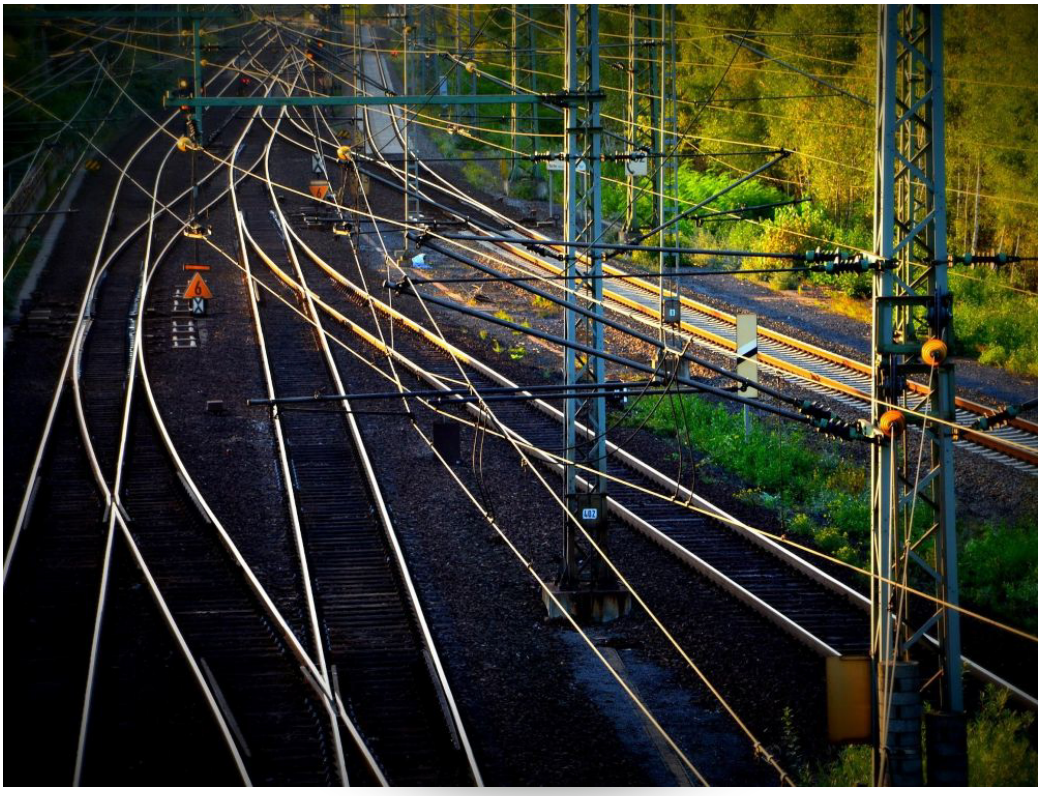
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edited by Eleonora Federici and Marilena Parlati

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Dark Tourism, in and out of Academic Discourse

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Still harping on 'dark tourism': a critical overview

The term 'dark tourism' refers to a form of travel and cultural consumption through which death, suffering, natural disasters, violence and traumatic history are selected, narrated, translated and represented for audiences looking for a specific experience. Destinations like prisons, battlefields, concentration camps, plantations, sites of war and genocide, disaster zones but also memorial museums and cemeteries can be included in this typology of tourist offer. The term 'dark tourism' has reached a wider audience also through TV programmes, like, for example, *Dark Tourist*, a Netflix series presented by journalist David Farrier and released in 2018, which showed how 'dark tourism' could be perceived in a morbid and voyeuristic way. Popular media and the web have offered and still offer incredibly numerous non-academic perspectives on this phenomenon, such as the website,[1] whose principal aim is to offer a list of dark tourism sites as places where visitors can think about the past and the events occurred there and be aware of the possible consequences of political choices and actions. If we scroll the list of sites and choose Italy, for example, the text reads: "Italy thus boasts a great number of dark attractions across a wide array of categories from cemeteries and catacombs to disaster sites, from medical museums to WWII and fascism-associated sites, some of them top-notch examples of their respective categories. And that's far from the end of it."[2] This initial paragraph makes clear that in the huge umbrella term 'dark tourism', one can also include the old practice of visiting cemeteries and crypts as medieval pilgrims did. Interestingly, by searching this site it is easy to see that the term itself can be understood or misunderstood in many ways; the author of this site reveals that all his social media were cancelled at once a few years ago and his blog was hacked last June. So, the popular idea of dark tourism can be very slippery in its potential relation to a morbid and unethical position regarding which dark places to visit and the reasons to do so. One of the reasons to analyse, from a scholarly and

academic perspective, phenomena that are visible and tangible in our society is to shed new light on them, to make readers think about causes and consequences, and hopefully to connect academic thought with real life.

Dark tourism should not be treated as a single, homogeneous form of tourism. Sites differ considerably in their historical significance, political function, degree of authenticity, commercial orientation and emotional intensity. Agreeing with Philip R. Stone's idea that dark tourism products are "multifaceted, complex in design and purpose, and diverse in nature" and with his invitation to take into account "multiple shades of dark tourism" (Stone 2006, 7), we offer a panoramic and diachronic view of the main studies about 'dark tourism' which are the background of this issue of *From the European South*, with the aim of producing a deeper linguistic and cultural analysis of the topic at hand. Dark tourism is best understood not simply as tourism associated with death, but as a complex cultural and communicative practice through which societies represent difficult pasts to themselves and to others. Its study requires an interdisciplinary approach combining tourism research with cultural and literary studies, memory studies, heritage studies, linguistics, translation studies, and intercultural communication. Such an approach reveals that dark-tourism sites are not passive containers of history, but rather dynamic discursive spaces in which historical knowledge, political authority, cultural identity, ethical responsibility, and emotional experience are produced and contested.

In order to analyse the dark-tourism phenomenon it is useful to go back to its definitions. Academically, the term was used by Malcolm Foley and John Lennon in their foregrounding text *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* (2000), where they argue that it is "an intimation of post-modernity" (Foley and Lennon 2000, 11) in an era where tourist interest in death and atrocity has exponentially grown. One of its synonyms is "Thanatourism," a term coined by Anthony V. Seaton (1996), concentrating on the tourist rather than the destination, to define a choice of travel related to the desire to encounter death symbolically and/or physically. Similarly, and again focusing on the tourist, in his chapter about "fatal attractions" Chris Rojek formulates the concept of "Black spots" (1993) to demonstrate that sites of violent or celebrated death are culturally reconstructed and transformed into objects of tourist consumption. This impulse towards a voyeuristic and morbid attitude has been further developed by Tom Blom in his article on "morbid tourism" (2000), where the attraction to a site is connected with an unexpected or highly publicised death through the media, which transform individual death into a tourist attraction. The spectrum of dark tourism sites has been analysed by Philip R. Stone, who conceptualises a range spanning from 'darkest' to 'lightest' sites connected to death, classifying seven different 'suppliers' of dark tourism and offering a framework of varied degrees of darkness, from commemorative sites to places which have been totally transformed into commercial and spectacular grounds (2006). In his view, the

sites' position on the spectrum is determined by authenticity, location, temporal proximity, political meaning, commemorative purpose and the balance between education, entertainment and commercialisation. Visits to sites of tragedy and death have a deep meaning in society, as Peter Tarlow underlines in a study in which he emphasises how dark tourism shapes society through collective memory, death-related heritage and the link to the present political life (2005).

The complex relation between dark tourism sites, visitors and the different reasons that push tourists to visit 'dark' sites has been further analysed by Richard Sharpley and Philip Stone, once again offering a range of darkness based not only on the site, but at the intersection between the attraction's purpose and the visitor's motivation (2009). The analysis is based on multiple factors: how death-related places are selected, interpreted, marketed and managed together with an examination of visitors' choices and motivations. Dark tourism sites seem to operate at multiple levels: they mediate the relationship between the living and the dead, they provide spaces for negotiating mortality and moral meaning, and they participate in contested processes of commemoration, commercialisation and political representation. 'Dark tourism' is thus not only a term to indicate a physical travel, but it also becomes a discursive and intercultural practice, tangible and evident when we analyse museum texts, tours, websites, photographs and other forms of representation. Dark-tourism experiences are mediated through museum labels, guided tours, audio guides, websites, brochures, commemorative speeches, visitor reviews, photographs, digital media, but also, we contend, through fiction, poetry and artistic mediation. These forms of communication do more than provide information: they frame events, assign responsibility, construct relationships between victims and perpetrators, and encourage particular emotional or moral responses.

From a cultural studies perspective, dark-tourism sites can be approached as spaces in which collective memory, cultural identity, heritage, and power are continuously negotiated. They do not simply 'preserve' an objective account of the past; instead, they select and continuously interpret historical experiences for contemporary audiences. Decisions concerning whose lives are commemorated, which events are emphasised, and which perspectives are marginalised participate in the production of public memory. Dark tourism is therefore closely connected with what J.E. Tunbridge and G.J. Ashworth define as "dissonant heritage," that is, a heritage whose meaning and ownership are contested by different social, ethnic, national, or political groups, so that the same site may function simultaneously as a place of mourning, an educational institution, a national symbol, a tourist attraction, and a source of commercial profit (1996). Cultural analysis therefore asks not only what happened at a particular location, but also how the past is reconstructed in the present, who has (or takes) the authority to interpret it, and what ethical responsibilities accompany its transformation into a visitor experience.

Controversial effects can be particularly visible in sites connected with colonialism, slavery, genocide, war, terrorism, and forced migration. Their representation may reinforce dominant national narratives, but it can also challenge official histories by foregrounding previously silenced voices. As we have already made clear, concepts such as difficult heritage, post-memory, trauma, authenticity, and commodification are central to this discussion, as Sharon Macdonald outlines in her study about the difficulty of surviving a 'dark' past, finding a reconciliation with it and constructing a national identity (2009). These concepts help explain how traumatic histories are transmitted across generations and transformed into narratives that serve educational, commemorative, political, or economic purposes, often intertwining. The idea of this monographic issue started from the aim to critically examine the complex relationships between dark tourism and colonial legacies, postcolonial realities and imagined communities, and also the possibilities entailed — and, unluckily, at times disappointed — by decolonisation processes. Our interdisciplinary perspective enables us to analyse how dark-tourism sites are experienced, consumed and, not least relevantly, represented.

Language plays a fundamental role in these processes. The linguistic choices made by institutions, such as whether people are described as 'victims', 'martyrs', 'combatants', 'terrorists', or 'collateral damage', are never entirely neutral. Naming practices, grammatical agency, metaphor, evaluation, and patterns of inclusion or omission can legitimise specific interpretations of the past while obscuring others. Linguistic studies of dark tourism can consequently draw on critical discourse analysis, narrative analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics. At the same time, multimodal analysis makes it possible to investigate how language interacts with photographs, architecture, sound, silence, spatial organization, and displayed objects in creating an affective encounter with traumatic history. Linguistic studies have dealt with the analysis of Holocaust museums (Krisjanous 2016; Wight 2020; Wan Yau Ni 2025), prisons (Gregoriou et al. 2026), slavery plantations (Alderman and Modlin 2008; Carter 2016; Harnay 2022), and cemeteries (Adami 2021), expanding the analysis on the reproduction of ideologies and showing how linguistic and multimodal choices change the representation of the destination and the reception of tourists. Critical discourse analysis, for example, is especially useful for examining how institutional texts reproduce or contest political ideologies. The use of passive constructions, for instance, may conceal the agents responsible for violence, whereas personal testimonies and first-person narratives can individualize victims and create emotional proximity. Pronouns such as 'we', 'they', and 'our' may construct imagined communities, distinguish insiders from outsiders, or invite international visitors to identify with a particular national memory.

Translation and intercultural communication further complicate the representation of dark heritage. Many dark-tourism destinations receive international visitors who encounter the site through translated texts or interpreting services, and how these texts are translated makes a

difference (Federici 2023). Obviously, translation is not merely a technical transfer of information between languages; it is to be acknowledged as a cultural and ideological practice where terms associated with violence, trauma, ethnicity, and political responsibility may carry different meanings in different historical and linguistic contexts. Translators must negotiate culturally specific concepts, competing memories, institutional constraints, and the ethical need to respect victims and survivors. Simplification for international audiences may make a narrative accessible, but it may also remove ambiguity, local complexity or politically sensitive details. An intercultural approach recognises that visitors do not interpret dark sites in identical ways. Their responses are shaped by language, nationality, education, religion, gender, family history, and proximity to the represented events. A narrative that appears commemorative to one group may seem accusatory, nationalistic, commercialised, or incomplete to another. Meaning is thus created through an encounter among institutional discourse, local memory, translated representation, and the visitor's own cultural frameworks. Digital platforms add another level of mediation, since tourists publicly reinterpret sites through reviews, blogs, photographs, hashtags, and social-media posts. These practices may extend remembrance beyond the physical destination, but they can also produce ethical controversies when places of suffering become backgrounds for entertainment, selfies, or personal branding.

Dark tourism in the future tense

Having traced the genealogy and shifting uses of the term 'dark tourism', from its critical origins to its more recent, and still partial, engagements with postcolonial and representational concerns, we turn to some of the contentious issues that continue to trouble the field and to the futures, both speculative and already emergent, that it must learn to confront. In 2004, Michael Hall and Hazel Tucker edited *Tourism and Postcolonialism: Contested Discourses, Identities and Representations*, which started drawing the evident connections between tourism and postcolonialism as contested territories. A decade later, in their "Shadow Zones: Dark Travel and Postcolonial Cultures," Robert Clarke, Jacqueline Dutton and Anna Johnston introduced a special issue of *Postcolonial Studies* (2014), still calling for a more critical turn in dark tourism scholarship, which we believe has found only partial realisation. The collection *Dark Tourism. Theory, Interpretation and Attraction*, edited in 2024 by Anukrati Sharma, Shruti Arora and Parag Shukla, hosts many welcome studies on non-western locations, with one important chapter by Max Hart, Craig Kelly, and Adam Lymes which argues for a re-conceptualisation of dark tourism "in the Era of Late Capitalism" (2024, 185-204). These scholars adopt Slavoj Žižek's theories on violence, which must be accounted for as the prime 'commodity' of our times, and eventually connect it to the financial and environmental harms produced by (dark) tourism. Even more interestingly, though, they discuss "Gore Capitalism" (Valencia 2018) and "Graze Culture" (Kelly et al. 2023) to identify the "thanatophilic nature of

contemporary capitalism" (Hart, Kelly, Lymes 2024, 197). To them, "these harms [industrial waste, deforestation, land disappropriation, fracking, annihilation of local communities and of theindustrialand sacred sites] are inflicted most disproportionately and savagely upon the people and communities of the global south. In recognizing this, there is a small glimmer of hope that the worst excess can be challenged and (hopefully) curbed" (2024, 198). Eventually, the scholars conclude that within our global economy of violence, "tourists from the global north are increasingly disenfranchised" and that, while "they consume violent media as a way to disavow their realities […] they engage in seemingly de-politicized consumption within the context of tourism" (198).

In the recent *Critical Theories in Dark Tourism: Issues, Complexities and Future Directions*, edited by Nitasha Sharma, Annaclaudia Martini and Dallen J. Timothy (2024), again, only a handful of contributions genuinely manage to disentangle dark tourism as practice from dark tourism as critically-oriented scholarship. Though this collection does attempt to open new research paths, we feel that too often most research and published studies remain focussed on the histories and marketing of sites, on visitors' motivations, and, growingly, on the involvement and engagement of communities in devising touristic strategies. What we believe still ought to be expanded is the use of a critical, maybe contestational approach, which might also include examinations of the ways in which scholarship itself participates in producing the very categories and narratives it claims to critique.

The potentiality of a more pressing critical methodology is also visible when the field turns towards its future. In a chapter included in *The Future of Dark Tourism* (2024), which he co-edits with Daniel W. M. Wright, Philip R. Stone — a pivotal figure in dark tourism studies — faces dark tourism in the metaverse to investigate a relatively new terrain, and what we call a 'presentfuture' tense: no longer an opening onto the future, but onto a very emergent present. Stone argues that "new places will agglutinate with technology" (11), suggesting that dark tourism's future will not remain bound to inherited sites of atrocity and memory, but will proliferate (as they are already doing) into what he calls "Vertopia," a hybrid spacetime/heterotopia that is, borrowing from Soja's reworking of Bhabha's Third Space, "neither virtual nor real" (18). In ways which resonate with our initial argument in this introduction, Stone sees these as polysemic zones, open in principle to multiple and competing meanings, in which the ongoing work of constructing and conserving "meaningscapes" (12), and therefore the hard work of making dark places signify, and signfiy against prescribed/enforced grains, takes on new and unstable forms.

The technologies of "emplacement" that Stone describes, i.e. virtual and augmented reconstructions, AI-mediated memory, 'sites' of dark heritage for the "significant dead," do not emerge from neutral or disinterested processes (Stone 2024, 11, 13). They are obviously designed and funded, used, or maybe one should simply say 'consumed', thanks to the same

commercial logics that have long driven the commodification of atrocity and suffering. Platforms and interfaces are engineered, more often than not opaquely, to capture and sustain scrolling and connecting attention, and to shape desire in ways that visitors may not even fully perceive nor consent to. Where earlier critiques of dark tourism worried about sites and guides mediating (and monetising) encounters with death and disaster, the technological 'futurepresent' makes this concern an absolutely urgent call, since many platforms not only anticipate but more radically manufacture what the visitor should feel, remember, and want (to buy) next.

While Stone inaugurates this recent intervention with his own fiction, what we have often noticed, in discussing and researching for this themed issue, is the persistent marginalization of 'representation' as an object of inquiry. With the notable exception of Anthony Carrigan's work on postcolonial tourism (2011), dark tourism scholarship has rarely turned its attention to fiction, film, and the arts as forces that actively inscribe and delineate dark spaces, rather than merely documenting them. Yet, it is easy to see that novels, films, photography, but also other artistic forms and, growingly, video games, often narrate stories that precede and sometimes 'positively' manufacture the itineraries and expectations of dark tourists. At the same time, one should not underestimate the potential for unpacking and exposing manipulative strategies such as romanticisation and decontextualisation through which atrocity and suffering, often 'staged' in 'colonised', or rather invaded and unceded territories, are packaged for consumption. 'Representation' (Hall 1997) can inscribe the very power hierarchies and neo-colonial gazes that critical scholars decry, but it can equally serve as a site of resistance, potentially capable of offering emancipatory accounts that more empirical, data-focused literature is only vaguely hinting at. We believe that dark tourism scholarship too rarely engages this representational terrain, and its frequent treatment of fiction and film as peripheral may be read as a symptom of the disciplinary insularity that we aimed to challenge by co-editing this issue from our different disciplinary positions.

The task facing dark tourism scholarship, then, is not to celebrate this Third Space as an emancipatory expansion of who gets to remember which and whose story. It is to interrogate this no-longer-emerging but rather well-established terrain with even greater vigilance. Dark tourism in the future tense may unluckily not be liberated from its founding tensions by technological novelty, but quite the contrary. The frictions among power, commodification, profit and meaning-making are being relocated, rewritten, and in some cases fearfully intensified, in code, on platforms and virtual-real, or should we term them "vertopian" (Stone 2024), interfaces.

FES 19 opens with Ilaria Iori's contribution, "Local Folklore or Tragic History? The Linguistic Representation of Witch Hunts in Tourism Discourse," which turns a corpus-assisted discourse

analysis lens onto the institutional websites of two emblematic witch-hunt heritage sites: Salem, USA, and the less well-known Triora, in Italy. Iori's comparative analysis reveals how tourism and museum discourse linguistically negotiates the tension between historical commemoration and touristic appeal, showing that while both sites employ hedging strategies to distance themselves from the historical label "witch," Triora's promotional language more readily lapses into folkloric and magical framing, at times aestheticising the imprisonment and suffering of accused women. Salem, by contrast, foregrounds vulnerability and injustice through the individualisation of victims. In bringing gendered violence and linguistic evaluation into direct dialogue, Iori's essay exemplifies precisely the kind of attention to representation as a discursive practice actively constructing, rather than merely reflecting, the meaning of dark heritage sites, that this introduction has argued for.

The second contribution turns to a very different, yet equally haunted, site of dark heritage. In "Lo Spettro del Brigante. Il Museo Lombroso come caso di 'Colonial Hauntology'," Annalaura Ferrara and Fabio Tesorone read Turin's Museo Lombroso through Derrida's hauntology (1994) and Giulia Grechi's notion of colonial hauntology (2016), arguing that the museum's exhibition design performs a double spectral operation: on the one hand, it revitalizes the ghost of Cesare Lombroso, who is rehabilitated as a fallible but well-intentioned 'father of modern science'. On the other hand, the ghost of the famous 'brigante' Villella, whose skull is put on display and subtly fetishized, is somewhat silenced, his 'owner' stripped of the historical and political context that once made him also a symbol of resistance to the violent internal colonization of Southern Italy. Tracing Lombroso's theory of criminal atavism back to its role in legitimizing the repression of post-unification peasant uprisings and the broader construction of the Mezzogiorno as racially and biologically 'other', Ferrara and Tesorone show how the narrative of scientific 'error' re-semanticizes this intensely controversial museum, with this famous case of claimed and denied restitution of the skull to the local communities of Calabria, into a museum of 'errori', mistakes, rather than 'orrori', (political) horrors, as one of its curators insists. The essay extends dark tourism's critical vocabulary into direct dialogue with Italy's still largely unexamined colonial and internal-colonial past, showing how heritage sites can function simultaneously as spaces of memorialization and as instruments of historical erasure.

Esterino Adami contributes with an article entitled "Memory and Matter: The South Park Street Cemetery as a Cultural Text between (Post)Colonial Discourse and Dark Tourism," in which he offers a new perspective on the old practice of visiting cemeteries and shrines through an interdisciplinary analysis of the multiple symbolic meanings of the colonial cemetery. Adami examines how the cemetery's intersecting cultural and ideological layers are foregrounded and negotiated through the tourist gaze. His selected case study is South Park Street Cemetery in Calcutta (Kolkata), established in 1767 and restored by BACSA in 1977. Adami's investigation

focuses on the cemetery's stylistic and semiotic representation across a range of texts and genres, including literary fiction, brochures, guidebooks, and websites in order to show how these narratives collectively construct the 'thanatouristic experience' and perpetuate imperial ideologies and processes of postcolonial remaking.

The following four articles seem to us to be related in their attention to structural state violence and its aftermaths, in contexts as varied as Portugal, Mexico, so-called Australia and Gaza. Settler states, colonial powers in their own terms, these locations are perfect examples of "dissonant sites," whose contours are ongoing challenges for academic analyses. The fourth contribution, "(Re)Constructing Memory through Dark Tourism: Visitor Narratives at the Museum of Aljube in Post-Dictatorial Portugal," by Belmira Coutinho, Maria Manuel Baptista and Moisés de Lemos Martins, investigates how visits to the Museum of Aljube — Resistance and Freedom (a former political prison in Lisbon now dedicated to commemorating the victims of the Estado Novo dictatorship) generate processes of memory (re)construction. Adopting a grounded theory approach within the broader framework of cultural studies, the authors examine how encounters with representations of death, suffering, and political violence in dark tourism spaces, such as Aljube, shape visitors' understandings of national history and identity. The article proposes a theory of memory (re)construction in dark tourism settings centred on two fundamental conditions: visitors' degree of personal memory and their level of political awareness. These factors influence how individuals engage with the museum's representations of oppression, torture, and death. By foregrounding visitors' perspectives and their relationship with collective memory, the paper contributes to current debates about the capacity of dark tourism to both challenge and paradoxically reinforce dominant historical narratives. It considers whether the museum operates as a site of critical remembrance capable of fostering historical accountability or one that risks reproducing simplified and depoliticised interpretations of the past. More broadly, the analysis addresses the commodification of suffering, the tensions between authenticity and performativity, and the role of museums in reconstructing collective memory in post-authoritarian societies.

Mario Alberto Velázquez García and Fernando Andrés Meza Rojas's article, entitled "Tlatelolco as a Disputed Landscape: Dark Tourism, State Violence, and Decolonial Memory in Mexico," offers a critical reinterpretation of dark tourism focusing on the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco, Mexico City, the site of the massacre of October 2, 1968. Drawing on a qualitative methodology combining participant observation and semi-structured interviews conducted between 2023 and 2025, their analysis considers three interconnected dimensions: the extent of the site's institutionalisation by the state; the cultural and ideological frameworks shaping its relationship with the surrounding urban environment; and the meanings visitors attribute to it according to their geographical and social backgrounds, class positions, and cultural capital. In the authors' view, the findings demonstrate that Tlatelolco constitutes a site

of contested memory in which official narratives of reconciliation coexist with insurgent memories that denounce continuing impunity. Yet, although the museification of trauma has facilitated the site's incorporation into cultural and educational circuits, it has not resolved the underlying political tensions.

Marilena Parlati's "Beyond Dark Voyeurism: Nuclear Violence, Memory and Community at Maralinga" turns to one of dark tourism's most under-examined sites: Maralinga, on Pitjantjatjara land in South Australia, where British nuclear tests between 1956 and 1963 inflicted lasting radioactive contamination and colonial violence on Aboriginal communities that were never warned or evacuated. Reading Maralinga through Masco's "nuclear uncanny" (2006) and Morton's "hyperobjects," (2013) Parlati first traces how some works of popular fiction — Dorothy Johnston's *Maralinga, My Love* (1998) and Judy Nunn's *Maralinga* (2009) — domesticate this history into conventional romance narratives that recentre white protagonists and relegate Indigenous people to background witness, effectively reproducing the same *terra nullius* logic that made the tests possible. Against this, she turns to Aboriginal cultural production, namely Ali Cobby Eckermann's poetry, Yhonnie Scarce's glass sculpture, and the play *Ngapartji Ngapartji,* which insists on nuclear violence's presentness and on the capacities of local communities for creative re-appropriation. From these practices, Parlati derives what she calls "communal un-forgetting", grounded in Indigenous-led exhibitions, storytelling, and the *Visit Maralinga* tours, which refuses both the affective distance of voyeuristic consumption and the narrative closure of romantic memorialization, replacing them with relationships of accountability and reciprocity between visitors and traditional custodians. In doing so, Parlati first extends Carrigan's call for postcolonial critiques of dark tourism, but also proposes a paradigm rooted explicitly in Indigenous sovereignty and epistemic justice.

The issue closes with Valentina Di Francesco's "From Trauma to Spectacle: Post-October 7 Tours, Gaza-facing Viewpoints and the Live Consumption of Violence," an exploratory study of how post-October 7 guided tours in Israel incorporate viewpoints overlooking (in all senses) Gaza. Drawing on Urry's tourist gaze and dark tourism scholarship on moral distance and chronological proximity, Di Francesco conducts a qualitative textual analysis of twenty-one tour operators' and municipal promotional webpages, tracing recurrent patterns of witnessing, authenticity, resilience, and risk management. Her central finding is stark: while these tours make Gaza "lexically and geographically visible," though literally 'framed' by panoramic lookouts, binoculars, and border viewpoints, this visibility never translates into social representation. Gazan civilians remain structurally absent from the tours' routes, which use abstract categories such as 'border', 'strip', and 'threat', while Israeli survivors, soldiers, and residents are individualised and offered as sites of 'authentic' encounter. Reading this asymmetry through Weizman's account of frontiers as "deep, shifting, fragmented" spaces rather than stable borders, Di Francesco argues that the Gaza-facing

viewpoint transforms a devastating, ongoing genocidal conflict into a purchasable, ethically-legitimated spectacle: one in which testimony, solidarity, and even volunteering become 'touristified' products, and the act of looking itself is normalised as a scheduled, paid activity, without ever producing an encounter with those whose plight is being 'watched'.

Taken together, the essays gathered in this issue resist any settled or singular definition of dark tourism, offering a wide range of cases and interventions which bring together linguistics, translation studies, literary and cultural studies, postcolonial and decolonial theory, and tourism studies in ways no single methodology could possibly sustain on its own. Each contributor arrives at more or less famous wounded territories and people of the past and of the present from different disciplinary vantage points, yet each is drawn, we believe, towards the same unresolved questions pertaining to how commemoration and spectacle remain entangled, how some lives are individualised while others are abstracted into categories of generic non-agentic victimhood, how difficult it is to identify biases and avoid complicity not only in dark tourism practice, but even within critical scholarship itself. What these essays offer are instances, by necessity partial and by decision disciplinarily various, of a kind of engagement that we deem essential in that it helps foster the recovery of silenced voices, and the insistence on what we like to call practices of "communal un-forgetting," made of relational participation and of the reappropriation of memory and places over consumeristic and banalised spectacle.

Notes

[1] See www.dark-tourism.com. Accessed 15 September 2026.
[2] See https://www.dark-tourism.com/index.php/italy. Accessed 15 September 2026.

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Local Folklore or Tragic History? The Linguistic Representation of Witch Hunts in Tourism Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the linguistic construction of the history of witch-hunt in the discourse of institutional tourism, with a specific focus on the heritage sites in Salem, USA, and Triora, Italy. This study is based on a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of the institutional websites of the local tourist information offices and museum sites dedicated to witchcraft, exploring the ways in which the websites negotiate the tension between the commemoration of the past and the promotion of tourism. The analysis combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate the lexical and evaluative patterns used to represent the accused individuals, with particular attention to the most frequent lemmas in the datasets, namely *witch*, *woman*, and *victim*. The results show a divergence in the way in which the two locations frame the accused, with Salem consistently individualising them and representing them as vulnerable. Triora, on the other hand, concurrently hedges the label 'witch', while also presenting persistent folkloric and supernatural representations which activate the 'magical gaze' often expected by tourists in such locations and possibly contributing to the aestheticisation of gendered violence.

Keywords
Witch hunts, dark tourism, tourism discourse, gendered violence, corpus-assisted discourse analysis

Introduction

Witch hunts represent one of the darkest events in the history of Europe and America. The period of witch hunts, which occurred between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, saw the persecution of many individuals, mostly women, who were accused of practising harmful magic (Hutton 2017). The popularity of the sites connected to witch hunts has grown in recent years and they can be considered heritage tourism destinations, where histories of violence are recontextualised for tourists (Thelen 2024). As sites that can be situated within the broader field of dark tourism, they are particularly relevant to the study of how histories of violence and death are transformed into tourist attractions and interpreted for contemporary audiences. This study, therefore, employs a corpus-based approach to analyse how victims of trials are linguistically constructed for tourists. Specifically, it investigates the official tourism and museum websites of two major witch-hunt sites: Salem, USA, and Triora, Italy. These two sites, although different, share the common factor of leveraging their witch-hunt past as a means of attracting tourists.

The article first outlines its theoretical background and methodology, then presents the small-scale quantitative findings alongside the qualitative interpretation and concludes with a final discussion.

Witch Hunts and Dark Tourism

Researchers studying witch hunts face at least two challenges: defining the concept of 'witch' and explaining the causes of witch hunts. With regard to the former, a widely accepted definition of 'witch' in the field of history and anthropology is "someone who causes harm to others by mystical means" (Needham 1985, 26). Hutton (2017) notes that 'witch' has acquired multiple meanings in modern Anglo-American contexts, ranging from an alleged practitioner of harmful magic to a figure associated with contemporary Paganism or female independence. In the context of early modern trials, however, the term refers specifically to individuals accused of harmful magic. The emergence of witch hunts themselves is linked to multiple factors combined, rather than to a single cause. According to Hutton (2017), these include belief in harmful magic, cultural stereotypes of the suspects (mainly related to age, gender, and status), economic or social instability, and religious traditions.

Feminist perspectives on witch hunts highlight the ways in which the early modern witch hunts have shaped gender relations. Specifically, early feminist studies argue that witch hunts took women away from their medical knowledge, particularly their knowledge of natural medicine and herbal remedies (Ehrenreich and English 2010). Ehrenreich and English root this claim in a broader epistemological argument: they describe the witch-healer as "an empiricist: she relied on her senses rather than on faith or doctrine," and argue that it was precisely this empirical approach to disease, pregnancy, and childbirth that put her at odds with a Church that "discredited the value of the material world" and distrusted sensory experience as a path to truth (Ehrenreich and English 2010, 48). Silvia Federici broadens this argument and applies it to political economy: for her, the suppression of women's independent knowledge and authority was inseparable from the construction of "a new patriarchal order, based upon the exclusion of women from waged-work and their subordination to men" (S. Federici 2004, 12). From this perspective, the witch-hunts did not simply displace a body of medical knowledge but may also have contributed to the sexual division of labour on which capitalist accumulation depended.

In recent years, sites associated with witch trials and persecutions have increasingly been included into heritage tourism, where histories of violence are recontextualised for visitors. Tourism to sites of traumatic or unsettling pasts — such as witch trials — is commonly known as 'dark tourism', namely travel "to sites, associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre" (Stone 2006, 146). Its increasing popularity is likely connected to a broader fascination with crime, the grim and occult (Binik 2020). This same appeal, however,

poses ethical questions regarding the promotion of these 'dark' sites: such promotional efforts often combine historically accurate and educational representations of tragic histories with more engaging promotional content to meet tourist expectations. As a result, many sites progressively lose the 'darkness' of tragic events and replace it with more entertaining narratives (Sharpley 2009).

This tendency also applies to tourism related to witch hunts. For instance, Sharpley (2009) notices that witch-hunt tourism often involves a tension between the traumatic history of persecution and the more entertaining, popular-cultural forms through which these sites are made attractive to visitors. Thelen (2024) also confirms that such tourism frequently moves along a spectrum of 'light' and 'dark' elements, combining historical remembrance with elements of spectacle and folklore. Furthermore, tourists tend to approach and experience witch-hunt sites through a magical or fantastical lens (Lovell 2019; Thelen 2024). This perspective can de-emphasise the violence victims experienced and foreground elements of mystery and spectacle. As a result, women's pain may be aestheticised or downgraded, raising ethical questions about how violence against women is represented in tourism discourse (Stone and Morton 2022).

Previous research has taken cultural and ethnographic perspectives on witch-hunt tourism across Europe and the United States (DeRosa 2009; Sharpley 2009; Thelen 2024) and has highlighted how tourist expectations usually revolve around chasing magical experiences, rather than learning about a tragic past. This tension is unveiled in the types of activities intended for visitors, which often combine historical information with entertaining elements — e.g., theatrical light, sound installations, the use of puppets (DeRosa 2009). The case of Salem exemplifies this duality quite clearly: DeRosa (2009) shows that the heritage landscape of Salem alternates between educational historical interpretation and attractions which exploit the witchcraft connection to the city. For instance, he observes that the Salem Witch Museum presents the trials through immersive and theatrical experiences rather than conventional historical expositions. Caiazzo (2020) further demonstrates how the name 'Salem' has become a powerful metonymic resource in the tourist promotion of the city.

These patterns corroborate previous research showing how language plays a central role in shaping tourists' expectations of a destination (Dann 1996; Maci 2020). However, within the specific field of witch-hunt tourism, relatively little attention has been paid to how linguistic and discursive choices contribute to constructing these expectations. Studies on dark tourism discourse have shown that institutional tourism websites are not neutral informational platforms, but spaces in which difficult pasts are selectively framed, narrated, and evaluated, with certain actors and aspects foregrounded while others minimised (E. Federici 2024). In the context of witch-hunt heritage, such selective construction of events is especially significant, as it can reveal how gendered histories of violence are recontextualised and transformed within

contemporary tourism economies, where commemoration may coexist with processes of commodification and spectacle (S. Federici 2004).

Despite these insights, little research has examined how witch-hunt histories are linguistically framed in institutional tourism discourse in different cultural contexts, especially on official tourism and museum websites. As primary interfaces through which destinations present themselves to potential visitors, these platforms are key in constructing tourists' first impressions of the site and its history. This study addresses this gap by investigating how witch trials are represented in the tourism discourse of two destinations strongly associated with these events: Salem, in the United States and Triora, in Northern Italy. It analyses how these sites recontextualise the language surrounding witch trials and how they negotiate the tension between historical explanation and tourism promotion along a continuum ranging from the memorialisation of tragedy to the attraction of visitors seeking magical experiences. Specifically, the analysis addresses the following research questions:

a) How are the social actors involved in witch hunts linguistically represented in the institutional tourism discourse of Salem and Triora?
b) What insights does the comparative perspective offer into the representation of witch-hunt heritage?
c) How is the tension between representing tragic pasts and entertaining tourists linguistically realised?

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a corpus-assisted approach (Partington, Duguid, and Taylor 2013) to analyse how the social actors involved in witch hunts are linguistically represented in tourism discourse through two case studies: Salem (USA) and Triora (Italy). Salem and Triora were selected as case studies because they exemplify two markedly different models of witch-hunt heritage tourism. Salem is a well-known witch-trials site: the trials date back to 1692 and the city is a popular tourist destination welcoming over one million visitors annually, especially during the Halloween season and the Haunted Happenings Festival,[1] an October, Halloween-themed celebration. Salem highly relies on its connection with witchcraft, making it an example of commodified dark tourism (Sharpley 2009). Differently from Salem, Triora is a small-scale heritage site where trials took place between 1587-1589, and its tourism is more closely integrated with local folklore and landscape, as well as with regional agro-tourism, including its location within the Parco Alpi Liguri.

Two types of websites were examined for each site: the official tourism website and a museum website. This choice ensured that both promotional (tourism offices) and historical (museum) perspectives were included in the dataset. The websites comprised in the corpus are *Destination Salem* and *Triora da scoprire* alongside the *Salem Witch Museum* and *Museo*

di Triora Etnografico e della Stregoneria. In Salem, different museums have sections dedicated to witch trials, but I chose the Salem Witch Museum, as its mission explicitly references giving a voice to the victims of the witch hunts, unlike other museums with a wider scope (e.g., the Peabody Essex Museum). Similarly, the Haunted Happenings website was excluded due to its event-specific nature, which falls outside the study's interest in year-round institutional discourse. All English-language webpages from the selected websites referring to 'witch hunts' were downloaded for the analysis, excluding dynamic pages such as blogs. The resulting small corpora comprise 7,356 tokens for Salem and 5,083 tokens for Triora. Given the limited size of the corpora, the findings should be understood as indicative of patterns within the specific contexts analysed, rather than generalisable to witch-hunt tourism discourse as a whole.

The analysis aimed to identify the naming practices used to represent the social actors involved in the witch hunts, with particular attention to the accused individuals. A frequency list was generated in Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al. 2014), and all lexical realisations referring to the accused were manually annotated by reading the concordance lines and grouped into lexical categories. Most lexical realisations in the data corresponded to lemma-based classes (e.g., *woman*, *witch*, *man*). However, two additional analytical categories were introduced: 'proper names' and 'other'. Proper names of historically identified victims were treated as a separate category ('proper names') to capture instances of individualisation, as distinct from collective or genericised representations (Van Leeuwen 2008). Furthermore, lexical realisations that occurred only in one corpus or could not be consistently aligned with the more frequent lemma-based categories were grouped under the label 'other'. Then, the collocational patterns of the most frequent lemmas among the lexical categories (e.g. *witch*, *woman*, etc.) were explored using the Word Sketch tool in Sketch Engine, using LogDice to measure salient lexical associations, particularly modifiers. Finally, the concordance lines of the lexical realisations were examined qualitatively to analyse their evaluative patterns in context.

The qualitative analysis of the concordance lines explored evaluation both at the level of individual lexical occurrences (e.g., adjectives, adverbs, nouns, and verbs) and through lexical patterns beyond word level (Hunston 2010). More specifically, evaluation was qualitatively examined through the ways in which social actors were described and qualified, focusing on premodification and surrounding linguistic patterns, and was interpreted along a positive–negative continuum (evaluative polarity), grounded in the basic 'good-bad' parameter (Hunston and Thompson 2000). Further attention was paid to stance markers, particularly hedges and other markers of authorial positioning, which signal degrees of commitment, distance, or alignment with historically contested labels (Hyland 2005). The qualitative interpretation also refers to the theoretical background discussed in the previous section, particularly focusing on how the tension between historical commemoration and more spectacularising forms of

representation is linguistically conveyed (Sharpley 2009; Thelen 2024; Stone and Morton 2022).

The results include a quantitative overview of the naming practices of the accused with a qualitative analysis of modifier patterns and concordance lines, focusing on evaluation and stance. Frequencies were normalised per ten thousand tokens.

Representing the Accused: An Overview

The quantitative analysis provides an overview of the naming practices used to represent the accused individuals in the two corpora. Figure 1 below shows the distribution of the lexical categories in the Salem and Triora corpora.

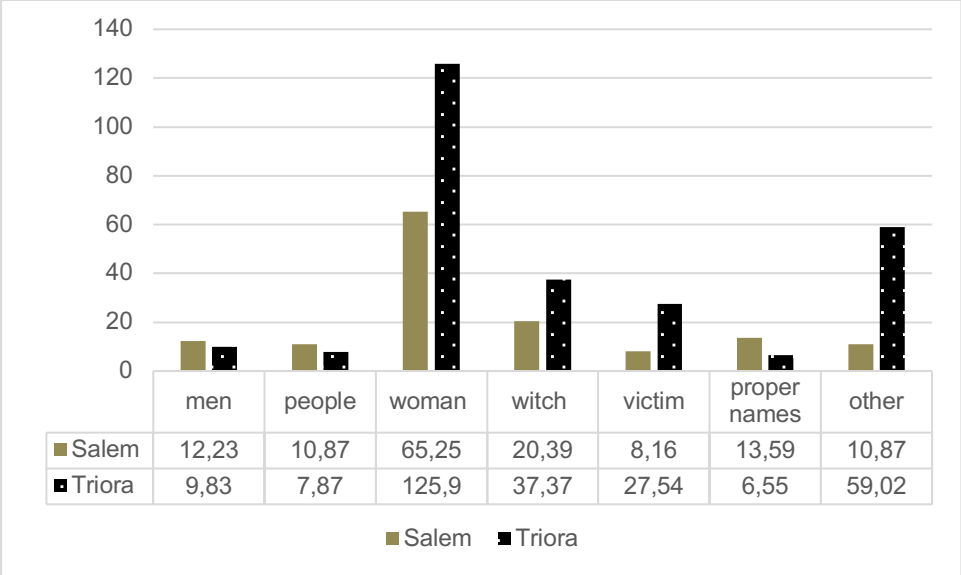


Figure 1. Lexical representations of the accused individuals in the corpora

Figure 1 shows that the most preferred linguistic representation of the accused actors is 'woman' in both corpora. It occurs with a frequency of 65.25 in the Salem corpus and 125.9 in the Triora corpus. Its more frequent use in the Triora corpus might suggest an attempt to represent the victims of the witch hunts as they were — women accused of having magical powers – rather than through a more overtly magical lens.

The noun 'witch' is quite recurrent in both corpora, specifically 20.39 in the Salem corpus, and 37.37 in the Triora one. Although expected, the frequent use of 'witch' has crucial discursive implications, as it can be considered a metonymy whereby the accused individuals are referred to through the accusation itself. This may reproduce the historical categorisation used during the trials and present the accusation in terms of an established identity rather than a contested claim. Unsurprisingly, as will be shown in the following section, this representation

co-occurs with hedging markers that soften the proposition of the accusation and signal distance from the label.

In the Triora corpus, the picture is somewhat different, as the category 'other' is more frequent than 'witch'. This signals greater lexical variety in the representation of the accused individuals. For instance, the Triora corpus presents expressions such as "mythical figures", "a non-existent enemy", "mistress of the herbs" etc. In the Salem corpus, the 'other' category is one of the less frequent ones (10.87) and comprises terms such as 'slave'.

Other lexical realisations in the Salem corpus include references to social actors as 'men' (12.23) and 'people' (10.87). The latter is mainly used as a collective reference to those accused in the trials, for example "between 150-200 people were jailed for witchcraft". In the Triora corpus, 'people' and 'men' are significantly less frequent. A further difference between the datasets is the use of proper names, which occur more frequently in the Salem corpus (13.59) than in the Triora corpus (6.55). This suggests a stronger tendency in the Salem corpus to individualise — in Van Leuween's sense (2008) — the victims by referring to specific historical figures, often accompanied by brief accounts of their personal stories. By contrast, the Triora corpus seems to represent the accused more frequently through generalised or collective categories. Lastly, 'victim' is used to describe people accused in the trials in both corpora. This term is considerably more frequent in the Triora corpus (27.54) compared to the Salem corpus (8.16), suggesting a stronger emphasis on the victimisation of the accused people in the Triora corpus.

The following qualitative section focuses on the modifiers identified in the word sketches of the most frequent labels in both corpora, namely 'woman', 'witch', and 'victim'.

Qualitative Analysis

This section provides a qualitative analysis of the concordance lines and collocational patterns (word sketches) associated with the most frequent naming practices discussed in the previous section: the lemmas *witch*, *woman*, and *victim*. Table 1 below provides an overview of the most frequent modifiers and lexical associations observed for each term, which serve as the starting point for the discussion. Each lemma is then examined in turn, with a focus on the evaluative patterns emerging from its concordance lines.

Lemmas	Modifiers in the Salem corpus	Modifiers in the Triora corpus
witch	so-called, alleged, education, supposed, alleged, stereotypical, word	diabolic, alleged, demonic
woman	poor, elderly, ornery, confused, ill, old, [number]	evil, local, unknown, people, enterprising
victim	innocent, unsuspecting	innocent, hunting

Table 1. Modifiers of the lemmas *witch*, *woman*, *victim.*

Table 1 shows that the lemma *witch* is modified by various evaluative adjectives in the two corpora. First, in the Triora corpus, *witch* is frequently preceded by negatively evaluative adjectives, such as 'diabolic' and 'demonic', directly reproducing the language of accusation and moral judgement historically associated with the persecution of alleged witches. Despite this tendency, both corpora show the use of hedging modifiers preceding the term 'witch', which distances the author's stance from these accusatory labels reported in the sources. These hedging premodifiers include expressions such as 'so-called', 'supposed', 'alleged' and 'stereotypical' in the Salem corpus and 'alleged' in the Triora corpus. These patterns convey distance from the historical use of the term 'witch' to describe women accused of witchcraft. This can be observed in the following examples[2]:

1) Spectators gathered to watch the event unfold and lined the riverbank to see what would befall the **alleged Witch** of Pungo (*Salem Witch Museum*);
2) **So-called witches** were often victims of superstition, ignorance, or malice (*Salem Witch Museum*);
3) Here, within the walls that saw the **alleged witches** of Triora held in captivity, you will learn about the properties and objects that, around the world, serve those who go beyond the powers of Man, black or white, positive or negative (*Museo di Triora*);
4) The other rooms besides displaying old trial documents also host life-size reproductions of local **"witches"** in their daily activities (*Triora da scoprire*);

The examples above show how the authors distance their stance from the word 'witch'. In the Salem corpus, this distance is conveyed through various lexical hedging markers such as 'alleged', example 1, and 'so-called', example 2. In example 2, this is reinforced by the statement that such individuals were "victims of superstition, ignorance, or malice", which strengthens the critical stance towards the allegations and presents the trials as a form of injustice.

In the Triora corpus, authorial distance is also present but is expressed through slightly different linguistic choices. For instance, the modifier 'alleged' in example 3 hedges the term

'witch', but it co-occurs with references to objects associated with magical practices (e.g., "beyond the powers of Man"). This suggests that attempts at historical accuracy coexist with lexical patterns that evoke a magical dimension, thereby appealing to the 'magical gaze' (Lovell 2019) associated with witch-hunt tourism. In example 4, distance is not realised through premodification but through the use of quotation marks, which signal that the term 'witches' reflects a historical label rather than a category endorsed by the author.

A further concordance line of the term 'witch' shows how, in the Triora corpus, there is a negotiation between hedged and folkloric representations of the trials:

5) Since the mid 1500s it has become known as "The Village of the **Witches**" due to its tragic past (*Triora da scoprire*);

In example 5, Triora is described as *"*The Village of the Witches" due to its tragic past. The reference to a tragic past acknowledges the historical dimension of persecution, but the description of the village as "the village of the witches" highlights a folkloric imagery of the destination centred on a magical atmosphere. Hence, the website seems to leverage this magical imagery to attract visitors. In the Salem corpus, no such explicit place-based identification can be found at the linguistic level. However, this does not mean that stereotypical representations are entirely absent; despite their limited realisation at the verbal level, they are present at the visual level in Salem, as noticed by Caiazzo (2020). From a linguistic perspective, this type of imagery is more extensively proposed in the Triora corpus:

6) Even a single **broom** on a door in Triora is a memory. As you enter the house, then, there may be a mirror in front of you, against the **witches**: the **witch** is afraid of herself (*Triora da scoprire*);
7) In one of the barns you can find a beautiful bàgiua (**witch**) inside a cell (*Triora da scoprire*);
8) The other rooms […] also host life-size reproductions of local "**witches**" in their daily activities (*Triora da scoprire*);

In example 6, everyday objects such as brooms are presented as stereotypical symbols linked to witches, contributing to the magical appeal of the destination. The reference to folkloric beliefs (e.g., mirrors used "against the witches") further normalises elements of superstition. In this case, the website incorporates folkloric beliefs without hedging, thereby promoting the representation of Triora as a tourist destination associated with magic. Examples 7 and 8 suggest a spectacularised representation of the trials. In example 7, the description of "a beautiful bàgiua (witch) inside a cell" is particularly significant, as the positive evaluation conveyed through 'beautiful' aestheticises a scene of imprisonment. In this sense, the representation aligns with Stone and Morton's (2022) observations on the beautification of dead or victimised women in dark tourism, where female suffering may be transformed into an object of visual consumption. Similarly, example 8 refers to the "life-size reproductions of local

'witches'", which, although hedged through quotation marks, suggest an immersive and theatrical way of staging the past. In this sense, the website presents the museum experience as one in which persecution is reworked into a visually engaging tourism narrative, recalling the experiential staging observed by DeRosa (2009).

In addition to the term 'witch', the corpora also frame the victims of witch hunts through the lemma *woman*. As shown in Table 1, in the Salem corpus, modifiers of *woman* include 'poor', 'confused', 'ornery', 'elderly', and 'old' and emphasise the vulnerability and marginalisation of the accused. The examples below show how the accused women are represented as socially fragile and as passive subjects of persecution:

9) She appears to have been a **confused** and **ornery older woman** (*Salem Witch Museum*);
10) Instead, the **poor**, **confused woman** was likely a perfect scapegoat to explain a confusing sickness in a troubled family, during a time of great fear (*Salem Witch Museum*);

Example 9 refers to the case of Goody Glover, a woman accused of practising witchcraft, who is described as a confused and elderly woman who behaved irritably. In example 10, the expression "the poor, confused woman" constructs a prototypical representation of those accused of witchcraft as vulnerable and socially marginalised individuals.

By contrast, the Triora corpus includes modifiers of *woman* such as 'enterprising', 'unknown', 'local', and 'evil', which frame women in a more varied way, ranging from neutral or descriptive identification (local, unknown) to explicitly evaluative or moral judgement (evil). This can be noticed in the following examples:

11) The only knowledge of folk medicine has come down to us, almost intact, despite the condemnation of remedies by **lonely** or **enterprising women**, by **obscure** and **silent figures**, then often identified as an underhand danger to the Community (*Triora Museum*);
12) In a letter to his seniors he claimed it necessary to conduct an inquisition […] against **evil women** referring to an important preceding phenomenon of which there were only traces left in human memory (*Triora da scoprire*);

In example 11, the modifier 'enterprising' portrays these women as active agents involved in preserving traditional herbal knowledge. However, this relatively positive evaluation co-occurs with descriptions such as "obscure and silent figures" and "danger to the Community", suggesting that such practices were retrospectively constructed as suspicious. Here, the website does not explicitly hedge the sensational description of the victims, presumably in order to construct a form of magical imagery that aligns with tourists' expectations. Unlike the Salem corpus, where vulnerability is foregrounded, the Triora corpus presents a more

ambivalent representation in which women are associated both with medical knowledge and with potential threat, thereby appealing to the magical lens sought by visitors (Lovell 2019).

In example 12, the expression “evil women” occurs within reported speech from a historical source. Here, the strongly negative evaluation does not represent the narrator’s own stance but reproduces the voice of the historical actor, thereby signalling distance through mediated attribution. Despite the emphasis on women’s medical knowledge, the Triora corpus, especially the local tourism office website, presents strong magical and folkloric associations, exposing a negotiation between historical interpretation and tourism-oriented representation (e.g., “there are still women who can heal by simply using their hands and whispering some incomprehensible words. Some say they can still abbaggiurare (curse) [...] and it might be true […],” (*Triora da scoprire*).

Alongside these processes of spectacularisation, both corpora also represent the people accused of witchcraft simply with the lemma *victim*, often premodified by the adjective ‘innocent’. This representation highlights both the historical injustice and the commemorative dimension of the trials, as shown in the following example:

13) The mission of the Salem Witch Museum is to be the voice of the **innocent** victims of witch hunts from 1692 to the present day. (*Salem Witch Museum*)

Example 13 explicitly references the mission of the Salem Witch Museum, which is that of remembering the innocent victims of trials, thereby constructing the institution as a mediator of memory and moral interpretation. A similar pattern can be observed in the concordance lines of the lemma *victim* in the Triora museum:

14) Documenting the world of hunting **victims** is the challenge and the aim of this section (*Triora Museum*);

Example 14 explicitly references the role of the Triora museum dedicated to the witch hunts in educating and commemorating the victims. Hence, it positions the institution as an educational space transmitting knowledge about the events. However, this contrasts with the emotionally charged representations of the victims in the tourism office website:

15) As **innocent victims** of the first holocaust in European history these **victims** remind us of how fanaticism and obscurantism are not alien to us, on the contrary they are a relevant part of our past (*Triora da scoprire*);

In example 15, the victims are described in strongly evaluative and emotionally charged terms. The use of the expression “first holocaust in European history” conveys a strong moral judgement of the events and frames the victims as symbols of broader historical injustice.

In conclusion, the analysis shows a balance between historical and tourism-oriented discourses, realised through different linguistic strategies. The Salem corpus foregrounds vulnerability and injustice, while the Triora corpus combines distancing features with more

explicit folkloric and magical representations, particularly in the tourism website, resulting in a closer overlap between commemorative and more spectacularising forms of representation.

Conclusion

This case study has explored how witch hunts are linguistically represented in the institutional tourism discourse of two sites, Salem in the USA and Triora in Italy. The analysis was conducted on the official tourism and museum websites and specifically focused on the lexical representations and evaluative patterns used to represent the accused individuals in the two small corpora.

The quantitative overview of the results shows that the lemma *woman* is the most preferred expression to name the accused in both corpora, highlighting the gendered nature of the trials. At the same time, the results also show significant differences between the corpora. The Salem corpus shows a stronger tendency towards individualisation, referring to specific historical figures using proper names and emphasising their vulnerability through evaluative modifiers such as 'poor', 'confused', and 'elderly'. The Triora corpus, by contrast, relies more on collective and genericised representations and displays a greater lexical variety, especially in the category 'other'. It also uses *victim* more frequently, which might show a tendency to frame these actors in commemorative terms at the lexical level. However, this tendency coexists with forms of representation that recall folkloric and magical meanings.

