Review of: Dark Tourism and Pilgrimage

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The very act of ‘dark tourism’ or ‘the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre,’ recalls all sorts of images. From haunted tours in New Orleans to battlefield memorials, to visits to the Holocaust concentration / extermination camps, dark tourism has become visible. The practice has its roots in the heritage of pilgrimages. Pilgrims, both in ancient ages and in the current one, purposefully visited and / or visit the sites of deceased individuals. Yet the examination of the relationship between dark tourism and pilgrimage is a fragmented affair. Most visitors to such places generally do not consider themselves as ‘black’ or ‘dark’ tourists. Likewise, the very conceptualisation of dark tourism lends itself to criticism, as some contend that the profiting off other’s misery is inexcusable, particularly if the macabre event was recent.

This discourse sets the stage for Olsen and Korstanje’s book *Dark Tourism and Pilgrimage*, an edited volume of 22 chapters organised thematically. The book begins with a thorough reconceptualisation of dark tourism and pilgrimage in chapter 1. By building on Lennon and Foley’s seminal book *Dark Tourism*, the editors explain in detail the interconnections between dark tourism and pilgrimages. Dark Tourism is *thanatopsis*, which means to ponder on or meditate on death.

In Chapter 2, Bideci connects the evolution of dark tourism from ancient times to modern and postmodern society, even though premodern dark tourists would not see themselves as such. In Chapter 5, Korstanje and Howie launch into a meaningful conversation on the growth of dark tourism as a natural consequence of thana capitalism, with the 9/11 attacks opening the door on the ‘morbid consumption of disasters as exchangeable commodities’.

In Chapter 3, Sharma investigates public displays of death rituals in the holy city of Varanasi in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, an increasingly popular dark tourist activity. In Chapter 4, Tan explores the convergence of dark tourism and religious tourism using the Killing Caves of Phnom Sampeau as context.

In Chapter 6, Kuznik and Grafenauer survey their hospitality and tourism students to see how dark tourism sites are understood in Slovenia. Mileva in Chapter 7 also discusses how difficult it will be to develop dark tourism sites in Bulgaria. In Chapter 8, Plibersek, Basle and Lebe discuss the role of cemeteries in dark tourism and how they transition from places of personal mourning to pilgrimage centres.

In Chapter 9, Munro highlights St. John’s cathedral in Valletta, Malta as both a place of worship and a site of dark tourism as it is full of macabre symbols. Burger investigates in Chapter 11 the Aokigahara, or the suicide forest near the base of Mount Fuji, where many visitors specifically travel there to end their own lives and has developed into a dark tourism site.

In Chapters 10 and 12, the authors explore dark tourism sites in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. First, Esplin and Olsen discuss the Carthage Jail in Illinois. Second, Hartley-Moore provides an ethnographical account of Mormon Handcart Trek reenactments, which recreate the experience of pushing handcarts across the American plains.

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In Chapter 20, Donica examines hip-hop tourism and its relationship to dark tourism. Using the Bronx, one of New York City’s poorest boroughs, as context, the author evaluates ‘ghetto’ tours. In the next chapter, Newton provides a deeply personal account. As a person who escaped death, the author uses these visits to reflect on his own life.

The final chapter by Ward and Hill is noteworthy. Holocaust museums and memorial sites are the darkest type of dark tourism. Given the horrors of the Holocaust, these sites have authenticity of place and tourism infrastructure around the sites is limited to preserve their originality.

Overall, Olsen and Korstanje’s book *Dark Tourism and Pilgrimage*, is a great addition to the literature on dark tourism and on pilgrimage; shining a light on ‘heritage that hurts’. No longer is dark tourism the domain of the sacred, where pilgrims come to visit relics or the resting place of saints. Now, it is the realm of the secular, where visitors transmigrate themselves (metempsychosis) into the experience or the journey of the deceased.

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In Chapter 13, Zhang, Coghlan and Knox, conduct a case study of the Beichuan earthquake memorial in China, where over 69,000 people were killed. In Chapters 14 and 17, museums are examined as sites of dark tourism and authenticity of connection. In Chapter 14, Bond, Carr and Comtesse compare aboriginal and non-aboriginal visits to the Western Australian Museum. In Chapter 17, Cook considers the ethics of a casket belonging to a murdered black teenager at the National Museum of African American History.

Chapters 15 and 16 explore dark tourism through experiential learning. First, Thesing-Ritter, *et al.* outline their use of critical pedagogy in creating a civil rights pilgrimage. Then, Hayes reflects on African American literature, with a focus on Richard Wright. Chapter 18 also discusses a faculty-led trip to a dark tourism site, in this case a visit to Juffure and Kurté Kinteh island in The Gambia. In Chapter 19, Johannesen compares the experiences of two groups of visitors to the Wounded Knee massacre monument on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota.