristics and mapping them against postmodernist philosophical frameworks. While frequently challenged, this premise represents an openness to, and engagement with, new conceptual dimensions and philosophical underpinnings in tourism studies. These changes include the evolution of cultural tourism, and its associated agendas, into heritage tourism, allowing a theoretical convergence with heritage studies that offers useful perspectives on dark tourism frameworks, experiences and transactions.

Of particular resonance to dark tourism concerns are theories relating to built and/or inhabited environments and the way in which they obtain socio-cultural significance. The typology of place offered by Williams (2009) distinguishes qualified environments, for example *builtscapes*, *workscapes*, *technoscapes* and *peoplescapes*. More specifically, Jansen-Verbeke and George (2012) observe changing identifications of 'war landscapes' over the past century or so as *memoryscapes*, *heritage landscapes* and *tourism landscapes*. The dark tourism lexicon adds '*deathscapes*' and '*traumascapes*' to this taxonomy and, as such, designation of (death) space according to social use and the making of meaning suggest psychologised processes that inform treatment of communal landmarks and landscapes. Where such landscapes relate to significant conflict, violence or tragedy, intense controversies may arise around their use and development. Such intensity is perhaps

proportionate to the various kinds of investments (socio-cultural, political and emotional) that are perceived to have been made by various stakeholders, both individually and collectively. The examination of the developmental processes – that is, convergences of people, place and time – by which dark tourism sites come into being is, therefore, vital to an enhanced understanding of those sites' functionality and identity within collective heritage contexts.

A useful template by which these developmental processes might be modelled is offered by Foote (1997) in which he examined sites associated with tragic events and, subsequently, suggested a prevailing set of conceptual outcomes. Foote's proposed continuum incorporates stages of *rectification*, *designation* and *sanctification*, through which the historical/cultural identity of sites is created or amended. He also proposes a state of *obliteration*, whereby the locus of violent or tragic events is forgotten in time; obliteration may occur for different reasons (and at various levels of deliberateness and consciousness), but they can all, arguably, be traced to a failure to rectify, sanctify and/or designate the site. Foote (2009, 38–9) maintains that 'no one outcome is ever final. Sanctification, designation, rectification, and obliteration are not static outcomes, but only steps in a process.' The flexibility of this model reflects the case histories of several iconic sites, such as at particular battlefields, where, for example, designation as a public memorial site may take many years; or redesignation may take place depending on cultural or political shifts (Chronis 2005). It also allows for the rapid creation of temporary memorials (or spontaneous shrines) and their potential, eventual permanence or obliteration. Of course, these processes will be informed and influenced by a diverse set of stakeholders as well as a range of other cultural, historical and ideological factors.

In some cases, authorities may avert spontaneous and non-authorised designation of particular sites through preventative obliteration, especially where the 'attraction of death' for visitors might be met with perceptions of deviance and the taboo (for example, the demolition by authorities of the house inhabited by, and witness to the violent crimes of, Fred and Rosemary West in the UK). Conversely, the Whitehall Cenotaph in London, originally intended by the authorities as a temporary monument (to be *obliterated*), was *designated* a permanent site due to the pressure of public opinion, which *sanctified* the site through mass visitation. This exemplifies, in displaced heritage contexts at least, 'more or less spontaneous gestures of public emotion, as often occurs after wars or public disasters, and the needs they create' (Benton 2010, 1). The question that of course arises is that where such social and emotional needs are met, by and within physical space – the obtaining nexus that may be defined as cultural heritage – might it also, under certain circumstances, be specified as dark tourism?

Arguably, there is no remarkable leap between the impact of prevailing public opinion and a comparable agency within the touristic community. Future research around the lifecycles (and designatory stages) of dark tourism sites may evaluate the impact of the tourist experience on institutional authenticity. Indeed, an examination of the agency of the tourist is of particular value with regard to cross-cultural participation and narrative congruence, and expressions of socio-cultural need. The function of, and challenge to, dark or displaced heritage is 'presenting or constructing monuments and ceremonies that attempt to meet these needs, and to match the inevitable differences in a "collective" memory of the event in question' (Benton 2010, 1). At sites of trauma of international and historic significance, physical and moral spaces may be required to enclose and represent diverse narratives and needs. Here, the iconic tourism site is challenged by what Stone (2009b, 63) describes as 'a post-conventional society' and its need for 'an open identity capable of conversation with people of other perspectives in a relatively egalitarian and

open communicative space'. The issue remains, of course, of how sites located in the often overwhelming and appalling historical contexts of dark tourism can manage such conversation and create such space. Even so, the role of participating communities, including tourist communities, in the development and designation of such sites is critical. Indeed, it may ensure the success of such sites and, thus, prevent obliteration.