The qualitative analysis shows that both corpora negotiate between historical accuracy and tourism promotion, but through different discursive patterns. Both sites employ hedging markers — such as 'alleged', 'so-called', and scare quotes — to convey distance towards the term 'witch'. This might signal a shared critical stance towards the historical validity of the accusatory label and towards the injustice of the trials it encodes. At the same time, the analysis also shows that Triora more frequently combines hedging markers with folkloric and supernatural representations, especially in the tourism office website. This distribution suggests that hedging devices are not evenly deployed across the Triora corpus: they occur more consistently in the museum data, whereas the tourism office more readily juxtaposes commemorative language with largely unhedged folkloric and sensational lexis. In the Salem corpus, by contrast, hedging markers occur consistently within museum discourse itself. Taken together, these findings confirm previous research on witch-hunt tourism as a field marked by a tension between tragic history and entertainment (Sharpley 2009; Thelen 2024), and they support Lovell's (2019) view that such sites are often experienced through a 'magical gaze'. The analysis shows that institutional discourse may anticipate this gaze, responding to and reinforcing tourists' expectations while simultaneously reproducing them through the linguistic construction of magical and folkloric imagery. Furthermore, the beautification of imprisoned women, the incorporation of folkloric beliefs without hedging, and the emphasis on immersive

museum displays indicate forms of spectacularisation in which persecution is aestheticised and reworked into engaging tourism experiences, aligning with Stone and Morton's (2022) discussion of the aestheticisation of gendered violence in dark tourism. By contrast, Salem, despite its strong commodified association with witchcraft already noticed in the literature (DeRosa 2009; Caiazzo 2020), tends to realise this tension less explicitly at the verbal level, maintaining a more consistent emphasis on vulnerability, injustice, and memorialisation.

The findings show that the tension between the narration of a tragic past and entertainment observed in previous ethnographic studies (Sharpley 2009; Thelen 2024) is also reflected in the language of the institutional websites, especially in the case of Triora. Interestingly, despite the well-documented spectacular nature of the tourist experience in Salem (DeRosa 2009; Caiazzo 2020), this particular aspect of the tourist experience is less evident in the language of the institutional websites. This could signal a more cautious use of language in official channels, where sensational aspects are restrained at the verbal level, even when the experiences offered are theatrical. More broadly, the study supports research on tourism discourse showing that institutional websites are not neutral informational platforms, but spaces in which difficult pasts are selectively framed and evaluated (Dann 1996; E. Federici 2024).

The study also presents some limitations. First, the small size of the corpora limits the analysis to a small number of specialised cases and does not allow for generalisations. Additionally, this study only focuses on verbal content. In future studies, a larger corpus could be compiled to include a wide variety of witch-hunt heritage sites across Europe, and a multimodal approach could be integrated to investigate the interplay between visual and verbal modes in creating images of destinations for witch-trial sites.

Notes

[1] Data retrieved from https://www.hauntedhappenings.org/about/.
[2] The lexical patterns discussed in the analysis are highlighted in bold for emphasis in the examples below.

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Lo Spettro del Brigante. Il Museo Lombroso come caso di 'colonial hauntology'

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ABSTRACT

The article aims to demonstrate that the Lombroso Museum in Turin is an emblematic case of a hauntological-colonial museum. In an attempt to scientifically rehabilitate the image of Cesare Lombroso, the Museum produces a rupture with the historical and political effects of his work concerning the *Southern Question*. In the first part, we will examine the historical and political role of Lombroso's work, understanding his 'scientific error' as the origin of an epistemological dispositive of racialization, ethnic criminalization, and segregation, which operated particularly in the decades following Italian unification, in the context of the Italian state's conflict with peasant revolts in Southern Italy. This investigation will provide the basis for the subsequent analysis of the museum's exhibition, revealing its spectrological dispositif, which simultaneously performs an exorcism of the brigand's body and a revitalization of the spectre of the Turin-based scientist. This occurs in two ways. The first is through a narrative construction based on the pretext of scientific neutrality and its intrinsic fallibility — "atavism as a scientific error." The second, by contrast, involves the use of a macabre aesthetic register, aimed at resignifying the value of the museum's specimens and removing them from the domain of their historicity. From this latter perspective, the Lombroso Museum may be understood as part of the broader phenomenon of *dark tourism*.

Keywords:

Lombroso, museo, 'colonial hauntology', questione meridionale, brigantaggio

Il museo coloniale come museo spettrale

Il seguente contributo prende avvio dalla categoria di "colonial hauntology" impiegata da Giulia Grechi in diversi studi per significare un processo di selezione, censura e, allo stesso tempo, di esposizione e risignificazione della memoria collettiva di cui i musei coloniali sono lo specchio. Lo Spettro in questo caso significa al contempo 'spectrum,' 'spectaculum' e fantasma (Grechi 2021). Il manufatto del museo coloniale possiederebbe la doppia funzione di evocazione spettrale di un passato rimosso e di esposizione del suo contenuto filtrato dallo 'spettro' epistemico-istituzionale. La Hauntologia — la logica dello spettro — viene teorizzata da Jacques Derrida per la prima volta nella sua opera *Spettri di Marx* (Derrida 1994). Per

Derrida lo spettro è prima di tutto *hantise*, ovvero frequentazione ossessiva che invade lo spazio del proprio, dell'*oikos*, convocando ciò che vi era stato escluso e ostracizzato. In questo senso, il museo è una delle forme che la modernità ha istituito tramite cui possiamo esercitare il nostro diritto al lutto collettivo, il nostro tentativo di riconciliarci o di rifiutare il dialogo con i nostri spettri. È un tentativo di chiedere perdono[1] o di chiedere giustizia,[2] ma anche la volontà di reprimere, di cancellare, di soffocare i fantasmi della nostra storia, di esorcizzarli disponendo le loro figure secondo un'ortografia del *quieto vivere* e un'ortopedia che attutisce il dolore senza comprenderne le cause.[3] Da questo punto di vista, si può affermare che il Museo nazionale è coloniale quando vuole mettere a tacere gli spettri, quando vuole catturarli per asservirli ai suoi fini e scacciarli, esorcizzarli, dimenticarli per sempre. Il museo coloniale ha come suo scopo l'oblio dei morti e il trionfo dei vivi, e lo realizza attraverso la trasmissione di un'eredità e di un racconto specifico, quello dei vincitori.

In questo articolo analizziamo il Museo Lombroso e l'eredità dissonante che esso sceglie di tramandare. A tal fine metteremo in evidenza il quadro storiografico all'interno del quale la figura di Lombroso emerge, e quelli che, a partire dalla ricostruzione del dibattito post-unitario, sembrano essere i rimossi che l'allestimento del dispositivo museale evidenzia. Tale dispositivo si inscrive all'interno della logica del *Dark Tourism*, muovendosi lungo due delle sue traiettorie teoriche fondamentali. Da un lato, l'allestimento risponde a precise istanze politico-istituzionali di gestione del patrimonio (*heritage management*), manipolando la memoria attraverso una selezione espositiva che mira a neutralizzare il conflitto storico e a produrre una narrazione egemonica e normalizzante (Tunbridge, Ashworth 1996). Dall'altro, esso sfrutta l'impatto emotivo e pedagogico della morte esposta, insistendo sulla presenza di resti umani reali per catturare lo sguardo del visitatore; un utilizzo del macabro che, tuttavia, rischia di anestetizzare la comprensione critica e l'elaborazione cognitiva attraverso lo shock visivo del resto biologico (Stone 2012; Martini e Buda 2020). In questa duplice piega si interpone, da una parte, la riabilitazione della figura di Cesare Lombroso, costantemente evocata e reintegrata entro la storia della scienza nazionale; dall'altra, la forclusione della figura del brigante, privata del suo significato storico-politico e ridotta a pura presenza residuale, a crudo reperto anatomico. Il brigante, infatti, emerge come il perfetto spettro coloniale: un corpo iper-esposto e una storia radicalmente rimossa, la cui marginalizzazione spettacolarizzata contribuisce a oscurare il legame genetico tra antropologia criminale e questione meridionale come forma di colonialismo interno.

L'errore come dispositivo epistemico-politico

Per comprendere come le logiche del *Dark Tourism* operino oggi all'interno dello spazio museale, oscillando tra la neutralizzazione istituzionale del conflitto e lo shock viscerale davanti ai resti umani, è necessario, in primo luogo, decostruire la matrice genetica e l'archivio

teorico di questa eredità dissonante. La figura di Lombroso si intreccia così, inevitabilmente, con quella del brigantaggio meridionale del periodo post-unitario. Quest'ultima è storicamente divisa tra chi individua le sue cause nei costumi, nella cultura, nella biologia o nell'arretratezza economica endemica[4] del Mezzogiorno e chi, al contrario, constata che gli sconvolgimenti socio-economici causati dall'unità d'Italia e il carattere discriminatorio e repressivo dell'impianto legislativo di quei decenni abbiano determinato in larga parte la connotazione del fenomeno (Fortunato 1911, Salvemini 1955, Gramsci 1966 [1949], Molfese 1964). Nel testo *L'unità d'Italia. Nascita di una colonia,* Nicola Zitara raccoglie le indagini economiche condotte nei primi decenni dell'unità d'Italia (2026), per ricostruire la trasformazione radicale delle forme di produzione e riproduzione nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia. Senza negare le condizioni di arretratezza industriali e la condizione di miseria e di iniquità delle campagne del sistema borbonico (Zitara 2026, 21), l'autore dimostra che gli effetti delle scelte politiche successive all'annessione del Sud produssero una crisi economica generalizzata e una migrazione di massa catastrofica (Zitara 2026, 49, 131, 143). Con la categoria di "sottosviluppo" (Lacoste 1958, 97), Zitara forniva un sostrato di analisi economica alla classica tesi gramsciana sulla questione meridionale:

> La 'miseria' nel Mezzogiorno era 'inspiegabile' storicamente per le masse popolari del Nord; esse non capivano che l'unità non era avvenuta su una base di uguaglianza, ma come egemonia del Nord sul Mezzogiorno nel rapporto territoriale città-campagna, cioè che il Nord concretamente era una 'piovra' che si arricchiva alle spese del Sud e che il suo incremento economico-industriale era un rapporto diretto con l'impoverimento dell'economia e dell'agricoltura meridionale. (Gramsci 1975, 79)

Nonostante i tentativi recenti di confinare il fenomeno del brigantaggio post-unitario ad un'origine totalmente autonomista e lealista (Pinto 2019), restano ancora valide le analisi degli studiosi che ne hanno sottolineato le ragioni sociali, economiche e identitarie in continuità con la tesi del 'sottosviluppo'. Inserendosi nella prospettiva gramsciana e riprendendo gli studi di Hobsbawm sul banditismo sociale (2002), l'opera di Molfese (1964) intende la causa dei movimenti contadini post-unitari nella complessa intersezione tra crisi economica dovuta all'unificazione (Molfese 1964, 46-47), reazione borbonica alla conquista e, soprattutto, incapacità da parte dello Stato italiano di proporre una soluzione alla questione della miseria contadina che fosse alternativa alla feroce repressione (Molfese 1964, 36, 264-271). L'appropriazione politico-militare da parte dei residui del regime borbonico operata sul movimento, soprattutto nei primi anni del fenomeno (1860-1863), secondo l'autore, fu resa possibile dal tradimento delle promesse garibaldine riguardo la riforma agraria che avevano anzitempo garantito l'adesione di massa di parte della popolazione meridionale alla campagna delle camicie rosse (Molfese 1964, 338). Riguardo la sua connotazione storico-politica, Molfese descrive il brigantaggio "come la manifestazione estrema, armata, di un movimento rivendicativo e di protesta che si eleva fino a rozze forme di lotta di classe" (Molfese 1964, 343). Come sottolinea Hobsbawm, per altro, nelle sue variegate forme, il brigantaggio presenta

come tratto caratteristico l'essere espressione della tensione intrinseca al processo di modernizzazione e di superamento del sistema feudale (Hobsbawm 2002, 13). Questo passaggio cruciale dello sviluppo del capitalismo occidentale, in cui lo Stato-Nazione si fa attore protagonista, avviene in maniera più o meno graduale, più o meno violenta e conduce con sé implicazioni più o meno coloniali a seconda dei casi.[5] Nel caso del Mezzogiorno, la transizione da un sistema prevalentemente feudale, con una ragione economica ispirata ai principi della regolamentazione assolutistica (Molfese 1964, 47), ad un'economia nazionale di mercato ha portato sconvolgimenti notevoli e, soprattutto, ha coinciso con un rapido processo di assimilazione culturale e nazionale, fino a quel momento quasi totalmente estraneo alle masse contadine del sud (Galasso 2006, De Martino 1948).

Unificazione nazionale ed esplosione del brigantaggio sociale e politico fanno dunque parte di un unico intreccio storico che, secondo la letteratura, su questo quasi del tutto allineata, ha comportato un dispiegamento ingente della violenza statale e una profonda spaccatura traumatica all'interno della storia italiana (Martucci 1999). Pur rifiutando ogni nostalgia e mitizzazione del passato borbonico, quindi, è impossibile non tenere conto di come, nel crocevia storico dell'unità d'Italia, la repressione del brigantaggio e la sua normalizzazione in seno ad una nuova società nazionale abbiano dovuto dotarsi di specifici strumenti legali, retorici, militari e politici finalizzati a tale esito. È il caso dell'impianto legislativo che ruotò intorno alla famigerata Legge Pica.[6] A detta di molti studiosi, la Legge Pica configurava un'eccezionalità normativa che rese possibili fucilazioni arbitrarie, arresti di massa e, più in generale, una vera e propria criminalizzazione collettiva (Martucci 1999). Lo stesso obiettivo che la Legge Pica perseguiva sul piano materiale veniva assunto dalla cospicua e influentissima letteratura dell'antropologia e della criminologia positivista italiana, raccolta esplicitamente attorno alla figura di Cesare Lombroso (Ferri 1884, Garofalo 1885, Niceforo 1898). Sin dalle prime opere, l'impianto teorico dell'antropologia criminale di Lombroso ha nell'evoluzionismo e nel biologismo razziale la sua premessa epistemologica e metodologica fondamentale. Nell'opera *In Calabria* (1898), Lombroso esamina i sintomi dell'arretratezza socio-economica del sud, così come del brigantaggio, a partire dalla composizione etnico-razziale del territorio:

> Quando si pensa il malandrinaggio in Sicilia si concentra, quasi tutto, in quella famosa valle della Conca d'Oro, dove le rapaci tribù Berbere e Semite ebbero le prime e più tenaci dimore, e dove il tipo anatomico, i costumi, la politica e la morale conservarono un'impronta araba, […] [il malandrinaggio] non suscita il ribrezzo né l'avversione che suole in popoli assai meno intelligenti, ma più ricchi di sangue ariano, anche della stessa Sicilia, p. es. di Catania, Messina. (Lombroso 1898, 53-54)

La grande 'intuizione' che formalizza la teoria dell'atavismo criminale viene poi esposta nella sua celeberrima opera *L'uomo criminale* (Lombroso 2013 [1876]) a partire dall'analisi craniologica del 'brigante' Vilella. Il comportamento criminale, per Lombroso, equivarrebbe alla regressione a dei caratteri ancestrali, selvaggi ed animaleschi ancora presenti geneticamente

nell'essere umano (Lombroso 2013 [1876], 14-15). Tali caratteri atavici si differenziano per un criterio razziale tale per cui, ad ogni razza, corrisponderebbe un certo grado di propensione alla criminalità (Lombroso 2013 [1876], 130, 273). Il paradigma lombrosiano dell'atavismo divenne in brevissimo tempo molto influente nel dibattito intellettuale italiano, in conformità con lo sviluppo scientifico europeo sugli stessi temi (Broca 1861, Morel 1857). Nel caso italiano la ragione di questo successo veniva interpretata, ancora da Gramsci, in questi termini:

> Il popolano dell'Alta Italia pensava invece che, se il Mezzogiorno non progrediva dopo essere stato liberato dalle pastoie che allo sviluppo moderno opponeva il regime borbonico, ciò significava che la base della miseria non erano esterne, da ricercarsi nelle condizioni economico-politiche obiettive, ma interne, innate nella popolazione meridionale, tanto più che era radicata la persuasione della grande ricchezza naturale del terreno: non rimaneva che una spiegazione, l'incapacità organica degli uomini, la loro barbarie, la loro inferiorità biologica. (Gramsci 1975, 79)

Furono i discepoli di Lombroso che svilupparono questa tesi nelle sue intrinseche possibilità di applicazione antropologica, politologica e sociologica per l'interpretazione dell'arretratezza del Mezzogiorno. Soprattutto l'opera di Niceforo *L'Italia barbara contemporanea* (1898), come ricostruisce dettagliatamente Vito Teti in *La razza maledetta* (2025), dà vita appunto al mito della 'razza maledetta' del Mezzogiorno, immaginata come ostinatamente contraria alla modernizzazione, strutturalmente votata alla criminalità, culturalmente incapace di salire a pieno titolo sulla locomotiva della civiltà (Teti 2025, 41-47). Oltre a ricostruire la filiazione lombrosiana delle opere dei positivisti razzisti a cavallo tra la fine del XIX e l'inizio del XX secolo (Teti 2025, 28-35), Teti riporta dei casi concreti, e degli studi in merito, che dimostrano l'influenza che queste teorie ebbero sulla psichiatria forense e di riflesso sulle scelte della magistratura in ambito giudiziario (2025, 78-89). Il cosiddetto 'errore' scientifico di Lombroso, quindi, pareva funzionare egregiamente come dispositivo epistemico-politico di segregazione e razzializzazione, da un lato giustificando e rafforzando le leggi speciali repressive del brigantaggio, dall'altro fornendo categorie socio-antropologiche che rinvigorirono la visione stereotipata del 'tipo meridionale', purtroppo ancora oggi diffusa sia nel senso comune sia nella propaganda politica.[7] Da questo punto di vista, ancora Teti sottolinea che il presunto carattere 'malinconico' dei meridionali, sempre al centro degli studi positivisti, offriva una sintesi efficace per la neutralizzazione della capacità rivendicativa meridionalista. Non casualmente la melanconia, come attributo etnico, era associata alla pigrizia e all'indolenza — che spiegavano il sottosviluppo atavico e il suo prosieguo nonostante i miracoli della modernizzazione italiana — ed anche alla tendenza alla 'lamentela' direttamente mutuabile nell'accusa, piuttosto ricorrente al giorno d'oggi, di 'vittimismo'.[8] Grazie alla recente opera di Livio Sansone, *La Galassia Lombroso* (2022), siamo oggi, inoltre, in grado di affermare che tale paradigma epistemico-politico sperimentato con successo per la neutralizzazione politica della questione meridionale, fu esportato con esiti e risultati ancora più significativi nel contesto sudamericano per alimentare la segregazione e la razzializzazione delle culture indigene

(Sansone 2022). La strategia che sta dietro alla sua efficacia e la sua estrema duttilità per le esigenze di controllo e di disciplinamento sociale sta proprio nell'equivoco della neutralità scientifica impiegata surrettiziamente per introdurre una normatività di condotta e di punizione collettiva. Ancora Gramsci ci ricorda infatti come "queste opinioni [i pregiudizi razziali] furono consolidate dai sociologi del positivismo […] assumendo la forza di 'verità scientifica' in un tempo di superstizione della scienza" (Gramsci 1975, 80).

Il museo degli e(o)rrori

Nonostante le evidenti filiazioni del pensiero lombrosiano dalle teorie discriminatorie e razzializzanti nei confronti del Mezzogiorno d'Italia, il Museo di Antropologia Criminale Cesare Lombroso, inaugurato a Torino nel 2009 a partire dalle collezioni ottocentesche dello scienziato (Montaldo e Tappero 2009), opera una complessa strategia di contenimento narrativo. Questa analisi si concentra su organizzazione dello spazio, disposizione degli oggetti, uso di specifiche 'cornici'[9] interpretative (Derrida 1978), scelte espositive che orientano la lettura del percorso. Più che limitarsi a conservare una collezione, il museo appare attraversato da una persistente presenza lombrosiana: uno spettro che si manifesta nelle modalità stesse della sua messa in scena. A tal proposito, il museo propone una ricostruzione apparentemente attenta del contesto culturale dell'epoca. Questa strategia tende a funzionare come forma di tutela: Lombroso, presentato come 'figlio del suo tempo', risulta parzialmente sottratto a una critica radicale. Le tecnologie audiovisive giocano un ruolo centrale in questa operazione (Cilli, Malerba e Giacobini 2024, 21-28). Non si limitano a una funzione didattica, ma contribuiscono a rendere coerente la narrazione della figura di Lombroso e della sua eredità scientifica. Già nell'atrio, uno schermo mostra un documentario (realizzato tra il 1906-1908 e frutto della collaborazione tra il neuropsichiatra Camillo Negro e il regista Roberto Omegna) con pazienti neurologici e psichiatrici dell'Ospedale Cottolengo, introducendo immediatamente la visitatrice e il visitatore all'oggetto di studio lombrosiano: la devianza. I pannelli pongono domande: "chi è il criminale? chi è il genio? che cosa distingue la normalità dalla devianza? chi è il folle? siamo liberi o siamo automi condizionati dalla genetica e dall'ambiente?" Queste sono presentate ancora come attuali, senza porre la sola decisiva domanda circa il perché Lombroso abbia individuato proprio quei 'tipi' umani come oggetti di analisi.

La prima sala, uno spazio circolare dotato di sedute, suggerisce una dimensione di discussione e valutazione. Il centro della sala è occupato da un video (Cilli et al., 2016) in cui compaiono un giovane entusiasta del progresso e un interlocutore più scettico. Il dialogo mette in scena le tensioni dell'Italia post-unitaria, evidenziando il divario tra Nord e Sud. La nozione stessa di progresso viene problematizzata, offrendo una chiave di lettura per quanto seguirà nel percorso espositivo. Il video si conclude con una rottura della quarta parete, uno dei

personaggi si rivolge al pubblico: “buon progresso!” Questo elemento introduce una dimensione riflessiva, ma lascia aperta una questione fondamentale: quale ruolo viene attribuito a Lombroso all’interno di questa narrazione? Nel dialogo egli è richiamato in relazione agli studi sulla pellagra e, soprattutto, alle ricerche sul crimine, presentate come contributi alla comprensione e alla riduzione del fenomeno, senza tuttavia chiarirne le modalità concrete. Ne risulta che da un lato il contesto storico è ricostruito mettendone in luce le tensioni, dall’altro, il ruolo di Lombroso viene inscritto in una traiettoria progressiva, come se la sua attività potesse essere ricondotta a una tappa nel percorso di avanzamento della scienza.

La seconda sala, “Misurare, misurare,” introduce il contesto epistemologico entro cui si forma e opera Cesare Lombroso: il positivismo. Si legge nel pannello introduttivo posto all’ingresso della sala: “non c’è scienza senza misura”; tale affermazione rinvia a uno dei presupposti fondamentali di questo paradigma: la convinzione che la conoscenza possa essere oggettiva, neutra e fondata su dati quantificabili. L’allestimento insiste coerentemente su questo principio: gli strumenti di misurazione esposti costruiscono visivamente l’idea di una scienza fondata sui numeri e sulla precisione. In tale contesto si inserisce l’attività di Cesare Lombroso, che estende l’uso della misurazione allo studio della criminalità, nella prospettiva di individuare i tratti del ‘criminale’. La sua indagine si concentra sul corpo, considerato come superficie leggibile, e in particolare sul cranio, sede privilegiata di indizi rivelatori. Questo approccio si colloca in una tradizione scientifica che trova riferimenti in autori come Paul Broca e in Franz Joseph Gall, sostenitori dell’idea che la misurazione e l’osservazione delle forme craniche potessero rivelare caratteristiche morali e psichiche (Gall 1822-1825). Il pannello introduttivo menziona Adolphe Quetelet, presentato come colui che ha dimostrato statisticamente la diffusione del crimine. Questa indicazione resta, tuttavia, parziale: non viene esplicitato come tali studi si inserissero in un più ampio tentativo di classificazione delle popolazioni europee anche in base a presunte tendenze criminali (Quetelet 1822). In questo modo, il riferimento contribuisce a rafforzare l’idea di una tradizione scientifica neutrale, senza problematizzarne pienamente le implicazioni. L’enfasi sul rigore metodologico — si legge infatti che Lombroso “usò con rigore quasi ossessivo gli strumenti raccolti” — tende a valorizzare la dimensione scientifica della sua pratica, senza mettere sufficientemente in evidenza i limiti delle sue procedure: la selezione dei dati, la ristrettezza dei campioni e il ruolo delle ipotesi pregresse nell’orientare l’interpretazione dei risultati (Cilli, Montaldo e Sardi 2023). La sala delle misurazioni, più che limitarsi a contestualizzare il pensiero lombrosiano, sembra così riattivarne implicitamente il presupposto fondamentale: la fiducia nella possibilità di leggere nel corpo una verità oggettiva sull’individuo (figura 1).

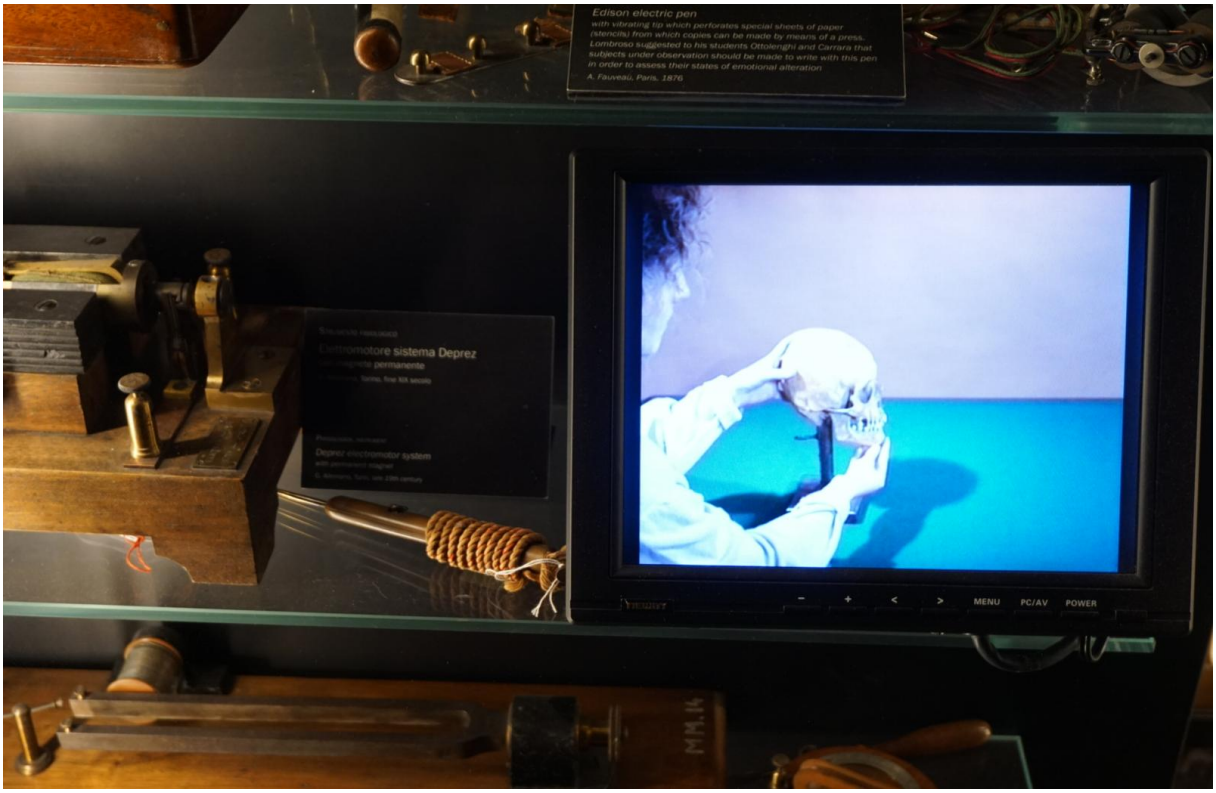


Figura 1

Il salone centrale, “Il mio museo,” costituisce il cuore dell’allestimento. Qui si intrecciano due presenze spettrali: quella, costantemente evocata, di Cesare Lombroso; e la più problematica e in larga parte rimossa presenza del brigante. Entrambe le figure si impongono fin dall’ingresso. In primo piano è esposto lo scheletro di Lombroso, collocato nel museo per sua esplicita volontà testamentaria (Cilli, Malerba e Giacobini 2024). Poco distante si trova il cranio del brigante Antonio Gasparoni, figura che, secondo la narrazione lombrosiana, avrebbe contribuito alla definizione del delinquente nato. La prossimità tra questi elementi costruisce una relazione implicita tra osservatore e osservato, tra colui che classifica e colui che viene classificato. Mentre la figura di Lombroso è esplicitamente tematizzata, quella del brigante resta opaca. Il brigantaggio non viene approfondito nel corso della sala: compare soltanto un pannello che lo presenta come fenomeno diffuso nell’Italia preunitaria e progressivamente superato con il rafforzamento dello Stato e il miglioramento delle condizioni di vita. In questa formulazione, esso viene ridotto a una forma di devianza da superare, priva di contestualizzazione storica e politica (*figura 2*).



Figura 2

Il brigante si configura come una figura spettrale speculare a quella di Lombroso: non una presenza evocata, ma un rimosso che riemerge. Il suo corpo, esposto e classificato, diviene oggetto di sapere, mentre la complessità storica del brigantaggio neutralizzata. L'allestimento rafforza questa dinamica attraverso un preciso dispositivo che la letteratura sul *Dark Tourism* definisce "dark exhibition" (Stone 2006). Le vetrine e le panche, di impianto ottocentesco, espongono una grande quantità di crani in serie, quasi totalmente privi di un apparato esplicativo e biografico dettagliato. Questa accumulazione produce un effetto visivo potente e perturbante: la visitatrice e il visitatore hanno la sensazione di attraversare uno spazio saturo di resti umani, in cui la ripetizione seriale prevale sulla spiegazione storica. Nelle dinamiche delle *dark exhibitions*, la rappresentazione spettacolarizzata della morte e dei suoi resti fisici si intreccia con finalità formalmente educative, ma attiva al contempo una forte attrazione viscerale basata sulla fascinazione per il macabro (Stone 2006, 153).[10] Nel caso del Museo Lombroso, tale intreccio non è affatto neutro: lo shock emotivo prodotto dalla serialità dei teschi satura lo spazio cognitivo dello spettatore, anestetizzandone la capacità critica. La fascinazione per l'orrore biologico partecipa così a un preciso discorso politico-narrativo: la progressiva riabilitazione affettiva della figura di Lombroso e, al contempo, la marginalizzazione dello spessore storico-politico del brigante. Nonostante ciò, il museo tende a prendere le distanze da una possibile lettura 'macabra' dell'allestimento. Come osserva Piero Bianucci, non si tratterebbe di un "museo degli orrori," ma piuttosto di un "museo degli errori," volto a mostrare i limiti delle teorie lombrosiane (Bianucci 2009, 59-64). Tuttavia, ridurre

tali teorie alla sola dimensione dell'errore rischia di neutralizzarne la portata storica e politica. Esse non furono soltanto infondate sul piano scientifico, ma contribuirono a legittimare pratiche di esclusione, stigmatizzazione e gerarchizzazione sociale. In questo senso, la categoria di "orrore" non rimanda a una reazione emotiva, bensì a una valutazione critica delle implicazioni etiche e delle conseguenze concrete di tali teorie. La sala della "rivelazione," dedicata all'atavismo, accentua la dimensione narrativa. Una voce registrata, che interpreta lo stesso Lombroso, accompagna il visitatore nella narrazione della scoperta, mentre un insieme di elementi visivi (scheletri disposti in sequenza, il cranio di Giuseppe Villella e un video che riproduce i ritratti dello scienziato) costruisce un ambiente immersivo in cui il racconto prende corpo (*figura 3*).



Figura 3

I pannelli si soffermano sugli "errori scientifici" della teoria dell'atavismo, senza tuttavia problematizzarne pienamente la matrice ideologica e le implicazioni razziali. Il video presente nella sala esplicita la mancanza di fondamento scientifico della teoria, concludendo che "la scienza procede anche per errori," formula ricorrente lungo il percorso espositivo. La sala riproduce la costruzione narrativa elaborata dallo stesso Lombroso nella descrizione della scoperta dell'atavismo. Come ha evidenziato Marc Renneville, in un intervento del 1906 Lombroso presenta l'episodio come un'intuizione improvvisa, avvenuta "in un mattino di una triste giornata di dicembre," in cui all'improvviso tutto assunse un nuovo significato (Lombroso 1906, in Renneville 2009, 109). Questa narrazione, fortemente estetizzata, tende a presentare

la teoria come il risultato di una rivelazione inattesa, sottraendola al sospetto di essere guidata da pregiudizi preesistenti — accuse che gli erano state rivolte da critici e scienziati come Paul Näcke o Richard von Krafft-Ebing (Renneville 2009, 110-111). La sala contribuisce a riprodurre e rafforzare questo effetto rivelatorio. Più buia rispetto alle altre, concentra l'illuminazione sul cranio di Villella, isolandolo e mettendo in evidenza la cosiddetta 'fossetta occipitale', trasformata in una sorta di prova visiva. In questo modo, il museo rilancia la dimensione leggendaria della scoperta, inscrivendola in una messa in scena che ne amplifica il carattere eccezionale. Definito da Renneville come "un cranio che fa luce," quello di Vilella assume un ruolo emblematico (Renneville 2009): mentre la narrazione ufficiale insiste sull'errore, l'allestimento continua a mettere in atto una forma di legittimazione visiva, lasciando emergere una tensione irrisolta tra critica e riproduzione. Quest'operazione raggiunge l'apice nella sala che ospita la ricostruzione dello studio di Cesare Lombroso (figura 4).



Figura 4

Qui ancora un dispositivo immersivo: la proiezione di immagini delle collezioni si accompagna a un monologo attribuito a Lombroso, che invita il visitatore a entrare nella dimensione più intima del personaggio. In realtà, la voce che si ascolta, pur presentandosi come quella di Lombroso, è una costruzione contemporanea: è il museo che parla attraverso di lui, mettendo in scena un bilancio retrospettivo della sua attività. Il tono è quello di una riflessione, in cui gli errori vengono riconosciuti e ricondotti entro una narrazione più ampia. Nel monologo Lombroso ammette: "ho commesso errori, certo, e chi non ne commette," soffermandosi su alcuni dei punti del suo pensiero, come la teoria dell'atavismo, il caso del

cranio di Giuseppe Vilella e l'idea di una gerarchia tra le 'razze'. Proprio su quest'ultimo punto, la voce afferma che "non ha fondamento scientifico il concetto stesso di razza," un passaggio significativo perché rappresenta una delle rare occasioni in cui il museo esplicita una presa di posizione netta, senza, tuttavia, confrontarsi con le reali affermazioni di Lombroso, che nelle sue opere ha invece sostenuto e articolato tali categorie fino in fondo. Questa ammissione è comunque immediatamente ricondotta entro una cornice attenuante: Lombroso viene presentato come uno scienziato che, pur avendo sbagliato, avrebbe agito in buona fede: "ho cercato di essere un buon cittadino, volevo rendere l'Italia moderna." Gli errori, dalla pellagra allo spiritismo, vengono così inscritti in una traiettoria che privilegia l'intenzione rispetto agli effetti e che riconduce il suo percorso entro l'idea di una scienza fallibile ma progressiva: "la scienza è sempre provvisoria," conclude il monologo. Tuttavia, se la provvisorietà può caratterizzare il sapere scientifico, non si applica allo stesso modo alle sue implicazioni sociali e politiche. La sala dello studio non rappresenta soltanto una conclusione del percorso espositivo, ma il momento in cui il dispositivo spettrale raggiunge la sua massima intensità: la voce di Lombroso, ricostruita e mediata, non si limita a raccontare il passato, ma continua a operare nel presente, offrendo una forma di autoassoluzione postuma che punta ad attenuare la portata storica e politica delle sue teorie.

A chiudere il percorso espositivo è il corridoio che conduce verso l'uscita, l'unico spazio in cui il museo affronta in modo esplicito le questioni più problematiche dell'opera di Cesare Lombroso. Dal punto di vista visivo, tuttavia, questo spazio si distingue nettamente dalle sale precedenti, esso è scandito da pannelli flessibili, leggeri, caratterizzati da una grafica uniforme (fondo bianco, scritte rosse e nere) che non costruisce un ambiente particolarmente coinvolgente. Dopo un percorso in cui il museo ha dimostrato una notevole capacità di attivare l'attenzione attraverso dispositivi immersivi e strategie narrative complesse, questo apparato appare sorprendentemente debole sul piano espositivo. A ciò si aggiunge la sua collocazione finale. Se da un lato essa può essere interpretata come una conclusione logica del percorso, dall'altro solleva alcune perplessità: è proprio al termine della visita, quando l'attenzione del visitatore tende fisiologicamente a diminuire, che viene concentrato l'apparato critico più esplicito. I contenuti, densi e articolati, richiederebbero invece un tempo di lettura e di elaborazione che questo spazio difficilmente consente. Ne deriva l'impressione che la dimensione critica sia confinata in una zona marginale del percorso, anziché essere distribuita e integrata lungo l'intero allestimento. Il corridoio sembra funzionare come un momento di compensazione tardiva, che interviene quando il dispositivo espositivo ha già dispiegato i suoi effetti. La rimozione simmetrica della controparte storica del dramma (la figura del brigante, ridotta a teschio seriale privato di voce e di contesto politico) si rivela allora come la condizione strutturale necessaria al funzionamento dell'intero dispositivo museale. L'esposizione del resto umano orfano della sua storia non serve a educare al trauma, ma a esorcizzarlo: imponendo il silenzio allo spettro del brigante, il museo ne dichiara la definitiva sottomissione anatomica,

celebrando, sotto la vernice dell'errore scientifico, il trionfo politico dello Stato nazione sui suoi residui coloniali interni.

Il museo dell'atto mancato

Il cranio del brigante partecipa appieno dello *spectrum* del Museo Lombroso: è esposto, illuminato, narrato e, al contempo, escluso, cancellato, storicamente dimenticato. L'Hauntologia che caratterizza l'allestimento conduce sul corpo e sull'immagine del subalterno un esorcismo dal duplice scopo. Da un lato, resuscita l'autorità di Cesare Lombroso, rappresentato come uno scienziato che, pur incorrendo in inevitabili 'errori', avrebbe contribuito al progresso civile e scientifico della nazione nel momento cruciale della sua unificazione; dall'altro, allontana e neutralizza il ruolo storico dei briganti, ridotti a icone macabre a compendio della biografia dell'illustre scienziato. Questa esclusione risulta strategicamente funzionale al recupero dell'immagine di Lombroso. Lo scopo del museo, esplicitato sia nel percorso espositivo sia nella letteratura scientifica a suo sostegno, è infatti quello di 'raccontare un errore scientifico'. Tuttavia, la figura di Lombroso perde di senso se sottratta alla storia di quel dispositivo epistemico-politico che egli ha contribuito a fondare e alimentare. Ciò che il racconto del museo liquida come un semplice "errore" si configura, in un'ottica psicoanalitica, come un vero e proprio 'atto mancato' o *lapsus* che, in senso freudiano (Freud 1970 [1901]), rivela la sua natura di atto perfettamente riuscito. I risultati del lombrosianesimo vanno valutati sul terreno storico, politico e legale nel quadro della strutturazione della questione meridionale, e non all'interno di una storia delle idee scientifiche astratta dal suo contesto di produzione. Da questo punto di vista, l'allestimento si presenta come un tentativo di riqualificare la biografia di una personalità che ha avuto un ruolo influente quanto nefasto nella storia d'Italia. Questo progetto di riabilitazione trova un preciso corrispettivo teorico nel saggio *Lombroso e il brigante* di Maria Teresa Milicia (2014).

Nel testo, l'autrice tenta di ridimensionare la responsabilità ideologica e scientifica di Lombroso rispetto allo sviluppo 'razzista' dei presupposti della sua antropologia nelle opere degli autori a lui coevi (Niceforo 1897, 1898; Sergi 1895). Al contrario, l'obiettivo polemico del libro pare essere il movimento di opinione *No Lombroso*, interprete contemporaneo di quella che l'autrice chiama "vittimizzazione" (Milicia 2014, 10-13, 135-136). In questo singolare rovesciamento critico, l'autrice interpreta la decisione di Lombroso di pubblicare lo scritto *In Calabria* nel 1898 come una presa di distanza dalle derive razziste del suo allievo Alfredo Niceforo (Milicia 2014, 131; cfr. 139-142), attribuendo parte della responsabilità della diffusione dei pregiudizi razziali alla categoria critica di "razza maledetta", coniata da Napoleone Colajanni per dare conto delle implicazioni politiche del testo di Niceforo (Milicia 2014, 126; Colajanni 1898). In tal modo a Lombroso si riserva una sorta di carità storicistica — la confusione lamarckiana fra eredità sociale e biologica, l' "illusione prospettica" dello

sguardo retrospettivo, la "tecnica del riflettore" che isolerebbe le frasi razziste disseminate nell'opera (Milicia 2014, 102-103) —, mentre la critica meridionalista viene derubricata a risposta speculare all'interpellanza razzista, che ne amplifica la portata anziché attenuarne l'efficacia (Milicia 2014, 10). Al di là dunque degli indiscutibili meriti documentari del testo — la ricerca negli archivi di Catanzaro e di Motta Santa Lucia smentisce la biografia eroica di Villella diffusa dal comitato *No Lombroso*, restituendo il profilo di un uomo processato per furto nel 1844 (Milicia 2014, 48-60) —, non possiamo non notare che l'inversione della prospettiva critica riattiva lo stesso tropo ideologico-politico che intende disinnescare. Annoverando la "vittimizzazione" fra gli "effetti perversi del linguaggio dell'odio" (Milicia 2014, 135-136), l'autrice finisce per riattivare una rappresentazione del meridionale come soggetto recriminatorio, malinconico e fatalista, appartenente allo stesso repertorio stereotipico che l'antropologia positivista contribuì a fissare (Teti 2025, 55). Oltre all'appassionata difesa di Niceforo da parte di Lombroso (Lombroso 1897) — che l'autrice, per altro, non manca di analizzare, riconoscendo che gli argomenti addotti sul *Corriere della Sera* "contribuirono non poco a tramandare alla storia l'accusa infamante di razzismo antimeridionale" (Milicia 2014, 128; cfr. 130-131), e che già di per sé chiarisce il ruolo e la responsabilità politico-istituzionale dello scienziato per la scuola positivista dell'epoca —, ciò che il nostro articolo dimostra è che, oltre al piano documentario e filologico, la vicenda politico-ideologica lombrosiana si innesta all'interno di un dispositivo epistemico che sopravvive, producendo effetti nefasti, fino ai giorni d'oggi.

È in questo senso che intendiamo la ragione stessa del Museo Lombroso nella sua forma attuale: da una parte, riabilitare la figura di Lombroso come figura di genio della storia della scienza italiana; dall'altra, con lo stesso gesto, neutralizzare la storia e la soggettività politica meridionale e meridionalista. Il dispositivo epistemico-politico del museo appare quindi, in buona sostanza, esso stesso di matrice lombrosiana. Esso impiega il pretesto di una astratta neutralità scientifica per mistificare la materialità dei processi storici e produrre stereotipizzazioni utili a discreditare politicamente la controparte, mascherando la violenza coloniale attraverso l'auto-commiserazione collettiva delle culture e dei popoli storicamente discriminati. Il Museo Lombroso affronta un tema dirimente ed estremamente problematico nella società attuale, quello della criminalizzazione etnica, senza fare il minimo accenno alla questione meridionale e al ruolo che Lombroso e i lombrosiani hanno svolto rispetto ad essa nella storia d'Italia. Questo, per altro, ci conduce a riflettere sulle possibilità ancora inespresse di questo museo, che potrebbe trasformarsi in un vero museo di etnografia critica, dove la storia, le contraddizioni e i corpi, come sempre spettrali, dei meridionali siano ricondotti ad una cornice di senso storico-politica. La polemica politica e giudiziaria degli anni precedenti avrebbe, per altro, potuto condurre ad una seria riflessione su questi temi e su queste importanti problematiche etico-politiche, ma si è velocemente risolta in una polarizzazione controproducente che non ha giovato né a quei cittadini italiani che hanno legittimamente

espresso delle riserve nei confronti del museo, né al museo stesso, che ha perseguito la linea della neutralità scientifica, allineandosi così agli esempi classici del museo coloniale.

Note

[1] Il Jüdisches Museum di Berlino ne è sicuramente un esempio.
[2] Il *Legacy Museum* di Montgomery Alabama assume questa funzione riguardo il terrorismo razziale negli Stati Uniti, ma sopratutto l'ESMA di Buenos Aires che costituisce una vera e propria prova giudiziaria riguardo ai *desaparecidos* durante la dittatura di Videla. Altrettanto prezioso è la testimonianza del Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos di Santiago de Chile che ricostruisce storie, biografia e destini delle persone torturate e uccise durante la dittatura di Pinochet.
[3] Classici esempi sono il Museo Reale dell'Africa Centrale ("Africa Museum") di Tervuren (Belgio), oppure il Museo Coloniale di Roma, chiuso nel 1971 per ignavia rispetto al nostro passato coloniale.
[4] Per l'interpretazione biologista, oltre a Lombroso, si vedano Sergi 1895, Niceforo 1898; mentre per un'interpretazione più attenta alle cause storico-economiche, si veda tra gli altri Croce 1925.
[5] Uno spettro che va dalle enclosures inglesi allo sterminio nord-americano, secondo lo schema dell'accumulazione originaria descritto nel I libro del *Capitale* (Marx 1964 [1867]).
6 La legge 15 agosto 1863, n. 1409, nota anche come legge Pica dal nome del suo promotore, il deputato abruzzese Giuseppe Pica, fu una legge speciale per la repressione del brigantaggio nella situazione di conflitto o di "guerra civile" post-unitaria. Si veda soprattutto Martucci 1999 per una ricostruzione storica e giuridica della legge.
[7] Si pensi all'esperienza politica della Lega Nord che deve il suo successo alla reiterazione di questi pregiudizi (Teti 2025, 101-155).
[8] "L'etnicizzazione della melanconia diventa un motivo essenziale del paradigma antimeridionale dei positivisti, e paradossalmente, finisce col condizionare il senso di sé delle popolazioni, che finiranno col percepirsi e rappresentarsi come tristi e lamentose" (Teti 2025, 55).
[9] Ci riferiamo al motivo derridiano del *Parergon,* spazio liminare intorno all'opera, ne determina la forma e ne traccia il confine (Derrida 1978).
[10] P. Stone critica la formulazione troppo generica del *dark tourism* formulata da J. Lennon e M. Foley. Tra le sfumature che l'autore delinea del *dark tourism* identifichiamo il museo Lombroso in parte con la *dark exhibition* che comprende le '*Body Worlds' exhibitions*, esposizioni dei corpi col pretesto della conoscenza anatomica. Sull'attrazione visuale esercitata dai corpi in sofferenza e senza vita rimandiamo anche al testo di Susan Sontag (2003).

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Memory and Matter. The South Park Street Cemetery as a cultural text between (post)colonial discourse and dark tourism

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ABSTRACT

Thanks to tangible and intangible features and symbolic values, historic cemeteries can be viewed as dark tourism destinations. In the postcolonial world, these sites reveal even more levels of complexity because they encapsulate histories of connection, suffering and hybridity. The way in which colonial cemeteries, especially in Asia and Africa, are discursively depicted conveys ideological views that can stimulate nostalgic sentiments, historiographic reflections or political considerations since they constitute a synecdoche of "ambivalent heritage" (Chadha 2006, 347). Informed by dark tourism scholarship, postcolonial criticism and cultural studies, this contribution offers an interdisciplinary analysis of the multiple symbolic meanings of the colonial cemetery in order to examine how its numerous cultural and ideological layers are exploited through the tourist gaze. The case study regards the South Park Street Cemetery in Calcutta (Kolkata) (Johnson 2025). The investigation focuses on its stylistic and semiotic representations across different texts and discourses such as brochures, guidebooks and websites, and interrogates how such narratives construct the intersections and contradictions that concern the thanatourism experience, the subtle persistence of imperialist creed and the sense of postcolonial abrogation (Buettner 2006; Walton 2019).

Keywords

postcolonial dark tourism, South Park Street Cemetery, cemetery discourse, Indian heritage, colonial India, decolonisation in India

Introduction

Thanks to tangible and intangible features and symbolic values, many historic cemeteries now serve as dark tourism destinations (Stone 2006; Venbrux 2010). They physically embody and imaginatively evoke the layering of history, and the meaning that individuals and communities have constructed and spread, suggesting "how a society's relations with the dead are fluid, contingent and emerging" (Young and Light 2016, 70). In the postcolonial world, historic cemeteries and mausoleums reveal even more levels of complexity because they unfold histories of connection, suffering and hybridity. If, on the one hand, British colonial cemeteries constitute a form of outlandish attraction by virtue of their decadent architecture and romantic nature, on the other they still bespeak and interweave significant themes such as memory, identity, and trauma (Nora 1989).

Today, most of such graveyards are in a dilapidated state so that the consumption of the tombstones and funeral monuments seems to manifest itself in tandem with the obliteration of memory in the 'new' postcolonial context, although there are attempts to restore and promote such sites, for example with the campaigns and initiatives launched by the British Association for Cemeteries in South Asia (BACSA) (2026), founded in 1977 by Theon Wilkinson, an Englishman born and raised in Cawnpore.[1] The way in which colonial cemeteries, especially in Asia and Africa, are discursively depicted through different forms and text-types points out ideological views that can stimulate nostalgic sentiments, historiographic reflections or political considerations since they constitute a synecdoche of "ambivalent heritage" (Chadha 2006, 347). As they trigger a mixture of aesthetic appreciation for decay, (in)ability to decode or accept the past, and pensiveness on mortality, they also become destinations for tourists interested in genealogic and historical research, architecture and the environment.

Drawing from dark tourism scholarship, postcolonial criticism and cultural studies (Adami 2023; Nora 1989; Sharma 2020; Stoler 2013), this contribution offers an interdisciplinary analysis of the multiple symbolism of the colonial cemetery viewed as a "cultural text" (Vidutis and Lowe 1980, 103) in order to inspect how its numerous ideological layers are exploited, or marginalised, through the tourist gaze. The case study selected for this project is the South Park Street Cemetery, in Calcutta (now named Kolkata), built in the 18th century. The article is organised as follows. After this introductory part, the article provides a section which summarises the long-standing and extensive body of scholarship for the field of postcolonial dark tourism, and it also provides a brief introduction to the case study under scrutiny. What follows is a section that investigates the stylistic and semiotic representations of the South Park Street Cemetery and draws data from three sources: (a) a non-fictional text by Rudyard Kipling, (b) present-day tourist guidebooks, and (c) the broad multimodal discourse sustained by BACSA. The last section recapitulates the argument put forward and provides some concluding reflections. The aim of the article, thus, is to question the way in which such narratives cumulatively construct, and promulgate, the intersections and contradictions that concern the thanatourism experience, the subtle persistence of imperialist creed and the sense of postcolonial abrogation (Buettner 2006; Montanari 2024; Walton 2019).

From postcolonial dark tourism to Calcutta's South Park Street Cemetery

Visiting places connected with experiences of suffering constitutes the perimeter of dark tourism, a vast domain whose linguistic premodifier is somehow misleading as it seems to merely suggest a voyeuristic act of gazing (Lennon and Foley 1996; Light 2011). Inevitably, in fact, dark tourism touches on sensitive and ethical questions, and the reasons that motivate people to practise it. In reality, however, approaching and understanding sites of death and sorrow such as battlefields and disaster zones can aid in rediscovering the past and reflecting

on human existence, though they retain ambivalent or dissonant values (Sharma 2020; Young and Light 2016). Places where colonial control produced enduring social, racial, and economic disparities span the slave forts of Cape Coast, Nelson Mandela's prison on Robben Island, and the Myall Creek Massacre Memorial, in Australia. Of course, such sites are primarily imagined as places of remembrance and reconciliation, but they are also marketed as tourist destinations. Interestingly, over the last decades, dark tourism studies have expanded their traditional scope and have started considering the postcolonial world. Postcolonial dark tourism reiterates how death and grief are central paradigms of colonial history, and consequently excavating the way in which their related sites are transformed into attractions allows us to tackle the overlapping of memory, identity and power in the postcolonial nation, and its attempts to implement a new decolonial order based on non-western epistemologies (Clarke, Dutton and Johnston 2014; Carrigan 2014).

Perhaps the most emblematic illustration of dark tourism is anchored to the prototypical funeral place, namely the cemetery, whose key social importance is attested across all human civilisations and cultures. Materially and immaterially, cemeteries project some of the views that guide communities according to their specific religious and ideological values: on the one hand, they represent forms of tangible culture, in their structural, architectonical and environmental forms, but on the other they also take a discursive dimension to substantiate narratives of different nature. From such angle, cemeteries operate as repositories of concepts and ideals in their constant capacity to articulate images, memories and understandings of reality. Foucault even views cemeteries as heterotopias (i.e., 'other spaces') (1984) since they are separated from quotidian life, they connect the living with the deceased, they mirror how humans respond to death, they accumulate time and they embody social differences. Vidutis and Lowe propose to critically interpret the cemetery as a cultural text (1980), namely an integrated system of signs and devices that convey an accumulation of meanings rather than monolithically fixing a sense of remembrance in stone. The symbolic parallel between cemeteries and texts is further developed by Chadha, who borrows the intertwined notions of 'phenotext' (superficial meaning of the message) and 'genotext' (deeper meaning of the message) (2006) from Kristeva's theory of meaning (1984) to scrutinise the inscriptional epigraphs of the South Park Street Cemetery. For Chadha, these are "texts, which perform a crucial role in the theatre of pain that a cemetery represents but the deeper underlying meaning is located in the ideological genotext of colonialism" (2006, 350).

Cemeteries located in the former segments of the Empire, in particular, lend themselves to this view because they testify to their alternating colonial, postcolonial and even decolonial essence as they now become peculiar attractions for visitors, who evidently are driven by different motivations. Endowed with a plethora of indexes, cemeteries figuratively and semiotically compress and communicate dense histories. But they are also subjected to a

double process of consumption: they are increasingly consumed by the passage of time, and they are turned into decadent agglomerations of vegetation-infested tombstones, obelisks and pyramids, a detail that in turn supplements a romantic and attractive characterisation, and feeds another type of consumption, namely the visitors' experience. Originally built to preserve memory, colonial cemeteries now have to suffer the annihilation of matter as well as the reimagining of travellers, as exemplified by the 17th -century Dutch cemetery in Surat (Adami 2023).