Hence, the nature of dark touristic transactions with dark heritage sites invites close study. Of course, while 'dark tourism does not need "dark tourists" – just people who are interested in learning about this life and this world' (Philip Stone quoted in Coldwell 2013, 1) – the tourist experience may have a powerful capacity to direct and influence the landmarks of cultural heritage and its narratives. Interdisciplinary research approaches may include issues of social change, social action and cultural orientation, and the agency of individuals and of groups in influencing significant institutions. Other research avenues for examining the dark tourism/displaced heritage nexus may focus on post-materialist theory and values systems, and on cultural theories of the post-museum and consumer authority in public contexts. In turn, these interdisciplinary discourses may offer germane, complex contexts in which to explore the social significance of dark touristic transactions and, ultimately, their convergence with broader cultural heritage concerns.

#### DARK TOURISM VS DARK HERITAGE: A NARRATIVE DISSONANCE?

In the latter half of the 20th century, heritage studies increasingly privileged the role of memory in identifying what is important in society. In turn, the development of heritage systems were built on and around memory and meaning, rather than, necessarily, on fact and artefact. Benton (2010, 1) reveals a heritage/tourism convergence that emphasised 'the power of collective memory, where large or small groups within society share an idea of what happened in the past and why it was important [which] translates into patterns of tourism'. Clearly, where such groups hold ideas, and perceptions of importance, which are not shared (either with other groups, or with others within a group), their translation is likely to be problematic and even dissonant. Where memories relate to events of trauma, violence and/or conflict, the likelihood of difference in perception of the past is increased. Moreover, where diverse cultures and faith systems are factors, narrative discord may be further exacerbated. For this reason, the memorialisation of extraordinary events and efforts to acknowledge multiple memorial narratives may be fundamentally problematised in modern cultural heritage contexts and, particularly, in contexts in which dark touristic transactions occur. Here, we encounter situations where memory and its translation – or put another way, heritage and tourism – becomes discordant, and we find reflection of those situations in developing conceptual discourse relating to difficult, displaced and/or dissonant heritage.

With regard to touristic concerns, (dark) heritage scholarship allows a focus on the real-world functioning of heritage sites, and specific contemporary dilemmas encountered in their management. Perceptions and interpretations of heritage in modern multicultural societies, and in visitation to Other cultures, are ambiguous; they necessitate consideration of justifiable contestation of heritage and perceived dissonance between 'closed' heritage narratives and 'open' experience and memory. Such considerations are the nucleus of much of the recent literature on heritage messaging and meaning-making systems which may provoke heritage dissonance or even displacement (Ashworth and Hartmann 2005; Poria and Ashworth 2009). Ashworth's (2008)

examination of historic trauma and violence and its implications for heritage tourism resonates with, although its agenda clearly differs from, dark tourism research.

Similarly, the authors in the edited volume by Logan and Reeves (2009) introduce the term 'difficult heritage' in their consideration of sites dealing with genocide, political imprisonment and conflict. However, the term and contextualising case studies used by contributing authors suggest a potential and relevant convergence with dark tourism research; yet only one specific reference is made to dark tourism concepts – that is, the examination of Auschwitz-Birkenau by Young (2009). Arguably, therefore, dark tourism has yet to be fully recognised as a mutually relevant cross-referential field in heritage studies contexts. However, White and Frew (2013), in their examination of sites of dark heritage, suggest an emergent tendency in broader heritage research to evoke dark tourism tropes, where given sites and their associations relate to profound and historic human experience.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter set out to outline key parameters of dark tourism and its fundamental interrelationships with dark heritage. In so doing, the chapter has revealed that dark tourism, while a contested term, is an academic brand that can shine critical light on the touristic consumption of 'heritage that hurts'. Consequently, discourses of both cultural heritage and dark tourism converge and cluster readily when themes of war, disaster, atrocity or social conflict, and memory and identity are in question. However, interpretations of these themes are understandably prone to concerns about dissonance, inclusion, exploitation, sensitivity and appropriateness, and are vulnerable to ideological shifts. There may also be a perceived responsibility, or indeed political direction to support or engage on some level with conflict resolution processes, including rehabilitation and reintegration, especially in pedagogic and interpretation activities. Therefore, developing touristic opportunities at particular dark heritage sites is an increasing, perhaps inevitable, feature of creating contemporary traumascapes in shifting political and socio-cultural contexts. Of course, the practical possibility of travelling to landscapes of conflict and atrocity is one influencing factor in their evolution as tourism destinations, as is their historic and human significance. Therefore, it is likely that dark tourism scholarship will continue to find significant, even growing, mutuality with those of cultural heritage studies and indeed other associated fields. Ultimately, as heritage concerns and systems are further globalised and integrated by political institutions and processes, dark tourism will provide a heritage mechanism in which death is democratised and shared and narrated for the contemporary visitor economy.

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