To unpack some of the intricacies of contemporary postcolonial dark tourism, this article examines the case study of Calcutta's South Park Street Cemetery as a destination for visitors. Originally built in 1767 and restored in 1977 by BACSA, it used to be known as the 'Great Cemetery' but was then renamed after a private park established by Sir Elijah Impey. Calcutta was the capital of the Raj until 1911, and therefore it necessitated a large burial ground to see to the hygienic disposal of the growing number of the dead. The site also represents one of the earliest non-church cemeteries in the world, and its story is tied to the contagious diseases that afflicted the British colonial settlements during the 18th and 19th centuries, determining very high mortality rates for westerners, due to malaria, cholera and dysentery. The cemetery has become the final resting place for many famous people such as Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831, the pioneer of the Young Bengal movement) and William Jones (1746-1794, the philologist and founder of the Asiatic Society). Housing about 1600 dead, the cemetery displays an eclectic range of architectonical styles mixed with Greek, Egyptian, and Indo-Saracenic elements, and some less frequent Hindu or Islamic details. For example, the syncretic tomb of Charles Stuart (1758-1828), the Irish general working for the East India Company, reveals that he embraced Hindu culture, as demonstrated by the peculiar epitaph "Hindoo Stuart."

Like many other British colonial graveyards, whose tombstones and sculptures were built using sandstone, marble, and bricks, namely materials that suffer both the effect of recurring monsoons as well as the overgrowth of foliage, the South Park Street Cemetery too experiences many serious problems of quotidian management and general conservation. In fact, although in 1947, a special body called the Monuments and Graves Section had been set up by the High Commission for India with the purpose to take care of the Raj's material inheritance in India. Due to lack of funds, not much was carried out, in spite of the uproar of the Anglo-Indian community in Britain (Johnson 2025). The story of Calcutta's most famous cemetery emblematises some of the historical dynamics that affected the entire colonial cemetery system left by the British. In 1984, the cemetery ran the risk of being pulled down and replaced by an art centre following the plans of the business conglomerate Apeejay Trust, but their speculative operation was blocked by the Calcutta High Court. Towards the end of the 1970s, the Preservation of Historical Cemeteries in India (APHCI) and the Christian Burial

Board intervened to save the dilapidated South Park Street Cemetery. BACSA too decided to contribute, and in 1977 they started their preservation project, which brought many positive results in terms of restoration and management.

Unveiling Calcutta's narratives and memories between (post)colonial discourse and dark tourism

This section applies linguistic tools and cultural notions to analyse the discursive rendition of Calcutta's South Park Street Cemetery as an instantiation of postcolonial dark tourism by considering different texts. Clearly, space restrictions forbid the implementation of a quantitative methodology, and consequently the approach will be qualitative, examining how even small portions of discourse can capture, or contribute to the imagination that amalgamates colonial funerary heritage, postcolonial sentiments and decolonial education. With the achievement of Independence, the new Indian nation had to handle the material inheritance of the Raj, but the grand imperial monuments and the more modest colonial cemeteries were treated differently. The former, in fact, underwent a process of re-semanticisation in order to strengthen the sense of pride and rebirth of the country: for example, the Victoria Memorial, the huge imperial site built between 1906 and 1921 in the Maidan, Calcutta's largest green urban area, is now regularly visited by both national and international tourists and viewed not as a celebration of the Empire, but rather as a mausoleum. Moreover, it frequently "houses permanent and temporary Indian-specific exhibitions, such as an exhibit to India's national leaders, raising their history to equal that of Britain's most famous queen" (Johnson 2025, 22). Cemeteries, instead, were mostly ignored, subjected to occasional vandalism in the form of graffiti and left to crumble down as the new Indian authorities were not interested in maintaining and promoting this kind of heritage. Nonetheless, they appear across traditional and multimodal genres, moving from orientalist depictions to more mindful, and yet to some extent still ambiguous, interpretations that travellers elaborate when they visit them.

The South Park Street Cemetery in the late Victorian Age

An extract from Rudyard Kipling's *The City of Dreadful Night* (1899, originally published in 1891) can serve as an interesting starting point to explore the historical conceptualisation of the cemetery. Somehow this text is akin to tourism-based writing since it bears elements of literary journalism, travel sketch, and colonial reportage. Here the India-born English writer develops a narrative that, on the one hand, sketches out clues of exoticism, and on the other incorporates echoes of tourist discourse. Thus, it is a subtle evocation of the intercultural experience of voyaging across a space 'Other' because, for a late Victorian reader, the passage not only depicted a colonial territory, but it was also a representation of a 'liminal'

space, as the graveyard designated the realm of the dead and as such had to be cordoned off from the living:

> From love by natural sequence to death. Where *is* the Park Street Cemetery? A hundred *gharriwans* leap from their boxes and invade the market, and after a short struggle one of them uncarts his capture in a burial-ground—a ghastly new place, close to a tramway. This is not what is wanted. The living dead are here—the people whose names are not yet altogether perished and whose tombstones are tended. "Where are the *old* dead?" "Nobody goes there," says the *gharriwan*. "It is up that road." He points up a long and utterly deserted thoroughfare, running between high walls. This is the place, and the entrance to it, with its *mallee* waiting with one brown, battered rose, its grilled door and its professional notices, bears a hideous likeness to the entrance of Simla churchyard. But, once inside, the sightseer stands in the heart of utter desolation—all the more forlorn for being swept up. Lower Park Street cuts a great graveyard in two. The guide-books will tell you when the place was opened and when it was closed. The eye is ready to swear that it is as old as Herculaneum and Pompeii. The tombs are small houses. It is as though we walked down the streets of a town, so tall are they and so closely do they stand—a town shrivelled by fire, and scarred by frost and siege. They must have been afraid of their friends rising up before the due time that they weighted them with such cruel mounds of masonry. Strong man, weak woman, or somebody's "infant son aged fifteen months"—it is all the same. For each the squat obelisk, the defaced classic temple, the cellaret of chunam, or the candlestick of brickwork—the heavy slab, the rust-eaten railings, the whopper-jawed cherubs and the apoplectic angels. (Kipling 1899 [1891], emphasis in the original, 88)

In foregrounding some aspects of the exotic picturesque, and mixing both gloomy and ironic suggestions, Kipling's book carries a sociocultural message because it aims to persuade visitors to consider the place in spite of its macabre connotations. In particular, in the extract, the alterity that characterises the cemetery emerges with "restricted terms" (Sailaja 2009, 72) of Indian English such as *gharriwan* and *mallee*, respectively indicating a driver of a local horse-drawn carriage or cab (*gharry*), and a member of a caste whose traditional occupation is gardening. Not only do such words bring in images of exotic lands, but they also anchor the text in the paradigms of tourist discourse such as authenticity and realism, suggesting that the author is a local witness of the landscape, and therefore totally entitled to talk about this place.

Interestingly, the passage is organised in a metadiscursive way so that it invites a reflection through the traveller's perspective since it openly mentions that the "guide-books will tell you when the place was opened and when it was closed," thus approving the historicity of the site, and implicitly stressing that it is an interesting site. Several stylistic patterns seem to frame this type of metadiscourse, for example by embroidering specific visual references such as "the sightseer" and "the eye," which further demonstrate the travellers' cultural and sensory consumption of the place (Stone and Sharpley 2008). But there are also elements borrowed from the specialised fields of architecture and masonry to support the description of the graves and mausoleums that dot the place. Sometimes, technical expressions are diatopically coloured as in the case of "the cellaret of *chunam*," whose last loanword, originally from Sanskrit, indicates a polished lime, plaster or mortar, used in the Indian subcontinent for building, coating walls, and waterproofing.

But the imagery of the colonial cemetery is also treated metaphorically through the hyperbolic simile "as old as Herculaneum and Pompeii," which magnifies a decadent fin-de-siècle fantasy growing out of classical myths. Moreover, the narrator compares the living and the dead when he affirms that the "tombs are small houses" in order to cast irony into the material magnificence of the necropolis. In cognitive terms, it is an operation that brings to the fore the intertwined ideas of life and death through a concrete image: the intimate space of the house is reiterated in the funerary monument. This type of metaphor is not devoid of pungent overtones: though, strictly speaking, the device of irony is more frequent in narratives rather than tourist-oriented texts, here it cleverly stimulates readers, reminding them of the connection between memory and matter, and inviting them to view the cemetery as a sort of microcosm mirroring the macrocosm of colonial India, with all its social and urban infrastructures.

The South Park Street Cemetery in present-day tourist guides

Of course, the prototypical texts promulgating the domain of tourism are guidebooks, and some of them dedicate space to Calcutta's most famous colonial cemetery. Consider, for example, the following two excerpts, the first taken from the 2009 *Lonely Planet India*, and the second from the guidebook *Calcutta*, in which the texts by Rudrangshu Mukherjee are enriched by Kamal Sahai's photos:

> Today Park St is one of Kolkata's top commercial avenues. But when it was constructed in the 1760s, it was a simple causeway across uninhabited marshlands built for mourners to access the then-new Park Street Cemetery (Map pp. 488-9; cnr Park St & AJC Bose Rd; h. 7.30am-4.30pm). Today that cemetery remains a wonderful oasis of calm with mossy Raj-era graves from rotundas to soaring pyramids jostling for space in a lightly manicured jungle. Buying the guide booklet (Rs 100) supports its maintenance. (*Lonely Planet India* 2009, 497)

> Calcutta has some of the oldest British cemeteries in India. The South Park Street Cemetery is one of the most beautiful. It relates to the moving tales of young officers and very young children who died of illness, epidemics, floods and cyclones in Calcutta two centuries ago. Sadly, the cemetery has fallen into a state of neglect. There is a growing awareness that these cemeteries are a vital part of Calcutta's history and need to be preserved. (above) Job Charnock's grave lies at St John's Church near the High Court. It commemorates the founding father of Calcutta. (Mukherjee and Sahai 1997, 76)

Both descriptions are quite short for obvious reasons of space and they follow the conventions of the language of tourism, such as conciseness and the use of abbreviations. Yet, some linguistic features turn dark tourism into a historical and cultural experience, thanks to positive forms of evaluation as the graveyard, respectively in the first and in the second text, is portrayed as "a wonderful oasis" and is "one of the most beautiful." The two passages acknowledge the decrepit conditions of the site, though the *Lonely Planet* guide also enhances the atmospheric description by mentioning "a lightly manicured jungle," a detail that evokes traces of faraway exoticism. More importantly, both texts underscore that saving colonial

cemeteries from destruction is of paramount importance. In particular, the first text exhorts readers to act and aid the maintenance of the site by purchasing the illustrative self-published booklet, whose proceeds will finance management and restoration projects. The pragmatic implicature of the message lies in the textual promise that all visitors can do something concrete to help the cemetery with only a little expenditure. The second text shifts the tourist perspective through some comments about the historical significance of the place affirming that cemeteries are "a vital part of Calcutta's history," and as a consequence their preservation problems must be carefully addressed. Remarkably, this point is expressed through the verb phrase "need to be preserved," which conveys boulomaic modality, namely the linguistic system encoding duty, obligation, and requirement (Gibbons and Whiteley 2018, 110). The effect of such a choice is to offer the reader a certain view of the world and inculcate a sense of responsibility amongst visitors and the broad community.

However, approaching the Calcutta cemetery as an attraction and a text requires a reflection on its cultural and rhetorical many-sidedness. After Independence, most of the statues of British sovereigns and military were relocated to peripheral areas, but cemeteries instead were simply ignored, though sometimes they experienced the removal of headstones or slabs of marble recycled as building materials or even grinding stones for curry. Going beyond the mere physical decay of the site, the ideological burden of the colonial cemetery is reconfigured in the new decolonial ecology, which tends toward the future rather than the contemplation of the past. For Buettner, "although it is tempting to read the postcolonial treatment accorded to these cemeteries as transgressive 'subaltern' acts against symbols of colonialisms, the condition of these sites suggests apathy or indifference to the colonial heritage more strongly than focused resentment" (2006, 23).

On closer inspection, the South Park Street Cemetery unfolds the power of an ambivalent space that transcends its own semiotic forms. It is not a simple instantiation of dissonant heritage, namely those sites associated with negative feelings, conflicts or traumatic events, and for which there is not a shared interpretation (Tunbridge and Ashwort 1995), because "it can neither be culturally appropriated nor completely obliterated from the postcolonial landscape and [therefore] it occupies a space of conflicting emotions and indeterminate meaning" (Chadha 2006, 348). Such a sense of ambivalence is, to some extent, exploited by the two tourist texts reproduced above since, predictably, they are addressed to an international readership, which certainly includes visitors from Britain, who may have a general or personal interest in colonial history. For example, the detail about Job Charnock (1630-1693), the English East India Company administrator conventionally credited as the founder of Calcutta in 1690 (here ostensibly defined as "father"), subtly lends support to this interpretation, linking the origin of the vibrant capital of West Bengal to the colonial era thereby supplementing the ambivalence of the place itself.

Revitalising the South Park Street Cemetery: BACSA

Today, thanatourism too chiefly operates in the digital world for obvious reasons, and by surfing the net it is possible to come across several websites, blogs and other platforms totally or partially devoted to the colonial graveyard of Calcutta, and this section specifically considers the vast discourse proposed by BACSA. Articulating their intervention via promotional and informational actions, this non-governmental association's contribution is indicative of how such type of heritage oscillates between the persistence of imperialist creed and the sense of postcolonial remaking.

BACSA's purpose is to save the cemeteries of the former Empire and pursue educational and cultural goals, although the entire project was also driven by "an awareness that the decay of these cemeteries meant the absolute end of a colonial way of life that many of them had loved, now severely missed, and, most importantly, saw as *pukka* (proper)" (Johnson 2025, 26). The disintegration of the materiality of the colonial cemetery cannot be stopped, but BACSA's intentions are varied and complex. To some extent, though, the association generates an impression of "clubbability" (Buettner 2006, 14) that still suggests an exclusive social or professional space, whose members share some interests or cultural ethos. Incidentally, after the end of Empire, many British individuals returned home and founded clubs such as the Delhi Club, the Bombay Club or the Calcutta Club, but it can be noted that "their Indian experiences, and particularly their exclusivity, created a community that not only clung together but also saw itself as different from their fellow Britons" (Johnson 2025, 26). Inevitably, then, BACSA's work too can be construed so as to trigger a sense of nostalgia, which encapsulates a sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past, and in the case of Britain's colonial history may evoke images of power, superiority and dominance.

However, nostalgia is a psychologically loaded term, mixing the ambiguity of memory with political implications, particularly in the postcolonial world (Walder 2011). The idea of the cemetery is in tune with nostalgia, and memory, as tombs become the components of a large semiotic infrastructure that leads visitors to meditate on the sense of loss, process inner emotions and reflect on the passing of time and the meaning of life. But this is only a preliminary consideration, as studying the relics and ruins of empire (Stoler 2013; Walton 2019) permits one to tackle some of the overlapping, and at times contradicting, feelings that accumulate through historical periods. For Buettner, "in deracinated postmodern circumstances the allure of 'disappearing' worlds, environments 'at risk', and nostalgia for what has been destroyed can readily become enhanced" (2006, 14). Such a view explains the fascination for places connected with disaster, crisis and suffering by evoking a yearning for lost grandeur, or a place that does not exist any longer, or perhaps has never existed. In this light, nostalgia is also a cognitive mechanism to rebalance the thought that all human endeavour is transitory.

Rejecting the image of cemeteries as neglected and liminal places can unveil some of the dynamics that reverberate in the phenomenon of postcolonial dark tourism, and the way in which visitors approach, or read about the South Park Street Cemetery sheds light on the negotiation of ambiguity. Judging the interventions on colonial cemeteries carried out by BACSA means disentangling complex questions, considering a sentiment of nostalgia for the past, but also deciphering other motives, which affect tourists visiting the funerary heritage of the postcolonial nation. As already suggested, at least in its first phase, BACSA's members were people who had some direct or indirect engagement with the Raj, since some of their dear ones had been buried there prior to 1947. With the passing of time, however, the idea of family memory and preserving the memory of the departed became increasingly aloof, paving the way to a process of historisation whereby the men and women who once lived in, and served, the colonial enterprise are now consigned to a different conceptualisation, revealing their true human nature.

The BACSA initiatives recuperate the lore of stories of the Empire and continuously interrogate how remote, decadent and yet meaningful places such as the South Park Street Cemetery stratify colonial, postcolonial and decolonial preoccupations. Similarly to other burial grounds, the Calcutta cemetery too continues to index its ambivalent legacy because, on the one hand, it attracts visitors to signify an imperial past, but, on the other, it depends on the local context to survive through time. Chadha illuminates this point when he argues that "the colonial cemetery in the postcolony is located in the irony of its previous glory, its past power, and its present powerlessness" (2006, 347). Thanatourism is governed by a variety of motivations, and visitors to the South Park Street Cemetery can be driven by curiosity about their origins, by some historical or literary interest (e.g., the cemetery houses the tomb of Walter Landor Dickens, the fourth child and second son of Charles Dickens), or by some other personal reasons (e.g., the funerary landscape as a suggestive context for photographing, or as a meditative space for a reflection on existence and death). But, in all cases, they have to negotiate the stratification of connotations emanating from the heterotopic space of the cemetery, theorised by Foucault. Ultimately, practitioners of postcolonial dark tourism that visit the ancient British cemetery of Calcutta reinforce Johnson's argument that "the dead, not the living, shape who we are" (2025, 3).

Concluding remarks

This contribution has tried to assess the case of Calcutta's South Park Street Cemetery as a dark tourist destination and a cultural text that intermingle the colonial, postcolonial and decolonial valences of the place, in transit between signs of imperial nostalgia, attempts to recuperate memory, and educational or recreational activities. The former colonial context complicates the morally transgressive ethical and social nuances inherent in thanatourism, and

inevitably produces forms of ambivalent or dissonant heritage, in which traces of Empire are saved from physical decay and reimagined as discordant or polyvalent sites of meaning, encapsulated in a double paradigm of making an act of remembrance and of being surrounded by a deliberate amnesia. The material and immaterial legacy of Empire constitutes an object that is difficult to handle or read univocally: the process of "ruination" extrapolates the damages of the past by looking at how its imperial signs are appropriated and inscribed in the present as colonial memory outlives memories of colonialism (Stoler 2013).

But this type of explanation applies to colonial cemeteries only partially since, originally, the colonial cemeteries were not ruins, and are now reconfigured as hybrid spaces, for instance when portions of graveyards are expropriated by individuals of the local community due to a lack of city space. Thus, walking in the South Park Street Cemetery, visitors can admire dilapidated graves, urns and mausoleums surrounded by overgrown luxuriant vegetation, but they may also see clothes hanging out to dry and even farmyard chickens. Transcending the superficial oddity of such scenes, in reality, the dark tourism experience juxtaposes the living with the dead and further invites a contemplation on the impermanence of life, which is an existential question for the entire humanity. In this light, Johnson even proposes that "colonial cemeteries should be seen as sites of international cooperation that positively connect South Asia with Britain" (2025, 249) because such a view could operationally favour a more comprehensive evaluation of the past in order to frame the present. The consumption of the material space and immaterial lore of the cemetery lets the visitor imagine what was once present, even when the funerary monuments are gone or damaged. In observing graves, reading their epitaphs and filling in gaps of incomplete histories, the visitor acquires a new role, mentally reimagining life and almost becoming a co-author of the past.

Unpacking a message of *sic transit gloria mundi*, the burial sites of the Raj accrue and problematise the (inter)cultural contacts between individuals and cultures that have gradually brought us to the contemporary scenario, in which the past too is unclear and volatile:

> The history of British cemeteries in India crosses and pulls together two very different worlds, one colonial and the other postcolonial, and the compelling personal manifestations and in the historical contingencies that emanate from that crossing. It is a story that examines perhaps the most seminal aspect of the human condition, the way in which the dead continue to inform our lives and the personal pain that is caused when that connection is broken. One does not have to love or hate the British and their colonial system to understand why some Britons continue to be drawn to imperial cemeteries as if they were islands of security in an ocean of postcolonial uncertainty. (Johnson 2025, 11-12)

The domain of postcolonial dark tourism exemplifies a discourse community, in which both producers and receivers of texts operate, professionally and non-professionally, with the results that images, materials and meanings are constantly realised, circulated and manipulated. It is in this configuration of centripetal and centrifugal forces that individuals interested in the South Park Street Cemetery have to manage their personal experience,

recalling that such a site "is an anomaly, an idiosyncratic monument whose symbolic meaning has been muted, and its physical edifice forgotten, but still it remains firmly rooted in the cityscape of postcolonial Calcutta" (Chadha 2006, 359).

Notes

[1] This Uttar Pradesh city played a key role in the 1857 Indian war of independence (previously designated as the Indian Mutiny or Indian Rebellion). Many Indian cities have been renamed over the last twenty or thirty years, returning to the precolonial naming system: Cawnpore is now known as Kanpur, and since 2001 the new name for Calcutta has been Kolkata. However, in this article, in the light of the bibliographical sources cited, the pre-1947 names are maintained to show the historical complexity of the cultural context under scrutiny.

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(Re)constructing memory through dark tourism: visitor narratives at the Museum of Aljube in post-dictatorial Portugal

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how visitor experiences at the Museum of Aljube – Resistance and Freedom, a former political prison dedicated to memorializing victims of the Estado Novo dictatorship, generate processes of memory (re)construction in a post-authoritarian context. Situated in Cultural Studies and informed by a grounded theory methodology, the study analyzes how encounters with representations of death, suffering and political repression within a dark tourism setting shape visitors' understandings of national history and identity. Drawing on empirical research with four groups (anti-fascist resistance activists, secondary school students, young political activists and general visitors),[1] the analysis identifies how affective, cognitive and political responses emerge from the interaction between visitors' positionalities and the museum narrative. The article proposes a theoretical model based on two foundational conditions: the degree of personal or intergenerational memory and the degree of political awareness. These conditions structure key dimensions of interpretation, including narrative extension, materiality, identification, naturalization and relativization, which combine to produce outcomes ranging from resonance to dissonance. By foregrounding visitor perspectives, the article contributes to debates on dark tourism, contested memory and post-dictatorial heritage, highlighting how sites of suffering can both challenge and reproduce dominant narratives in contemporary Portugal.

Keywords

dark tourism, post-dictatorial memory, Portugal, Southern Europe, political violence, contested heritage

Introduction

In recent decades, dark tourism has emerged as a field of growing academic interest, particularly in relation to how sites associated with death, trauma and political violence are experienced, consumed and represented. Initially conceptualized through the works of Foley and Lennon (1996), Seaton (1996) and later expanded by scholars such as Stone (see, for

example, Stone et al. 2018) and Sion (2014), dark tourism encompasses visits to places marked by suffering, whether individual or collective, historical or recent, institutionalized or marginalized. While much of the literature has focused on spectacularized or commercialized forms of dark tourism, there is increasing attention to how these practices intersect with memory politics, heritage production and postcolonial critique, especially in regions marked by authoritarian pasts and contested historical narratives.

This article contributes to that body of work by examining how memory is (re)constructed by visitors to the Museum of Aljube – Resistance and Freedom, a memorial institution located in the former political prison of Aljube, in the heart of Lisbon. The museum is dedicated to the history of political resistance under the Estado Novo, the Portuguese authoritarian regime that lasted from 1933 to 1974. As a site of incarceration, torture and silencing of political dissidents, the Aljube today functions as a space of remembrance, education and critical reflection, but also as a site of touristic and museological consumption of suffering.

Portugal represents a particularly revealing case in the context of Southern Europe, where the memory of fascism and dictatorship remains highly disputed. Despite the democratic transition following the 1974 Carnation Revolution, the process of transitional justice had limited effects, and the legacies of the Estado Novo, including its colonial violence (Rosas 2018), continue to generate silence, denial or selective remembrance (Loff, Piedade and Soutelo 2015). In this context, museums such as the Aljube take on a dual role: they are both spaces of historical reckoning and products of contemporary memory politics.

This paper seeks to analyze how the tourist practice of visiting a site of political imprisonment and repression becomes a space for the negotiation of memory. It focuses not on the institutional narrative of the museum itself, but rather on how that narrative is interpreted and reconfigured by different groups of visitors. In doing so, the article asks: to what extent, and in what ways, does the presence of death and suffering in the Aljube's museological content influence visitors' interpretations of the Estado Novo and its legacies? Based on empirical research conducted using grounded theory and focus group interviews with four distinct visitor profiles (including anti-fascist activists from the Estado Novo period, secondary school students, young political activists, and members of the general public) this study develops a theory of memory (re)construction in dark tourism settings (Coutinho 2025). It identifies how visitors engage affectively, cognitively and politically with the museum's representation of trauma, and how these engagements are shaped by two foundational conditions: the degree of personal memory (or generational proximity to the dictatorship) and the degree of political awareness.

Rather than assuming a unifying or pedagogical function of dark tourism, the analysis reveals a diversity of interpretive paths, ranging from empathy and identification to relativization, naturalization or dissonance. The article argues that these responses are

structured by socio-political and memorial trajectories that influence how the past is accessed and narrated in the present.

Ultimately, this contribution situates the Aljube Museum as a contested memoryscape, where the meanings of suffering are negotiated through the visitor's gaze. In doing so, it engages with broader debates around the commodification of memory, the challenges of post-authoritarian remembrance, and the role of dark tourism in shaping national identity, especially in contexts where the past has not been fully confronted.

Dark tourism, memory politics and the museum as a site of narrative construction

The concept of dark tourism emerged in the mid-1990s as a way to describe a set of practices involving visits to places associated with death, tragedy and suffering. Introduced by Foley and Lennon (1996), the term gained visibility through their later work *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* (Lennon and Foley 2000), where the authors analyzed memorial visits as examples of the commodification of trauma. In parallel, Seaton (1996) introduced the concept of thanatourism, focusing more explicitly on the touristic fascination with death. That same year, Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) proposed the concept of dissonant heritage to describe "a discordance or a lack of agreement and consistency" (20) wherein heritage is not perceived simply as positive and a source of cultural enrichment, but as a place of tensions between conflicting social, cultural, and even individual views.

Together, these contributions catalyzed a scholarly field that has grown increasingly complex and interdisciplinary. As stated by Podoshen: "The nature of dark tourism today is multifaceted and multidimensional and that requires a blending and bridging of theory from multiple subject fields" (2018, 182). Our theoretical reflection on dark tourism (see Coutinho 2025) has led us to conclude that we are dealing with a powerful analytical tool, rather than merely a theoretical concept or segment of the tourism industry. As an analytical tool, dark tourism allows us to explore, identify, and understand practices, places, or objects of tourism activity based on—or viewed through the lens of—relationships with death and suffering. For this particular study, it was important to examine dark tourism as a site of politics of memory, especially in a context marked by an authoritarian past and contested national narratives like Portugal.

According to Huyssen (2003), memory is not merely an element confined to an individual's private sphere; it permeates everything: buildings, monuments, institutions, and the social and cultural environment. As Ricoeur puts it, "memory is of the past" (2007, 26), but the past, its narratives and the meanings ascribed to them are frequently reconfigured, both by individuals and by memory-mediating institutions: "history and memory are not abstract forces: they are located in specific contexts, instances, and narratives, and decisions have

always to be taken about what story is to be told" (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003, 5). Hence, according to Ricoeur (2007), what is forgotten is as important as what is remembered.

Pierre Nora's (2012) notion of *lieux de mémoire* has been central in highlighting how specific sites, including prisons, cemeteries, battlegrounds and museums, are invested with symbolic meaning and become anchors of collective memory. However, these places can serve political functions and be used to advance the interests of governments and citizen groups; they are often used to strengthen or even shape national memories and identities (Logan and Reeves 2009). According to Logan and Reeves (2009), this is something that frequently occurs in the context of the production of nationalist representations, but also in postcolonial societies, as a result of the need to foster political and social cohesion. These tensions are especially acute in post-authoritarian societies, where the memory of the regime is still unevenly distributed and politically sensitive.

The Portuguese case is marked by an initial impetus of transitional justice mechanisms after the fall of the Estado Novo regime in 1974. Immediately after the Revolution, efforts were made to formally identify and punish the political and economic elites of the Estado Novo, as well as government agents who had directly or indirectly perpetrated state-sponsored violence. Public services underwent purges, and some political police (PIDE) agents were brought to trial (Pinto 2006). Although the crimes committed by PIDE were declared non-prescriptible, this ultimately had no practical effect (Loff 2015). By late 1975, these actions began to be reassessed, and many agents saw their rights as civil servants officially restored (Pinto 2006; Pimentel 2023). What occurred thereafter was, in fact, a reintegration policy that abolished any punitive legislation directed at dictatorial agents and elites (Pinto 2006). This limited effect of the official transitional justice mechanisms has contributed to what Manuel Loff (2014, 2015) identifies as a persistent revisionist discourse which downplays the violence of the Estado Novo and questions the legitimacy of anti-fascist resistance.

As such, the construction of public memory has been left largely to civil society initiatives, heritage professionals and cultural institutions. In this scenario, museums such as the Aljube (created only in 2015) function both as repositories of historical artifacts and as performative agents of memory production:

> Museums are legitimate and legitimizing institutions for different discourses on the way memory is built, and they can play an important role in political transformations. Since they can no longer be ivory towers, they contain the possibility of destabilizing firm assumptions about the legacy of colonialism, dictatorship, genocide and war, with all that these regimes and events involve in terms of injustice and discrimination. Museums have power, which can either be used to deconstruct established memory narratives, or to build new ones. (Martins, Sarmento and Costa 2020, 7-8)

The museum thus becomes a narrative device, mediating the relationship between personal memory, historical knowledge and political identification (Macdonald 2009). However, this

mediation is neither neutral nor uniform: visitors bring their own affective and ideological frameworks, which shape how they interpret and respond to what they see. In this sense, the museum visit is a situated and negotiated act of meaning-making. Following Hall (1997), meaning is not inscribed in the object itself, but produced in the encounter between text and reader, or, in this case, between exhibition and visitor.

The present study proposes to understand the visit to the Museum of Aljube as more than a moment of passive learning: as an active site of memory (re)construction. This approach allows us to interrogate the role of dark tourism in reinforcing or destabilizing national master narratives. As Derrida (1998) reminds us, the production of collective identity is never neutral or transparent; it is always entangled in power, exclusion and the suppression of multiplicity. In the context of the Aljube, the danger lies not only in forgetting the dictatorship, but in remembering it selectively. The task of dark tourism, then, is both to remember the past and to question how, why, and for whom it is remembered.

Methodology: grounded theory and situated visitor engagement

This study adopts a qualitative and inductive methodology situated in the epistemological framework of Cultural Studies and shaped by the principles of Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss 2015; Ralph, Birks and Chapman 2015). From its inception, Cultural Studies shifted

> […] the reflection on culture from an understanding centered on the culture/nation relationship and the emphasis placed on the teaching of language and literature, toward an approach that views culture through the lens of social groups and their subcultures as ways of life. (Martins 2010, 271)

Culture thus came to be conceived as a ‘central practice of society’ (Baptista 2009). and as something produced through the interaction of various groups (Sardar and Van Loon 1999). As such, Cultural Studies took as its objects of study the cultural products and practices of the proletariat and popular culture, seeking to examine their discourses, meanings, representations, and power relations (Hall 2005; Martins 2010). Currently, Cultural Studies debates on aspects and/or practices within the broad spectrum of popular culture seek to identify, understand, and discuss the roles that these aspects and practices might play in and in relation to broader political and social processes (Bennett 2006).

Culture is understood here as more than a static repository of meaning: it is a process through which power relations, identities and historical consciousness are constantly produced and contested (Hall 1997). The museum visit is thus approached as a meaning-making practice that reflects and refracts broader social dynamics, including (but not limited to) memory, ideology, generational positioning and political subjectivity.

Grounded Theory offers a methodological structure to analyze these meaning-making processes in a systematic yet flexible manner. Rather than testing pre-existing hypotheses,

the aim was to develop a theory from the data, emerging directly from visitors' narratives, interpretations and affective responses to the Museum of Aljube. In Strauss's approach (Corbin and Strauss 2015) to Grounded Theory, data collection and analysis are conducted in iterative cycles, allowing categories and theoretical insights to emerge progressively from the material, rather than being imposed a priori (Fernandes and Maia 2001). Coding was conducted in three phases (initial, focused, and theoretical) and guided by memo-writing and constant comparison between data, in order to capture both the patterns and the tensions within.

Case selection: the Museum of Aljube – Resistance and Freedom

The Museum of Aljube, located in the former political prison in central Lisbon, was selected as the site for this research, due to its historical significance and symbolic function in the post-dictatorship memory landscape. A jail since the Islamic period, the Aljube became a political prison under the Portuguese dictatorship around 1928. It was under the direct administration of the PIDE from 1934 to 1965, the year it was permanently closed. The Aljube functioned as a hub within the Estado Novo's apparatus of political repression, particularly targeting communist militants and anti-fascist activists, including women (Madeira, Farinha and Pimentel 2007). The prison's official files and records were destroyed, making it impossible to know the exact numbers and the full extent of the atrocities committed there (Caldeira et al. 2011). However, during the period when it served as a political prison, the Aljube Prison was a place where thousands of prisoners were subjected to extreme isolation, degrading and humiliating conditions, and physical and emotional torture (Caldeira et al. 2011).

In 2015, the Aljube Prison became the Museum of Aljube: Resistance and Freedom. This museum was designed to serve the dual purpose of educating visitors about the period of dictatorship in Portugal and acts of resistance, and preserving memories and testimonies from those times (EGEAC 2020). To this end, in addition to the exhibition area, it features an Educational Service and a Documentation Center. Since its inauguration as a museum, the institution has aimed to recover and disseminate the memory of anti-fascist resistance, through exhibitions, education programs and public events.

Data collection: focus groups and visitor profiles

Empirical data were collected through focus group interviews conducted with four distinct visitor profiles, chosen to reflect a diversity of generational positions, political subjectivities and degrees of historical proximity to the Estado Novo. As is the practice for Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss 2015), the aim was not to obtain a representative sample in statistical terms, but rather to explore the heterogeneity of responses to the museum's narrative of resistance and repression.

The first potential theoretical sampling factor was direct involvement in anti-fascist resistance movements during the Estado Novo period in Portugal. We contacted various associations and organizations that brought together individuals who met this criterion. Among them was the Women's Democratic Movement, which readily agreed to collaborate on the study and set about identifying, among its members and associates, individuals who met the aforementioned criterion. Founded in 1968, the Women's Democratic Movement grew out of older Republican women's groups, emerging from within the movement opposing the Salazar regime (Movimento Democrático de Mulheres 2023).

An initial review of the data collected from the first focus group revealed that the degree of memory of the Estado Novo period in Portugal and the degree of political awareness were characteristics from which the remainder of the theoretical sample could be derived. Since there was no way to determine the level of political awareness without first interviewing the subjects individually, we defined their involvement in political and civic activism movements as the criterion. Thus, the theoretical sample for this study consisted of four groups of subjects:

1. Anti-fascist resistance activists from the Estado Novo period: eight individuals with direct involvement in organized opposition to the dictatorship.
2. Secondary school students: nine adolescents visiting the museum as part of school programs, with limited direct knowledge of the dictatorship.
3. Young political activists: six university-aged individuals engaged in contemporary social and political activism (e.g., feminist or anti-racist movements).
4. General visitors with first-degree memory of the dictatorship (non-affiliated adults): eight individuals who experienced the Estado Novo period but have no activist profiles or direct personal connection to resistance movements during the dictatorship.

Each group participated in a facilitated discussion after their visit to the museum, responding to open-ended questions about their impressions, feelings, interpretations and points of identification or resistance. The discussions were recorded, transcribed and subjected to multi-stage coding.[2]

The (re)construction of memory in dark tourism sites: an emergent theory from visitor narratives

This section presents the core analytical contribution of the study: a grounded theory of memory (re)construction in dark tourism settings, developed from the empirical engagement with visitors to the Museum of Aljube – Resistance and Freedom.

Axial dimensions in the (re)construction of memory at the Aljube Museum

Analysis of the four focus groups revealed that interpretations of the violence, death, and suffering depicted at the Aljube Museum are structured by two foundational conditions: the

degree of memory and the degree of political awareness. These variables shape the ways in which the museum narrative is interpreted and organize the emerging categories into three axial dimensions: the narrative of death and suffering, the assessment of violence, and the emotions evoked by the past. The integration of these dimensions allows us to understand how a visit to the museum becomes a space for the (re)construction of memory in a post-dictatorial context marked by silences, disputes, and asymmetries of recognition.

Narrative of death and suffering

The first dimension brings together the initial categories of narrative scope and narrative materiality, which describe how visitors construct the scale and substance of the Estado Novo's violence. The scope of the narrative varies according to the degree of memory. In both groups with firsthand memory, subjects tend to emphasize the breadth of repression, the prevalence of political imprisonment, and the structural precariousness experienced during the dictatorship: "I had no idea there would be so many political prisons, that's for sure. That's what caught my attention the most" (SujCC7).[3] In contrast, groups without direct memory (students and young activists) favor individualized narratives, valuing personal stories, names, faces, and specific life trajectories.

The materiality of the narrative is shaped by the degree of political awareness. Subjects with less political awareness, such as students and some of the general visitors, respond primarily to material traces—such as cells, objects, sounds—and express difficulty in recognizing violence when it is presented in an abstract or immaterial form. The absence of tangible evidence sometimes generates disbelief or doubt: "Was it really like they say? We have to take their word for it, or we can choose not to believe them. But, with the instruments and other types of evidence, there's no way we can't believe it" (SujES7).

On the other hand, subjects with high political awareness (anti-fascist activists and young activists) tend to focus on the immateriality of oppression, highlighting surveillance networks, mechanisms of social control, practices of resistance, and subtle forms of political violence. For these individuals, materiality is not a necessary condition for recognizing violence.

Assessment of violence

The second dimension encompasses the categories of normalization and relativization, which reflect how these visitors assess the severity of the violence perpetrated by the Estado Novo. Normalization is predominant among subjects with firsthand memory, for whom violence and oppression appear as everyday elements of life under the dictatorship. Familiarity with repression, whether experienced or witnessed, leads to an interpretation in which violence is acknowledged but integrated into a historical context of normality: "Back then there was no other way; that's all they knew, it was about punishment; there was no other defense; no one

could defend themselves […]" (SujCC2), and "Although that was just the way the dictatorship was back then […], well, that's that" (SujCC7). In contrast, groups without first-degree memory reveal denaturalization, reacting with perplexity or disbelief to the repressive practices depicted.

Relativization is distinguished primarily by the degree of political awareness. In the groups with low political awareness, subjects tend to downplay the severity of the Portuguese regime in comparison with other European fascisms, especially Nazism. In contrast, subjects with high political awareness adopt an absolute assessment, recognizing the violence of the Estado Novo as structurally aligned with other fascist regimes and rejecting comparisons that rank suffering.

Affects of death and suffering

The third dimension brings together the categories of identification and dissonance, revealing how subjects position themselves emotionally in relation to the museum's narrative. In the groups with a high level of political awareness, subjects clearly identify with the victims and explicitly recognize the perpetrators. This identification produces resonance, reinforcing existing interpretive frameworks and allowing the visit to function as a space for confirming and deepening a politically situated memory.

In contrast, subjects with less political awareness (students and general visitors) exhibit diffuse identification, sometimes confusing roles or empathizing simultaneously with victims and aggressors: "[…] sometimes testimony from PIDE agents was essential, to understand why they did what they did, what they were afraid of, because many of them were forced to do it, and what drove them to commit such acts of cruelty" (SujES7).

This ambiguity often generates dissonance, especially when the visit challenges prior beliefs, knowledge gaps, or familiar narratives that downplayed the violence of the dictatorship.

As we will discuss in the next section, dissonance, far from being a failure of museum communication, constitutes a critical space for negotiation, where the authoritarian past is reevaluated and, potentially, reconfigured.

Processes of memory (re)construction at the Aljube Museum

An in-depth analysis of the data allowed us to conceptualize the process of (re)construction of memory sparked by a visit to the Aljube Museum as a dynamic interplay between individual factors, characteristics of the museum narrative, and interpretive mechanisms activated during the visit. The developed framework synthesizes this interplay (*Figure 1*), but it is through the underlying theoretical explanation that it becomes possible to understand how different visitors produce divergent interpretations of the violence, death, and suffering associated with the Estado Novo.

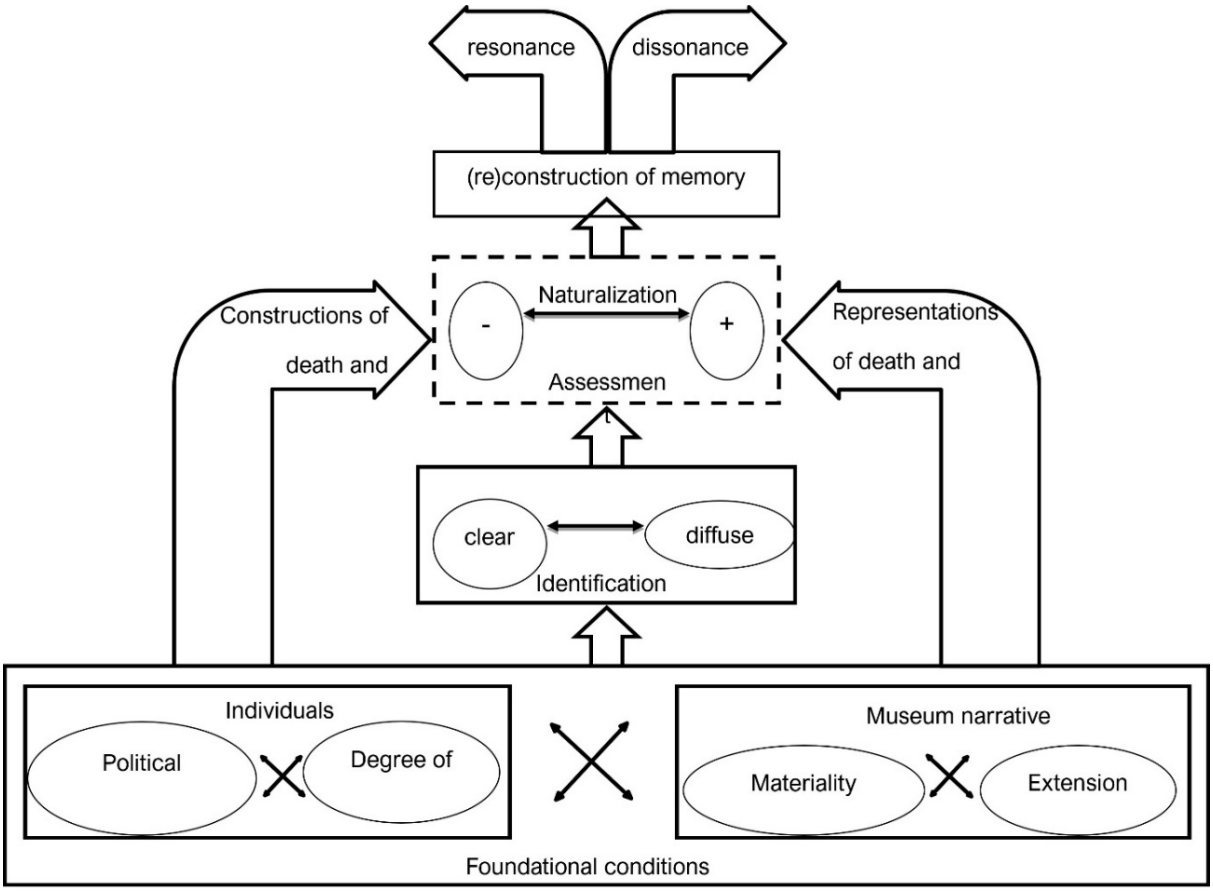


Figure 1. The process of memory (re)construction from a visit to the Aljube Museum.

At the core of the process lie the foundational conditions, which structure the way each visitor relates to the exhibition content. These conditions are divided into two sets: individual factors and characteristics of the museum narrative. Among the individual factors, the degree of memory stands out, distinguishing between subjects with first-degree memory (lived experience) and second-degree memory (intergenerational transmission) or the absence of direct memory; and the degree of political awareness, which varies between politically informed and engaged positions and diffuse, apathetic, or depoliticized stances. These factors do not operate in isolation; they interact in complex ways, producing combinations that profoundly influence the interpretation of the museum narrative.

From the perspective of museum narrative, two central characteristics emerge: the scope of the narrative, which may emphasize the scale of the repression or focus on individual stories, and the materiality of the narrative, which oscillates between tangible remnants (cells, objects, sounds) and intangible representations (surveillance networks, ideology, resistance). These characteristics are perceived and evaluated subjectively by visitors, meaning that the same exhibition can be interpreted in radically different ways depending on each individual's historical and political stance.

The interplay between individual factors and characteristics of the museum narrative leads to the first central interpretive mechanism: identification. This operates both at the level of identifying the narrative's actors (i.e., recognizing who the victims were and who the perpetrators were) and at the level of identifying with the narrative's actors (i.e., taking an affective stance toward these groups). The research indicates that the clarity of identification is decisive for the meaning of the process of (re)constructing memory. Subjects with high political awareness tend to clearly identify victims and perpetrators, while subjects with lower political awareness exhibit diffuse identifications, sometimes empathizing simultaneously with both sides or reinterpreting perpetrators as victims.

The process moves toward a moment of destabilization, triggered by the clash between the prior conceptions of death and suffering that visitors bring with them, and the representations of death and suffering presented by the Museum.

This encounter brings about a temporary suspension of established beliefs, making room for new interpretations. The literature on dark tourism helps us understand this phenomenon. Drawing on Foucault, Stone (2013) conceptualizes these spaces as heterotopias: places where the usual order of things is temporarily suspended, allowing for new ways of seeing and feeling. The universality of death and suffering (Seaton 1996) reinforces this effect, producing intense reactions even in individuals distant from the historical period depicted.

This moment is simultaneously fertile and dangerous. History shows that sites associated with death and suffering can be instrumentalized for ideological purposes, functioning as propaganda devices (Logan and Reeves 2009). The way in which the visitor cognitively reorganizes this moment is, therefore, crucial.

Following this destabilization, visitors begin a subprocess of evaluating the narrative of death and suffering. This subprocess is marked by a movement of relativization, which compares the violence of the Estado Novo with other authoritarian regimes, and by another of (de)naturalization, which oscillates between viewing violence as a normalized part of life under a dictatorship or as something extraordinary and shocking.

Relativization is particularly relevant in the Portuguese context, where the absence of material traces, the partial destruction of archives, especially those pertaining to the former colonies, and the persistence of discourses that present the Estado Novo as a 'mild' dictatorship contribute to minimizing interpretations. The literature demonstrates that Nazism and the Holocaust have become the universal trope of extreme violence, functioning as a comparative standard that obscures other forms of fascist violence (Huyssen 2003). In Portugal, this tendency is reinforced by narratives that describe the Estado Novo as an exception among European fascisms, sustained by myths of civility, moral Catholicism, and academic leadership (Loff 2015; Rosas 2007).

Naturalization, in turn, is more common among individuals with firsthand memory, who experienced violence as part of daily life. Younger visitors, however, lacking direct memory, tend to denaturalize the violence, reacting with shock and disbelief. The process culminates in one of two possible outcomes: resonance, when the museum's narrative is integrated into and amplified by the individual's narrative, or dissonance, when the narrative is rejected, challenged, or reinterpreted in a divergent manner.

The research suggests that clear identification is the most decisive factor for resonance. Visitors with high political awareness and/or firsthand memory tend to resonate with the museum's narrative, while visitors with diffuse or relativistic identifications tend toward dissonance. Dissonance should not be understood as a failure of the museum narrative, but as a critical space where hegemonic memories, familiar silences, and public discourses clash. However, when dissonance translates into a rejection of historical violence, as observed among some students or among older visitors without anti-fascist involvement, this poses a challenge to the museum's educational mission. The analysis points to several practical implications:

- Identification can be fostered by the museum narrative, particularly through the individualization of stories and the materialization of violence.
- The scope of the narrative must be balanced with individual elements, preventing the scale of repression from becoming abstract.
- The absence of material traces requires more interactive interpretive strategies, especially for young audiences.
- The Museum's educational mission faces specific challenges with audiences who have low political awareness or whose memories of the dictatorship have become normalized.
- National memory policies shape the reception of the museum narrative, especially in a country where the democratic transition involved the reintegration of perpetrators and the absence of robust transitional justice processes.

Conclusion

This article has proposed a grounded, visitor-centered theory of memory (re)construction in dark tourism settings, based on empirical research conducted at the Museum of Aljube – Resistance and Freedom in Lisbon. Drawing from focus group interviews with visitors from distinct political, generational and ideological backgrounds, the study analyzed how the experience of engaging with a site of repression, resistance and trauma gives rise to divergent and often conflicting interpretations of the past.

The process of (re)constructing memory at the Aljube Museum is, therefore, a complex phenomenon situated at the intersection of history, politics, affects, and pedagogy. The visit to the museum does not produce uniform effects; on the contrary, it triggers interpretive

mechanisms that are deeply shaped by visitors' historical and political perspectives. Understanding these mechanisms is fundamental to thinking about the role of memory museums in post-dictatorial societies and to reflecting on how these spaces can contribute to a critical, informed, and socially transformative civic and political education.

Although Portugal is rarely included in the canon of postcolonial or Global South studies, this paper argues that the Portuguese case offers valuable insight into how post-fascist societies with limited transitional justice mechanisms manage (or fail to manage) their violent pasts. The absence of an effective institutional lustration has led to a diffuse and fragmented memory landscape, where civil society and cultural institutions are left to carry the burden of remembrance.

This situation is not unique to Portugal. Other Southern European countries, such as Spain, Greece, or parts of the former Yugoslavia face similar dilemmas around the legacy of authoritarianism, the fragility of democratic memory, and the temptation to frame history through depoliticized or tourist-friendly lenses. As such, the Aljube offers a case study with broader relevance for understanding how sites of dark tourism function in post-authoritarian contexts across the Global South and Southern Europe. Moreover, the findings suggest that even when dark tourism is framed as educational or commemorative, it can reproduce epistemic inequalities, especially if visitors lack the tools to engage critically with the narrative. This points to the importance of designing multi-vocal, reflexive and participatory museum practices, and of incorporating counternarratives that challenge dominant frames.

Notes

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[2] A full methodological description of this study can be found in Coutinho 2025.

[3] Subject identifiers follow the coding system originally developed for the author's doctoral research. Each participant was assigned an anonymized code consisting of the abbreviation "Suj" (from the Portuguese sujeito, meaning "subject"), followed by the abbreviation of the focus group to which they belonged (MdR = Resistance Activists; ES = Secondary School Students; JA = Young Activists; CC = General Visitors with first-degree memory of the dictatorship) and a sequential identification number (e.g., SujCC7). The original Portuguese coding system was retained in this article for consistency with the broader research project.

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Tlatelolco as a Disputed Landscape: Dark Tourism, State Violence, and Memory in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a critical rereading of dark tourism based on the articulation between the production of space, the institutionalization of memory, and cultural disputes over traumatic pasts. In contrast to prevailing definitions that conceive of it as a market niche associated with visiting sites linked to death and disaster, it is argued that dark tourism must be analyzed as a situated social practice, traversed by power relations, global hierarchies of mourning, and processes of patrimonialization. The study focuses on the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco (Mexico City), site of the 2 October 1968 massacre. Through a qualitative approach based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews conducted between 2023 and 2025, three analytical dimensions are examined: the degree of state institutionalization of the site, the cultural and ideological frameworks shaping its relationship with its surroundings, and the meanings attributed by visitors according to their origin, class, and cultural capital. The findings show that Tlatelolco constitutes a space of conflictive memory, where official narratives of reconciliation coexist with insurgent memories that denounce impunity. While the museification of trauma has facilitated its integration into cultural and educational circuits, it has not eliminated underlying political tensions. The article concludes that dark tourism in Global South contexts cannot be understood without considering historical asymmetries and the permanent dispute over control of the national narrative.

Keywords

dark tourism, collective memory, state violence, production of space, Tlatelolco, geopolitics of mourning

¿Con qué he de irme?
¿Nada dejaré en pos de mí sobre la tierra?
¿Cómo ha de actuar mi corazón?
¿Acaso en vano venimos a vivir,
a brotar sobre la tierra?
Dejemos al menos flores.
Dejemos al menos cantos.[1]

Introduction

In recent decades, tourism has consolidated itself as one of the strategic sectors of the global economy. However, its dominant definition remains anchored in an economistic perspective

that privileges displacement, consumption, and revenue generation as its central dimensions (Urry and Larsen 2011). This vision, promoted by public and private actors, has oriented public and territorial planning processes toward the conversion of space into product and experience into commodity (García Canclini 1990). Within this framework, even places marked by violence, suffering and death have been incorporated into visitation circuits under the category of "dark tourism" (Lennon and Foley 2000).

The foundational literature of dark tourism has contributed to delimiting the field, defining it as visits to sites associated with death, disaster, or historical trauma (Lennon and Foley 2000; Binik 2020). Many of these approaches, however, tend to depoliticize the structural conditions enabling the transformation of spaces of violence into tourism objects (Podoshen et al. 2015). By focusing on typologies, motivations, or degrees of authenticity, they frequently omit the power relations, ideological disputes, and global hierarchies that organize which memories are institutionalized, which are silenced, and under what frameworks they become visitable (Aguirre 2014).

Against this technocratic rationality, critical studies have proposed understanding tourism as a situated social practice inscribed in processes of the production of space and in memory regimes (Carrigan 2014; Allier Montaño 2018). From this perspective, dark tourism is not simply a market niche, but a field where state and other actors generate differentiated interpretations of the past (Allier Montaño 2018). The question is no longer solely why a site associated with death is visited, but rather how that space is managed and reframed in specific historical contexts.

The Plaza de las Tres Culturas has become synonymous with a site for denouncing atrocities and demanding justice. Its symbolic meaning has extended beyond Mexico, appearing in travel guides that recommend the site to visitors to Mexico City as a destination for a particular form of trauma tourism — one that seeks political and cultural meaning through travel, and perhaps also encounters with the material and symbolic remnants of tragedy (Allier Montaño 2018, 235).

This article is inscribed within that critical line and proposes rethinking dark tourism from three analytical axes: (1) the degree of state institutionalization of memory sites; (2) the cultural and ideological frameworks that structure their relationship with the environment; and (3) the meanings attributed by visitors according to their origin, class, and cultural capital. We maintain that the experience of dark tourism cannot be understood without attending to the geopolitics of memory that differentially distributes the value of mourning, nor without analyzing the heritage apparatuses that transform trauma into regulated experience (Lennon and Foley 2000; Allier Montaño 2018).

The study focuses on the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco (Mexico City), the site of the October 2, 1968 massacre (Allier Montaño 2018). This space constitutes a paradigmatic case for examining the tensions between the production of space, patrimonialization, and

memory. Designed as an architectural synthesis of the pre-Hispanic past, colonization, and state modernity, the plaza was conceived as an emblem of national unity (Pani 1964; ArchDaily 2015). However, the 1968 repression fractures that narrative, converting the place into a symbol of state violence and a field of dispute over the control of historical meaning (Poniatowska 1971). The objective is not to classify Tlatelolco within a typology of 'darkness', but to examine how the memory of trauma is institutionalized and potentially touristified within a Latin American context marked by incomplete processes of justice and democratization.

By addressing Tlatelolco as a laboratory of contemporary tensions between mourning, pedagogy, and cultural consumption, the article seeks to contribute to a rereading of dark tourism from the Global South. Rather than treating it as a homogeneous phenomenon, we propose to read it as a practice traversed by historical asymmetries and by the permanent dispute between critical memory and official narratives. Only by situating the analysis within this web of power, culture, and institutionalization is it possible to displace dark tourism from a market logic toward a critical ethics of memory (Rico 2018).

The Production of Space, Institutionalization, and Memory: Rethinking dark tourism

Tourism has traditionally been defined from an economic perspective that privileges its quantifiable dimension as a revenue, employment, and growth-generating activity. To this dimension is added the spatial one: the displacement of people outside their usual environment. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO 2000) defines it as a social, cultural, and economic activity involving travel for personal or professional reasons, emphasizing its effects on growth and the circulation of capital.

This conception, promoted alike by international organizations, states, and the private sector, has oriented public policies and territorial planning toward tourism as an engine of development. In this instrumental view, visiting equals consuming: the tourist is an economic agent who moves, spends, and returns, leaving a measurable impact on Gross Domestic Product (GDP). As MacCannell (1976) warned, the tourist experience becomes symbolic consumption where the 'authentic' is commodified to satisfy the desire for the exotic. The visited space becomes a showcase, reinforcing asymmetries between hosts and visitors.

The concept of dark tourism has evolved through different analytical emphases. Lennon and Foley (2000, 3-11) described it as the presentation and consumption of real and commodified sites associated with death and disaster, highlighting the role of the tourism industry in transforming traumatic events into visitor experiences. Seaton (1996, 240), by contrast, had focussed on tourist's motivations, defining thanatourism as travel motivated wholly or partly by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death. Building on these perspectives, Stone (2006, 146) conceptualized dark tourism more broadly as the act of

travelling to sites associated with death, suffering, and the seemingly macabre, proposing a spectrum ranging from sites closely connected to authentic tragedy to more commercialized and entertainment-oriented attractions. Together, these approaches established dark tourism as a field concerned not only with places of death, but also with the social, cultural, political, and ethical processes through which such places are interpreted, commemorated, and consumed.

Much of the foundational literature on dark tourism originates from the Global North and presupposes a tourist traveling from that region (Carrigan 2014, 238). Under this perspective, sites are staged through processes of touristification: they are regulated and adapted to Western consumption standards—spatial ordering and the suppression of sensory or bodily risks—converting death into managed experience. Even horror is integrated into the product portfolio under criteria of efficiency and profitability, which marginalizes its historical and ethical density (Lennon and Foley 2000; Carrigan 2014).

Against technocratic approaches that reduce tourism to flows, infrastructure, or economic impacts, critical geographers argue that space is socially produced through power relations (Harvey 2003, 87-115; Massey 2005, 9-15). From this perspective, tourism is not merely physical mobility but a social practice that participates in the production, appropriation, and representation of places. In the case of Tlatelolco, these dynamics involve interventions in territory, public memory, and political meaning (Allier Montaño 2018, 230-236). Applied to dark tourism, this approach allows an analysis of how companies and institutions construct simplified narratives that privilege emotion and impact while omitting the structures that produced the trauma in the first place.

In contrast to approaches that framed dark tourism primarily as a tourism product or consumer experience, thereby downplaying its broader social and cultural implications (Sharpley 2005), Stone (2006) proposes understanding dark tourism as a spectrum ranging from “darker” sites, characterized by a stronger connection to traumatic events and commemorative practices, to more thematized and commercialized spaces. In this work, we propose that three variables are central to situating places on this continuum: (1) their state institutionalization, (2) the cultural and ideological frameworks surrounding them, and (3) the meanings that tourists attribute to the experience.

State Institutionalization

The degree of intervention by the state or international organizations shapes the site’s narrative, regulation, and legitimacy of the site. In the Global North, highly institutionalized spaces predominate, featuring pedagogical scripts and normative frameworks that orient a moral interpretation of the past. In Latin America, there are also examples of institutionalization oriented toward memory and symbolic reparation; however, numerous spaces of violence in

the Global South lack official recognition or adequate infrastructure (Sastre Díaz 2015). The absence of institutionality produces different experiences: abandoned ruins, precarious management, or ambiguous narratives can lead to banalization or spectacularization. This inequality in institutional treatment reflects global hierarchies about which memories deserve to be preserved and under what conditions.

Cultural and Ideological Frameworks

The "dark" character of a site is not inherent but relational. It depends on cultural values, ideological disputes, and processes of memory or denial. In a Latin American context, where indigenous, Christian, and secularized traditions coexist, the meanings attributed to death are plural. Practices such as the Day of the Dead in Mexico illustrate a culturally ambivalent and ritualized relationship with death that differs from the more restrained and solemn commemorative traditions predominant in many European countries and the United States (Lomnitz 2005). Rather than being confined to mourning, death is publicly integrated into everyday life through altars, music, food, satire, and family gatherings in cemeteries, where the deceased are symbolically welcomed back into the community. By contrast, in countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and much of Scandinavia, public remembrance tends to emphasize silence, contemplation, and individual mourning, while in France and Belgium commemorative practices are largely framed through official ceremonies centered on war memorials and military cemeteries. These contrasting cultural traditions shape not only how death is remembered, but also how sites associated with violence are interpreted, commemorated, and experienced as tourist destinations.

Likewise, in post-conflict scenarios, such as in Peru, Colombia, Argentina and El Salvador, sites of violence are the object of narrative disputes among state, victims, social organizations, the local population, and opposing social sectors. For some, they constitute legitimate spaces of mourning; for others, political impositions (Jaramillo 2021). Local cosmologies may integrate death into spiritual cycles or communal rituals, while external tourists seek linear and documentary explanatory frameworks. Thus, interpretation depends on the interaction between local imaginaries and global expectations.

Meaning Attributed by Tourists

The experience of dark tourism varies according to visitors' social, geographical, and cultural positions. This is where the geopolitics of memory becomes visible. Tragedies in the Global North — such as the Shoah or 9/11 — have been universalized through sophisticated museum infrastructures and global ethical narratives (Sharpley and Stone 2014). By contrast, conflicts and massacres in the Global South tend to be underrepresented or incorporated into tourist circuits through logics of exoticization or morbidity (Seaton 1996). This hierarchy of suffering

reflects what Mbembe (2003) and Butler (2010) conceptualize as the differential distribution of the value of life and death: not all deaths are equally mourned or institutionalized. Northern tourists may consume the pain of the South from a privileged position that oscillates between humanitarian concern and entertainment. Conversely, visitors affectively or historically connected to these events may experience the site as a political act or as part of a search for justice (Lennon and Foley 2000, 11).

The tension between consumption and commemoration traverses the entire field of dark tourism. What determines whether certain places are designed to educate and others to entertain? Why do some tragedies become universal symbols while others remain peripheral? These questions refer to global power structures that organize the visibility of mourning. Consequently, dark tourism cannot be understood solely as a market niche: it is a practice situated within a web of institutionalization and culture. Only by recognizing historical asymmetries and the differential character of the right to mourning is it possible to displace it from consumption logic toward a critical ethics of memory.

Entering the Field of Mourning: Analyzing Memory as Tourist Practice

The research was developed between 2023 and 2025 with a qualitative, interpretative approach, oriented toward the analysis of dark tourism as a social practice linked to processes of memory, state violence, and the touristification of traumatic events. The study focused on the Plaza de las Tres Culturas as a dark tourism site associated with the 1968 massacre. A case study strategy was adopted, providing analytical depth over statistical representativeness. In total, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with survivors and former students of the 1968 movement, long-term residents of the Tlatelolco complex, local cultural mediators, and visitors participating in commemorative and touristic activities in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas.

The selection of informants followed Valles Martínez's (2002) typology of key, representative, and special informants, using purposive and voluntary sampling (Hernández Sampieri *et al.* 2014), to prioritize theoretical relevance and participants' ability to provide substantive information on the construction and contemporary resignification of the 1968 narrative in a tourist context. Interviews were transcribed and thematically coded, combining inductive categories with the three analytical axes proposed in this article (state institutionalization, cultural and ideological frameworks, and visitors' meanings).

Key informants included people who witnessed the state violence of October 2, 1968, as well as informal tourism promoters and cultural mediators linked to the transmission of the site's memory. These actors facilitated access to the field and provided fundamental interpretive frameworks. Representative informants consisted of activists and human rights defenders involved in memory and commemoration processes, which allowed the analysis of

current disputes around the institutionalization and commercialization of the place. Special informants were adult local residents of Tlatelolco, directly or indirectly affected by the events or not, in order to explore everyday perceptions of the space and its integration into visitation and symbolic consumption dynamics.

Two main techniques were employed: participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Observation allowed for recording interactions among visitors, guides, activists, and neighbors, as well as museographic devices, commemorative rituals, and guided tours. The interest centered on identifying how the historical narrative operates as a symbolic resource and how tensions are articulated among memory, pedagogy, and spectacularization. Interviews were designed from a flexible guide based on previously defined theoretical axes: state institutionalization, collective memory, state violence, touristification, and visitor experience. Given the sensitivity of the topic, informed consent, confidentiality when requested, and the ethical handling of testimonies were guaranteed, situating the research within a critical perspective of memory.

All the participants provided informed consent, and generic identifiers (e.g., survivor, resident, visitor) are used in the findings to protect confidentiality while preserving the analytical value of their testimonies.

The Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco: History, Modernity, and Rupture

Located in the north of Mexico City, in the Cuauhtémoc borough, the Plaza de las Tres Culturas constitutes one of the country's most densely historically charged urban spaces. At this site converge three foundational moments of national history: the pre-Hispanic world, Spanish colonization, and the modern project of the post-revolutionary state. The plaza is not only a physical space but an urban palimpsest where layers of memory, power, and symbolic dispute are superimposed (Toscano 1968).

In pre-Hispanic times, Tlatelolco was an urban nucleus linked to Mexico-Tenochtitlan, with a strategic position near the ancient Lake Texcoco. Its great market (tianguis) was one of the principal exchange centers of Mesoamerica, articulating regional commercial networks. In addition to its economic relevance, the place acquired decisive political-military significance when it became the final site of Mexica resistance in 1521, when Tenochtitlan fell under the command of Hernán Cortés (Pani 1964).

After the Conquest, the site was reappropriated as a space for spiritual and educational domination. In 1536, the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, considered the first center of higher education in America, was founded. Promoted by the Franciscans, it sought to train young noble indigenous people in Latin, theology, and the liberal arts, integrating them into the viceroyalty's evangelizing project. The college was also a space of conflictive encounter between indigenous and European knowledges, as it allowed the preservation and recording

of Mesoamerican languages and knowledge. Beside it, the church of Santiago Apóstol was erected, atop vestiges of the ancient Mexica ceremonial center, following the colonial strategy of architectural and symbolic superimposition (Toscano 1968).

During the colonial period, Tlatelolco was consolidated as a hybrid space where the memory of the defeated indigenous world and the ecclesiastical structure of the viceroyalty coexisted. This mestizo and tensioned character persisted in subsequent centuries, when the area was progressively incorporated into the Mexican state's modernization projects (Pani 1964).

In the first half of the twentieth century, the post-revolutionary state promoted cultural and educational policies oriented toward consolidating a unified national identity. In that context, the Nonoalco-Tlatelolco Urban Complex, designed by architect Mario Pani and inaugurated in the 1960s, represented one of the most ambitious projects of modern urbanism in Mexico. Conceived under functionalist principles and comprehensive planning, it included more than one hundred residential buildings, schools, shopping centers, and cultural spaces. The Plaza de las Tres Culturas was designed as the symbolic heart of the complex (Pani 1964).

The spatial operation was deliberate, integrating into the same landscape the Mexica archaeological ruins, the colonial church, and the modern architecture of the state. The official discourse of mestizaje found in Tlatelolco an ideal scenario to stage the harmonious continuity among indigenous past, Hispanic heritage, and national modernity. In 1966, President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz formally inaugurated the plaza as a symbol of historical unity and progress. However, that narrative omitted the social and political tensions traversing the country (Moreno 2010).

In 1968, Mexico experienced a profound paradox. While the government prepared for the Olympic Games to project an international image of stability and modernity, social demands for democratization and political freedom were accumulating. The PRI regime maintained authoritarian control over unions, media, and universities, and had previously repressed worker and student movements (Poniatowska 1971, 40-43, 140-141). The 1968 student conflict was triggered in July, following the violent intervention of police forces in a clash between preparatory schools. The state response, including the use of the Army to occupy university facilities, radicalized the movement and gave rise to the National Strike Council (*Consejo Nacional de Huelga*, CNH), which articulated a list of demands centered on democratic freedoms and an end to repression. For months, massive marches evidenced the breadth of social discontent (Monsiváis 1999; Poniatowska 1971).

On 2 October 1968, the Plaza de las Tres Culturas hosted a rally convened by the National Strike Council (CNH). The assembly was surrounded by military and police forces. After signal flares were launched, an armed operation began that resulted in gunfire against the crowd. Chaos ensued as soldiers entered the surrounding housing complex, carried out mass arrests, and initially prevented ambulances and Red Cross personnel from reaching the

wounded (Poniatowska 1971, 229-252). Although the official death toll remained low, subsequent historical investigations have concluded that the number of victims was likely in the hundreds.

The operation responded to a clear political objective: to dismantle the student movement before the inauguration of the Olympic Games, thereby protecting the international image of the Mexican government (Monsiváis 1999, 126-132). Yet the symbolic outcome was the opposite. Through the testimonies collected by Poniatowska (1971, 229-260) and later interpreted by Monsiváis (1999, 119-145), the Plaza de las Tres Culturas ceased to function as an emblem of national modernity and historical reconciliation, becoming instead one of the most enduring symbols of authoritarianism and state violence in modern Mexican history.

Tlatelolco between Pride and Shame: Institutionalization and Dispute over Memory

As we have seen, before 1968, Tlatelolco symbolized the triumph of functionalist urbanism and developmentalist nationalism (Pani 1964). Military repression, however, converted that scenario of progress into a landscape of state horror (Monsiváis 1999; Poniatowska 1971). During the subsequent decades, the government opted for silence: it avoided recognizing responsibilities and limited public appropriation of the place as a memory space. The tributes paid by family members and activists (flowers, small crosses, candles and graffiti simulating bodies) were for years monitored or removed, configuring what Elizabeth Jelin calls “memories in conflict” (Jelin 2002, 37, 47): subaltern narratives confronted with the hegemonic account.

It was not until the 1990s, in the context of democratic opening and legitimacy crisis of the PRI regime, that processes of institutional recognition began. The creation of the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH n.d.) and the 1993 inauguration of the Tlatelolco Stele marked a controlled opening: the state incorporated 1968 into national discourse under a reconciliation framework, without fully assuming responsibilities. Although the Mexican state gradually incorporated the memory of the 1968 massacre into official commemorative policies, this recognition remained politically circumscribed. As Allier Montaño (2018) argues, Tlatelolco was progressively institutionalized as a site of memory through museums, memorials, and public commemorations, yet these initiatives often privileged narratives of national reconciliation over questions of political responsibility, state accountability, and judicial justice. Memory was therefore acknowledged, but within political limits that sought to integrate the event into the national historical narrative without fully resolving the demands for truth and accountability (Allier Montaño 2018, 223-236).

The culminating point of this institutionalization occurred in 2007 with the creation of the Tlatelolco University Cultural Center (CCUT), which integrates the Museum of 68, the Site Museum, and a memorial to the student movement (UNAM n.d.). This process consolidated permanent cultural infrastructures and converted memory into a museographic experience.

However, by delegating the duty of memory to the university and Institutions, the state channeled trauma toward an administered and expository form. In Pierre Nora's (1984) terms, living memory — sustained by mourning, political mobilization, and ongoing social claims — was progressively transformed into a regulated and patrimonialized memory, as the state and cultural institutions incorporated the site into official heritage frameworks. This process stabilized narratives of the past, while simultaneously reducing the visibility of competing interpretations and the site's function as a space of political contestation.

This institutionalization transforms the plaza into a potentially touristic space. As Carrigan argues, dark tourism requires attention to "the political and ethical implications of heritage practices" (Carrigan 2014, 238), since the institutional framing of sites of violence shapes how the past is interpreted and consumed. In this sense, memory becomes traversable, programmable, and visitable. The museification of trauma opens the door to its incorporation into cultural and memory tourism circuits, where the violent past is organized into pedagogical narratives that may neutralize its conflictual potential (Allier Montaño 2018, 230-236).

However, institutionalization has not eliminated conflict. Each October 2 anniversary, official acts coexist with marches and mobilizations led by student collectives and human rights organizations (Allier Montaño 2018). While the state tends to frame the massacre as a surpassed episode within the democratization process, social movements claim it as a persistent symbol of impunity and structural violence. This coexistence reveals an intermediate and problematic degree of institutionalization: official recognition and cultural infrastructure exist, but the narrative remains fragmented and in dispute (Trevizo 2015).

The plaza thus becomes a laboratory of the tensions inherent to dark tourism. Commemoration, protest, pedagogy, and cultural consumption converge in the same space (Carrigan 2014, 237-239). The annual marches function as hybrid practices where political rituals also produce forms of observation and visitation, especially for those approaching from outside directly affected communities. The boundaries between insurgent memory and tourist experience become porous (Allier Montaño 2018).

This intermediate and problematic degree of institutionalization is not only visible in commemorative calendars and museum scripts, but also in everyday struggles over who can legitimately speak in the plaza. A local cultural mediator (P1, cultural mediator, non-official guide, adult 70s) describes "a systematic attitude" from the University (Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco) and the Ministry of the Interior, who label him "a liar, a madman or someone seeking to 'profit' from the massacre," while some leaders of the residents' association "wanted to expel" him and others "defended him fiercely" (P1). For him, simply remaining in the plaza is "an objective in itself," a "symbol" that freedom of expression is still limited. These conflicts show that the institutionalization of Tlatelolco as a heritage and memory

site does not resolve the political disputes over its meaning, but rather relocates them into contested regimes of authorized speech and silence.

The central paradox lies in the state commemorating an event of which it was the perpetrator, constructing memory from the same structure that attempted to erase it. Tlatelolco thus embodies a permanent tension between national pride, expressed through its original conception as a synthesis of Mexico's historical development and modernizing aspirations (Márez Tapia 2011), and state shame, as the site became the principal symbol of the 1968 massacre and authoritarian violence (Allier Montaño 2018, 223-236). Consequently, the plaza is not merely a national monument but a contested space in which competing narratives of the past coexist, revealing the unresolved limits of the patrimonialization of political violence (Ruisánchez Serra 2011, 179-206; Allier Montaño 2018, 230-236).

Cultural and Ideological Site–Surroundings Relations

The Plaza de las Tres Culturas is a territory where civilizing projects and memories in dispute converge. In its material configuration, three historical matrices emerge — indigenous, colonial, and modern — that are usually presented in official discourse as a harmonious synthesis of the nation. However, that narrative obscures the enduring ideological fractures and cultural hierarchies that continue to define the site's social and symbolic significance (Allier Montaño 2018). As Eugenia Allier Montaño Montaño argues, Tlatelolco has become both a 'realm of memory' and a tourist destination, yet its transformation has never erased the political conflicts surrounding the interpretation of the 1968 massacre. She explicitly notes that the plaza is "*a place where multiple memories coexist and dispute their meanings*" (Allier Montaño 2018, 217, emphasis in the original).

The Nonoalco-Tlatelolco Urban Complex was conceived during the early 1960s as one of the most ambitious urban regeneration projects of the Mexican developmentalist state. In his proposal for the complex, Mario Pani emphasized functional planning, vertical housing, extensive green areas, and the rational organization of urban space as the basis for a modern city (Pani 1964, 185, 205-206). Later architectural historians have interpreted the project as a paradigmatic expression of the ideals of progress, order, and postwar urban modernity promoted by the Mexican state (Mereles 1997, 177-190). Before it, the Mexica ruins and the colonial church were integrated as historical references legitimizing the national narrative but subordinated to the monumentality of modern concrete. As García Canclini (1990) warns, the post-revolutionary cultural project incorporated the indigenous and popular as symbolic ornament within a narrative of controlled mestizaje. The spatial hierarchy expresses it clearly: the archaeological in the subsoil, the colonial on an intermediate plane, and modernity dominating the horizon.

This stratification does not imply intercultural dialogue but superimpositions. The material coexistence of different historical periods produces an aesthetic of reconciliation that, in Laurajane Smith's (2006) terms, reflects an *Authorized Heritage Discourse* (AHD). As Smith argues, heritage is shaped by "a hegemonic discourse about heritage, which acts to constitute the way we think, talk and write about heritage" (Smith 2006, 11). Rather than acknowledging the coexistence of competing memories, this discourse privileges a unified historical narrative in which pre-Hispanic, colonial, and modern layers appear harmoniously integrated. In doing so, it constructs a hegemonic version of the past that incorporates certain memories while marginalizing or silencing others. In the case of Tlatelolco, both the violence of the Spanish Conquest and the state repression of 1968 risk being absorbed into a visual narrative of national continuity, where successive historical layers appear to culminate in a shared national heritage. The apparent harmony of the site thus conceals the historical conflicts, asymmetrical power relations, and competing memory claims that continue to define the plaza as a contested landscape. The immediate urban environment reinforces these tensions. The housing complex, initially a middle-class modern housing model, today faces deterioration and inequality. For its inhabitants, Tlatelolco is first and foremost a neighborhood: school, market, church, daily routine. Heritage monumentality and sporadic tourist visitation coexist with domestic life. As one resident (P2, local resident, adult 45s) explains, many other local residents around Plaza de las Tres Culturas "do not necessarily experience the 1968 narrative as a state aggression, but as an invasion of other people," and "do not like that strangers come here as if they were entering their own house" (P2). This perception of intrusion highlights that the plaza is not only a national symbol or a tourist destination, but also a contested domestic landscape where heritage and memory practices are negotiated against everyday uses of space. The extraordinary — the massacre, national memory — interweaves with ordinary routine and local commerce, generating constant tension between lived space and represented space.

On the ideological plane, interpretation of the site has varied generationally. For those who lived through the Cold War, Tlatelolco symbolized repression and authoritarianism (Monsiváis 1999); for contemporary youth, it is an emblem of democratic resistance but also a heritage referent incorporated into educational and tourist circuits (Allier Montaño 2018). This process reflects what Elizabeth Jelin describes as the continual resignification of memory, whereby new historical contexts reshape the meanings attributed to the past (Jelin 2002, 13). Rather than replacing previous interpretations, successive commemorative practices accumulate, generating multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings. The religious dimension adds another layer of complexity. The church of Santiago, built atop the ancient Mexica ceremonial center, recalls the symbolic violence of evangelization. The discourse of 'mestizaje' converted that imposition into a myth of national integration. The combined image of Mexica stone, colonial quarry, and modernist concrete generates a reconciling aesthetic

that softens foundational conflicts. This aestheticization facilitates the site's incorporation into heritage and tourist narratives that privilege contemplation over historical confrontation.

Tlatelolco functions as a metaphor for the Mexican national project: unity built on inequality, modernity constructed on the rubble of the past. As Monsiváis (1999) noted, Mexican culture glorifies progress while idealizing the archaic. In the plaza, celebrated ruins coexist with contemporary social fractures and with the traumatic memory of 1968. At present, multiple actors inscribe their own narratives in the space: student collectives claiming insurgent memory; cultural institutions such as INAH and UNAM managing heritage; faithful maintaining religious practices; local authorities interested in tourist and real estate projection. These narratives rarely dialogue on equal terms. Each organizes space from its own ideology, producing a mosaic of superimposed meanings (UNAM n.d.; Smith 2006). Therefore, the Plaza de las Tres Culturas cannot be understood as a simple "encounter" between civilizations, but as a field of symbolic contestation. It is a mirror of Mexico's contemporary contradictions: reconciling a violent past while projecting modernity and global openness. This tension between critical memory and heritage projection converts the site into fertile terrain for memory tourism and dark tourism practices, where the past is simultaneously remembered, and potentially consumed. Understanding these cultural and ideological differences is fundamental for analyzing visitor experience. Approaching Tlatelolco does not occur in a neutral vacuum, but within a landscape of unequal memory, traversed by historical hierarchies and contemporary contestation that condition the ways of seeing, narrating, and inhabiting the place.

Meaning Attributed by Tourists: Origin, class and culture

The Plaza de las Tres Culturas appears serene: modernist architecture, discreet archaeological ruins, the church of Santiago, and a neighborhood life activated during patronal festivals, sports activities, and informal commerce. Yet, visiting it is not equivalent to a conventional tourist practice. It is a symbolic experience where national history, state violence, and contemporary forms of remembering are confronted. The meaning of the site varies according to the origin, cultural capital, and social position of those who traverse it. For the occasional visitor, national or foreign, the approach is usually brief and decontextualized. The archaeological zone functions as scenic backdrop; the commemorative stele ("To the comrades fallen on October 2, 1968...") operates as a visual landmark. Names are read and quickly forgotten. This transit experience prioritizes passage through the place over understanding of trauma, reducing memory to a spatial marker. It is a form of rapid consumption of the past, compatible with broader urban itineraries.

Among urban middle-class sectors, the visit acquires a pedagogical character. Schools and universities organize tours and commemorations that present October 2 as a tragic but

formative episode of Mexican democracy. In this key, Tlatelolco functions as a civic classroom: memory is integrated into a narrative of historical learning and citizenship. For older activists, this pedagogical appropriation also entails a renewed responsibility. As one interviewee (P3, 1968 movement, adult 70s) notes, as long as the "veterans" remain alive they have the duty "to prevent these events from being repeated by sharing our experiences with the new generations" (P3). This sense of obligation links memory transmission to a broader ethics of political education, rather than to mere heritage consumption. While this appropriation transmits democratic values, it also tends to frame state violence as a lesson overcome, attenuating conflict and normalizing the past within a reconciliation narrative (Allier Montaño 2018).

In contrast, for generations directly or indirectly linked to the 1968 movement — survivors and victims' families — returning to the plaza is a painful but necessary act. Several interviewees described difficult emotions but also a sense of fulfilment when seeing younger people in the marches. One survivor (P4, survivor, adult 75s) explains that returning to Tlatelolco after more than fifty years brings "sadness and nostalgia, but at the same time an inner peace… like seeing that the tree you planted is finally bearing fruit" (P4). It is not about knowing but about reaffirming a dissident memory that denounces impunity and questions the neutral patrimonialization of the site. The tour becomes political ritual: slogans, offerings, marches, and protest gestures reinscribe the space as a territory of impugnation. This intertwining of grief, inner peace and retrospective evaluation illustrates how, for survivors, dark tourism at Tlatelolco is inseparable from long-term struggles over justice and the perceived outcomes of their collective actions. Here, the relationship is neither aesthetic nor touristic, but openly political: it resists the reduction of trauma to administered cultural experience.

There also exists the gaze of those who inhabit the Nonoalco-Tlatelolco complex. For many neighbours, the plaza is part of routine: transit space, recreation, commerce. Memory coexists with daily life. The tragic past does not disappear but is normalized; it is inhabited more than commemorated. This form of relationship produces an incorporated and silent memory, not necessarily articulated in public discourses but persistent in the daily experience of the place. The boundary between the historical and the domestic becomes porous.

Class and cultural capital differences affect these appropriations. Visitors with greater historical training or political sensitivity tend to seek explanatory contexts and critical frameworks; others consume the site as an emblematic point of the city. The experience is also mediated by school narratives, media, and tourist circuits that organize prior expectations. Thus, the plaza is interpreted from diverse educational, emotional, or media frameworks, producing a plurality of memories.

These positions are not mutually exclusive and may overlap. The same individual may move between civic pedagogy, personal emotion, and tourist observation. However, the

coexistence of these approaches also reflects unequal access to the interpretive frameworks through which the past acquires meaning. As one interviewee (P5, Local resident, Adult 40s) emphasizes, “many people are still damaged by what happened fifty years ago… some are slowly recovering, others never did, because they lost their sanity or their lives” (P5). As Jelin (2002, 39-78) argues, memories are socially constructed, contested, and embedded in unequal relations of power; consequently, not all visitors possess the same cultural and historical frameworks to interpret the multiple layers of meaning condensed in Tlatelolco. The long-term wounds recalled by P5 underscore that the tourist experience at the site is entangled with ongoing struggles over trauma and recognition.

In sum, the meaning attributed to Tlatelolco does not reside solely in its materiality but in the interaction among institutional memory, lived experience, and visitation practices. The plaza is simultaneously an urban landmark, civic classroom, secular mourning sanctuary, and domestic space. This plurality of uses confirms that the experience of memory tourism is traversed by origin, class, and culture, and that the violent past can be remembered, ritualized, or consumed according to the frameworks from which it is viewed.

Conclusions

This analysis of the Plaza de las Tres Culturas allows us to argue that dark tourism cannot be understood solely as a thematic modality of the tourism market but as a field where the production of space, the institutionalization of memory, and multiple political disputes over the meaning of the past are articulated. The case of Tlatelolco evidences that sites associated with state violence are territories in permanent tension: between national pride and historical shame, between patrimonialization and protest, between civic pedagogy and insurgent memory.

The degree of state institutionalization of October 2 reveals an ambiguous process. While cultural devices and official recognitions exist, memory remains fragmented and conflicted. The museification of trauma has facilitated its integration into educational and tourist circuits but has also tended to frame it within reconciliation narratives that attenuate the structural responsibility of the state. Likewise, cultural, generational, and class differences decisively affect visitor experience. Tlatelolco is simultaneously an urban landmark, a civic classroom, a secular sanctuary, and an inhabited neighborhood. The experience is not homogeneous: it may be superficial consumption, institutional learning, political mourning, or memory incorporated into daily life.

In this sense, the case shows that dark tourism in the Global South is traversed by historical asymmetries and by a geopolitics of mourning that hierarchizes memories. Rethinking it critically implies recognizing that not all violent pasts are institutionalized in the

same way nor generate the same forms of visitation. More than a tourist product, Tlatelolco is a space where memory continues to be a field of conflict.

Notes

[1] Mario Alberto Velázquez García wishes to pay homage to his co-author, Fernando Andrès Meza Rojas, who passed away far too soon in 2026, and offer his felt condolences to his family by quoting a few lines from a poem by Netzahualcóyotl, king and poet (1402-1472).

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Beyond Dark Voyeurism: Nuclear violence, memory and community at Maralinga

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ABSTRACT

Dark tourism practices may reproduce problematic power dynamics, positioning visitors as consumers of curated narratives that may maintain affective distance even in cases of ongoing violence. For instance, at nuclear sites, restrictions manage both literal radioactive danger and the metaphorical toxicity of state violence and colonial dispossession, with tourists encountering nuclear history as a safely bounded past rather than a pervasive ongoing present, and future, since radioactivity persists invisibly across generations. This article addresses the "nuclear uncanny" (Masco 2006, 28) at Maralinga, site of numerous British nuclear tests on Pitjantjatjara land in South Australia from 1956 to 1963. Despite being long-lasting proof of a violence which is twice colonial, since 'Australia' is at the same time a colony and a violently colonising country, Maralinga remains largely unknown in international contexts. In my view, the ongoing violence against Aboriginal peoples in so-called 'Australia' and the atomic contamination of their territory have shaped the coverage and narrative representation of Maralinga in ways that do no justice to this history of expropriation and annihilation, but also of creative re-appropriation. This intervention expands on romanticised fictional memoryscapes of Maralinga that domesticate nuclear history through conventional narrative closure. It then contrasts this rhetorical strategy with works by Aboriginal artists (mainly Yankunytjatjara/Kokatha poet Ali Cobby Eckermann and all those involved in the play *Ngapartji Ngapartji* (2012) by Scott Rankin and Trevor Jamieson), which insist on nuclear violence's presentness and futurity, on intergenerational and multidirectional trauma (Rothberg 2009) but also, and mainly, on possible practices of re-appropriation. The final section introduces 'communal un-forgetting' as a theoretical and activist framework emerging from community-based cultural practices — co-curated exhibitions, painting workshops, intergenerational storytelling, tours "reflecting the wishes of the Maralinga Tjarutja people" (Maralinga Tours 2026) — that both resist dark tourism as voyeuristic consumption and foster the reciprocal engagement of artists, audiences and tourists toward different ethical and political futures.

Keywords
Dark tourism, voyeurism, memory, trauma, nuclear violence, Maralinga, community re-appropriation

Introduction

The term 'dark tourism' was coined by Malcolm Foley and J. John Lennon in 1996 and, with all the complexity of its practices and narratives, dark tourism is now recognised as a mass cultural phenomenon garnering growing academic interest (see Stone 2018). It is true that conventional tourist paradigms may also reproduce problematic power dynamics, with visitors passively consuming curated narratives within carefully managed boundaries that may

maintain affective distance. At nuclear sites particularly, from New Mexico to Hiroshima and Chernobyl for instance, restrictions both manage literal ongoing radioactive danger and obfuscate the toxicity of state violence and colonial dispossession. Visitors to these sites (with the exception of Chernobyl and Fukushima) encounter nuclear history as though it were a safely bounded past rather than a pervasive ongoing present, with exceptional catastrophic events often obliterating radically systemic violence. This dual character as both museum and toxic zone is further destabilised by nuclear time itself: since the half-life of plutonium-239, for instance, is 24,000 years, irradiated sites will remain potentially dangerous long after human memory as we know it possibly fades.

Within this context, I wish to analyse the case of Maralinga on Pitjantjatjara land in South Australia. From 1956 to 1963, seven major weapons tests and hundreds of minor trials dispersed mainly plutonium across these lands; yet, despite such prolonged violence, Maralinga remains largely unknown in both national and international arenas. It is both the explosive devastation and the slow violence of contamination persisting in its fields and remnant colonial buildings that this article attempts to navigate. I first introduce two novels: Dorothy Johnston's *Maralinga, My Love* (1988) and Judy Nunn's *Maralinga* (2009). In my view, they domesticate this nuclear history within conventional narratives, functioning as virtual dark tourism that contains discomfort and colonial guilt. Against these, I analyse more complex forms of memorialisation: a poem by Yankunytjatjara/Kokatha poet Ali Cobby Eckermann (2016) and the play *Ngapartji Ngapartji* (2012), by Scott Rankin and Trevor Jamieson, which intersects Hiroshima and Maralinga histories to 'illuminate' transnational patterns of nuclear dispossession. I argue that, by positioning Aboriginal voices and stories centre stage, these works facilitate communal responses to trauma and challenge Maralinga's strategic invisibility by insisting both on the presentness of nuclear violence and on its futurity.

The final section focuses on cultural practices that resist dark tourism's voyeuristic consumption and also adopts 'communal un-forgetting' as a theoretical and activist paradigm. I introduce community-led initiatives including co-curated museum exhibitions, narrative and painting workshops where nuclear history is inscribed within traditional epistemologies, with participants engaged as active agents in memory-making and artivism. These practices, and the 'Visit Maralinga' tours, insist on Maralinga's continuing toxicity, but offer a different ethical engagement of tourists, substituting any packaged consumption of trauma with relationships of accountability and reciprocity.

Into the dark: tourism as colonial gazing?

In 1976, and in a 2024 re-reading of that work, Dean MacCannell shed light on the cultural phenomenon of global tourism, seeing it through the lens of a 'leisure class' theory. To him, "alienated leisure" is the logical capitalistic outcome of Marx's "alienated labor"; therefore, "as

capital increasingly invades our leisure, tourists pay, sometimes dearly, for nothing – nothing tangible, nothing material […]" (MacCannell 1976; 2024, 170). This "nothing" generates immense profit, of course, and is meant to also generate a hunger for the 'Other'. In 1975, Louis Turner and John Ash had already suggested how tourism must be accounted for as an agent for the consolidation of Empire and of its representational grip. bell hooks clearly identifies how (imperial) desire has often been a devastating process of commodification, "so successful because [the 'Other'...] is offered as a new delight […] more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling" (hooks 1992, 21).

More recently, in an attempt at decolonising canons and places through engaged tourist discourse and artistic representation, Anthony Carrigan has focussed on the asymmetries of the global leisure industry, lamenting the absence of studies drawing the conjunction between tourism and postcolonialism (2011, 16-19). To him, tourism is a powerful machine for reproducing inequality and stereotypes, yet it can also fruitfully respond to postcolonial literatures from culturally fraught places, such as the Pacific and Caribbean islands he works on (xii). In that text, Carrigan did not specifically focus on Lennon and Foley's "dark tourism," which Leanne White and Elspeth Frew summarise as "visitation[s] to places such as murder sites, battlefields and cemeteries [… which] represent a range of events such as natural or accidental disasters […] group atrocities, wars, large-scale killings […] and genocide" (Frew and White 2013, 2).

In 2014, reviewing new "critical intersections" between postcolonial studies and dark tourism, Carrigan started an investigation into the uses and possibilities of dark tourism which resonates with my own concerns. In his view, global tourism is a complex financial and cultural engine, simultaneously generating income for local communities, but also transforming them in potentially irreversible ways. He poses some poignant questions, namely, "How […] does dark tourism analysis intersect with broader postcolonial critiques of globalized consumption?" and, "What roles might it play in reinterpreting heritage dynamics and sovereignty debates in contexts where many aspects of national history remain 'dark'?" (Carrigan 2014, 236). By focussing on the 'dark' side of nuclear colonial history made partially 'manifest' at Maralinga, I will expand on the friction generated by what Carrigan refers to as "national history," whose confines are very hard to agree upon, especially in settler states such as the primary focus in this article, so-called Australia.[1]

Molecular thrills and the nuclear uncanny

The friction between dark tourist sites and dark(ened) history produces a 'frisson', a vibrant encounter (Bennett 2010) with the elemental forces of nuclear energy. In his pivotal study of "nuclear borderlands," Joseph Masco investigates the first nuclear site, Trinity in New Mexico, and tackles what he terms the "nuclear uncanny" (Masco 2006, 28). To him,

> nuclear materials […] render everyday life strange, […] shift how individuals experience a tactile relationship to their immediate environment. This gets at the root definition of the uncanny […] for the invisibility of radiation can make any space seem otherworldly, strange, and even dangerous. Indeed, what could be more 'unhomely' than the introduction of nuclear materials into one's everyday environment or body? (Masco 2006, 33-34)

In this updating of Freud's theory of the uncanny, Masco foregrounds the plight of the native peoples of New Mexico — but his insights work for other irradiated territories as well — whose dispossession and unprotected work on atomic projects have rendered traditional environments toxic and lives vulnerable in ways inconceivable before 1945. On the one hand, local landscapes and people were, and still are, also impacted by nuclear-related extraction operations, as well as by testing and bombing; on the other hand, both local and global environments have been changed by atomic warfare in measurable ways: as DeLoughrey clarifies, radiation can indeed be traced in the teeth, bones and blood of all humans, thereby creating a different sense of "planetarity" than one might desire (DeLoughrey 2019, 63-97). Gabrielle Hecht also reads the planetary presentness of nuclear material in her study of the new "ontologies of the nuclear," that "have a history, and a geography" (Hecht 2006, 5). This is a relevant epistemological *impasse*, since nuclear history and matter have one history and one specific locale, but are also diffused and dispersed within, on and above this planet and its human and more-than-human components. Timothy Morton's theory on "hyperobjects" provides a powerful tool for reading such complexity: "Hyperobjects […] are *viscous,* which means that they "stick" to beings that are involved with them. They are *nonlocal* […] They involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones" (Morton 2013, 1). While being global and thrown "into eternity" (Madsen 2010), it is indeed essential to acknowledge that nuclear hyperobjects have invaded 'some' actual spaces more than others, and made 'some' lives more "bare" (Agamben 1998) than others.

This systemic imbalance unfolds in memorials and other dark tourism sites and pedagogical practices. Another prime location in atomic history, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, conveys, as Knowles suggests, "the violence and terror of the moment, [... making] this unthinkable moment [...] relevant to each visitor on each visit. [... It] remains a haunting, instructing, focusing memorial" (Knowles 2022, 305). In relation to the same site, Ran Zwigenberg highlights how, in the aftermath of the bombings, U.S. soldiers at Hiroshima were eager to witness and document the exceptional history they were both producing and testifying to so that they often collected vitrified radioactive material and sent it 'home' (Zwigenberg 2016).

Part of my interest lies in examining how 'other' nuclear sites and 'souvenirs' are memorialised (in some cases, actually marketed), in particular in locations such as Maralinga, which are constitutive of settler-state expropriation of the lands and epistemologies of First Nations and Indigenous peoples. This paper therefore turns to South Australia to engage with

Cold War atomic mania, and with a local version of "incremental decay [and of…] the slow unravelling of intimately entangled forms of life" (Knowles 2022, 139).

Global amnesia, nuclearity and the Maralinga case

Edward Said's foundational critique reminds us that Western epistemologies have long been engaged in inventing and institutionalising their ideas of Otherness (1978). This process has been particularly acute in the case of islands and island societies, which, as DeLoughrey argues, have been systematically fetishised in colonial discourse as "remote, timeless and unchanging" (2004, 11). In so-called 'Australia', since the nineteenth century (1835) and until the High Court of Australia's Mabo decision of 1992, the British and Federation governments have implemented the legal fiction of *terra nullius,* which has extended this logic to the entire continent, pushing (not at all metaphorically) Indigeneity into a constructed past, as well as into state-controlled spaces, and making living communities legally and physically invisible. White mythologies (Young 1991) of the 'Outback' and the 'Bush' have reinforced this erasure, naturalising colonial dispossession and genocide through romanticised narratives of an empty, timeless land. Of course, Aboriginal people and, more specifically, the Spinifex people — a term related not to language but to birthplace and custodial rights to Country — were very much already (in the) present as "Cold War moderns," when they were catapulted into a suicidal version of modernity, their unceded lands once again requisitioned for British nuclear testing without consent or warning (Castillo 2015). This deadly technoaesthetic 'modernity', with its momentous and slow violence (Nixon 2011), is a history worth illuminating.

"Maralinga is probably the most contaminated nuclear weapons test site outside the former Soviet Union" (Rabbitt Roff 1998, 290). This is the result of operations Buffalo and Antler, but also of hundreds of 'minor trials' prolonging an inglorious history of experiments with nuclear weapons subjected to fire, explosion and other sorts of 'accidents'. At a time of intense global paranoia, the U.S. atomic bombs in Japan in 1945 and the Soviet test of 1949 forced the British to face their indisputably diminished weight in international politics. Since the U.S. passed the *McMahon Act* (1946), their atomic expertise and weaponry was kept secret and entirely national. Since the awkward British atomic ambitions could not count on the Trinity sites and facilities, as they had wished to, they turned to their largest colonies, looking for a "large, uninhabited area […] where they would have logistical support and local facilities" (Arnold, Smith 2007, 17). 'Australia' eventually signed an agreement that included using 'its' grounds as a joint military base and testing range. In Una Rey's words, "[c]ulturally habituated to see what they wanted to see, [the British] found what they wanted to find: 'empty' land and sea off the northwest coast and inland deserts of Australia which proved ideal" (Rey 2021, 43). In its Cold-War dabbling with British atomic power and the arms race, the Menzies government allowed nuclear testing, and thereby inflicted long-lasting pain and trauma on 'its' own

population and territory. In perfectly colonial logic, the British gaze on the South Australian deserts also entailed placenaming: in fact, 'Maralinga' itself is a word from an extinct language (Garik), meaning 'thunder', which was chosen by the British and Australian experts on their reconnaissance explorations; as such, it is "not anchored in the place itself. The Indigenous people who lived in this part of South Australia for tens of thousands of years never spoke this word until it was transplanted there by white men" (Tynan 2016, 1).

After the first test on the Monte Bello Islands, Prime Minister Menzies pledged that there was expert evidence of "no conceivable injury to life, limb or property" connected to it. Instead, he "feared the country would […] become inferior in potential military strength to the potential of the enemy" (Menzies 1953). Thus, from 1952 to 1957, a further eleven major atmospheric bombs were detonated in South Australia, seven at Maralinga alone. After these stopped, other trials, fantastically named "Kittens, Rats, Tims and Vixen", continued the experimental process until 1963. These 'gifts' of plutonium, americium and strontium, mostly, were only partially "returned to Britain (in 1979)" (Parkinson 2007, 6).

Indigenous communities were never included within Menzies' 'national interest': the Spinifex people, the Anangu, the Yankunytjatjara, the Pitjantjatjara were neither warned nor evacuated. Their 'safety' was left to the care of one Native Patrol Officer and one assistant, whose task was to impede the mobility of traditional owners and their ritual 'trespassing' on forbidden toxic areas; they had to patrol an immense expanse, with fences and signs in an unknown written language. It proved an impossible task, as it was possibly meant to be. With the spread of fallout, immediate disease followed with "stomach pains, vomiting, choking, coughing, diarrhoea, rashes, peeling skins" (see Yalata and Oak Valley Communities, Mattingley 2009, 39-43). One well-known case was Yami Lester, a young boy at Emu Field in 1953, who witnessed the famous black mist across the desert after the Totem 1 test; he lost his sight shortly after, one of many Aboriginal people whose bodies became, quite literally, the unacknowledged 'collateral damage' of British imperial ambition and Australian governmental complicit indifference. The invisible long-range inheritance of radiation soon demanded its 'unpredictable' toll with cancer and stillborn or disabled babies.

Only in 1967 did the first clean-up operation start, first funded and managed by the United Kingdom as a form of compensation and, from 1984, by the Australian government itself. That year, a *Land Rights Act* was passed, and lands formally 'restored', with the rosy perspective of low radiation rates which would eventually "decay sufficiently in 50 years to permit 'continuous occupancy'" (Arnold, Smith 2007, 241). In 1985, the McClelland Royal Commission was set up to investigate on the British management of the Woomera Pitjantjatjara-Anangu area and their clean-up operations: they found out that the tests had been conducted with "ignorance, incompetence and cynicism" (McClelland in Walker 2014, 305). Furthermore, in a land soaked in plutonium waste, the health risks for the humans

involved (Aboriginals, but also British and Australian military personnel, whose legal cases for compensation still remain open) had been seriously underestimated. Unsurprisingly, little to no attention was paid to more-than-human life and matter. Many kilograms of nuclear waste were left on the ground, sometimes awkwardly interred and covered in concrete, and later vitrified *in situ* by the Australian government. Eventually, Maralinga was declared safe in 2000 (see Parkinson 2007); yet, even the later operations were not entirely successful, since plutonium particles, deemed "refractory and unreactive" if untouched, "can [...] become mobile and bio-available in water-soluble or particulate forms, resulting in a long-term radiological risk to ecosystems and human health" (Cook et al. 2021, n.p.).

Against the background of this relative immortality stand the material and "cosmological dimensions of Indigenous responsibility for Country […,] relations [...] expressing a consanguinity which includes physical belongings, kinship and mythopoeic belief" (Hall 2018, 6). As Hall highlights, the "whiteness" of the Maralinga bombing — and of the entire nuclear project — is clear. To use Arundhati Roy's words: "Nuclear weapons pervade our thinking. Control our behaviour. Administer our societies. Inform our dreams. [...] They are purveyors of madness. They are the ultimate colonizer. Whiter than any white man that ever lived. The very heart of whiteness" (Roy 1999, 130). It is precisely this logic of nuclear power as the ultimate expression of colonial whiteness that the memoryscapes examined in the following section have largely failed to name, let alone contest.

Maralinga as 'Australian' memoryscape

How this history has been narrated and systematically misnarrated is itself a political question. The fictional and cultural memoryscapes examined in this section reveal how nuclear colonial violence can be acknowledged, but also partially contained and ultimately domesticated. Writing about the "shadow of uranium," Alice Gorman analyses Woomera, as the militarised area in South Australia was called by the Anglo-Australians in the 1950s. She notes how Ivan Southall, famous writer of children's books, was struck by the 'silence' of the place: "It's almost like you are living in another world, just as though you had been shot off in a spaceship and let down on some strange planet where men had never been before" (Gorman 2017, n. p.). Gorman justly underlines the irony of Southall's perception of silence in a place overloaded with vans, rocket engines and atomic blasts (2017, n. p.). This is a typical example of how landscapes and audiospheres can be romanticised and adapted to the special needs of especially Western travellers-explorers-tourists.

This confrontation of memoryscapes is at stake in the two novels I refer to in this section. The first is *Maralinga, My Love* by Dorothy Johnston (1988), which 'reconstructs' events, starting with a Pitjantjatjara family, camping along the Kunkarangkalpa and 'witnessing' a deadly blast. The stories of the Australian-British and first communities protagonists in the

novel are evidently connected, yet they seem to move along parallel and distant lines. In my view, in this text Maralinga metonymically signifies Australia as a whole: the historical Charlie Hamilton and the fictitious Graham Falconer's confrontation with the sublime beauty of physics is tinged with nationalistic (Australian) overtones, with the British featuring as the bad guys in an outback western (1988). In this way, Johnston partially cancels any real Aboriginal presence.

A romanticising thrust is also at work in Judy Nunn's *Maralinga* (2009). Its cover image positions the text as "an epic of love and intrigue" in which a British soldier, First lieutenant Daniel Gardiner, dies at the Maralinga site; investigations on his death are conducted by his sophisticated fiancée, the British journalist Elizabeth Hoffmann. Here the plight of the local communities is present, but aestheticized as distant episodes reconstructed mainly from non-native perspectives. Both Johnston and Nunn, I argue, deploy Maralinga mainly as backdrop. In their narratives the reader is safely conducted through adventurous discomfort, at times guilt, and ultimately returned 'home'. Aboriginal communities, when present at all, function as peripheral witnesses to a history that is framed as essentially white: British or Australian, globally imperial or locally nationalist, but in either case not 'theirs'. Both novels partially reproduce the very colonial logic that made the tests possible in the first place: still the logic of *terra nullius*, the silent 'undiscovered' and romantically incomprehensible outback. In doing so, they risk functioning less as memorials than as acts of forgetting, glossy and readable, but maybe ultimately complicit in the ongoing erasure of Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara presence and pain.

Taking (it) home: communal un-forgetting

It is precisely against this logic of containment that 'communal un-forgetting' emerges as a fundamentally different relationship with history, Country and the future. I wish to attend to more complex, communal forms of memory and reappropriation, that also seem more open to futurities. In 2016, Yankunytjatjara/Kokatha poet Ali Cobby Eckermann published the poem "Thunder Raining Poison" in response to a work by Yhonnie Scarce, a Kokatha/Nukunu glass artist. Scarce's impressive glass clouds reimagine and materialise the atomic tests on Maralinga by recreating the shape of yams (traditional bush food) in glass, which is the material for Scarce's creativity, but also an uncanny reference to trinitite, sand turned to glass by the very high temperatures of explosions. It is also reminiscent of the vitrification procedures attempted in the cleaning up of the area, and, as the QAGOMA (Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art) suggests, that "suspended and inert, [the glass yams] bear a haunting resemblance to brutalised organs" (2023, n. p.). Thus, Scarce reappropriates the nuclear human-made devastation in ways that remind visitors to her exhibitions of a materiality bound

to crack, become dust and be diffused again, cloud-like and dust-like, in a circle of ongoing violence often still hauntingly unknown to non-Aboriginal inhabitants of 'Australia'.

The same breath animates Cobby Eckermann's poem, whose first lines insist on the sound of unwanted cremation forging an unceded museum of human and more-than-human pain:

a whisper arrives. two thousand. two thousand or more. did you hear it?
that bomb. the torture of red sand turning green
the anguish of earth turned to glass
did you hear it? two thousand. two thousand or more
yams cremated inside the earth. poison trapped
in glass like a museum. did you hear it? (2017, 138)

The "you" addressed are first and foremost, I believe, (white) Australian readers, who might and should have "heard" the blasting sounds and testified to the "trapping" of radioactive poison. Instead, the experiments remained incredibly secret, with atomic mushrooms and plumes recorded within ordinary meteorology. Cobby Eckermann acknowledges the pain and trauma inflicted on humans, animals and Country, who have lived in unison for "two thousand" generations, but she also insists on the power of collective action that art affords: "we are stronger than that/we always rise us mob**.** [...] we make a heart/did you see it? in the fragments. it's there in the glass [...] it's part of us. we love it. poisoned and all" (Cobby Eckermann 2017, 139).

Sue Rabbitt Roff's documentation of the Maralinga site offers a further, unsettling layer to this material history. She uncovers a proposal, circulating in 1997, to transform the vitrified desert into a tourist attraction, a glass-bead game of sorts, in which the very residue of nuclear devastation would be packaged and marketed as spectacle. The vitrified sand was momentarily envisaged not as evidence of ongoing contamination and colonial violence, but as aesthetic curiosity. This proposal may encapsulate the logic this paper has been tracing: the impulse to ultimately commodify nuclear devastation, transforming blasting and slow violence into manageable, even pleasurable, consumption, with the colonial gaze crystallised, quite literally, into collectible items (Rabbitt Roff 1998).

This tension between critical memorialisation and voyeuristic consumption is further complicated by digital technologies. Mick Broderick, Mark Cypher and Jim Macbeth's work on augmented and virtual experiences at Australia's Cold War and nuclear heritage sites opens a productively ambivalent terrain. On the one hand, digital souvenirs and augmented reality tools offer new possibilities for reaching wider audiences and rendering the "nuclear uncanny" visible. On the other hand, though, these "xenoplastic" experiences may risk reproducing the very dynamics they are meant to unsettle: safely mediated by screen and interface, the visitor consumes nuclear history at a distance. Whether vitrified glass bead/yam or digital artefact, the souvenir can remain an object extracted from context and ultimately domesticated. In this

sense, even digital dark tourism may technologically update the logic of the 1990s tourism proposal into the twenty-first century, while preserving a certain fundamental asymmetry.

Against both these forms of consumption, community arts and touristic practices offer a different engagement with nuclear memory and its futures. This insistence on collective voice and resilience finds another powerful expression in a performative multilingual experiment by Scott Rankin (writer, director) and Trevor Jamieson (creator and performer). The play *Ngapartji Ngapartji,* premiered as *MAMU* (meaning evil spirit, a word used to refer to the nuclear explosions and poisoning), has been presented at various international festivals since 2002. Its title is a concept in Pitjantjatjara culture for which there seems to be no adequate translation, but which is related to giving and returning gifts. Rankin and Jamieson focus on the prolonged legacy of colonial radioactivity in the Maralinga area, as in other parts of the world. To Helen Gilbert, Jamieson also "positions the legal recognition of ongoing Aboriginal belonging to the site as […] prophetic. [… and affirms] the deep time of the past, present and (projected) future of his people's adaptive inhabitation of this post-nuclear space" (Gilbert 2013, 206). By using "Pitjantjatjara, Japanese, Greek, Indian and Anglo performers," and by actively engaging the audience as community, *Ngapartji Ngapartji* manages to re-situate local histories within a truly planetary frame, interweaving memories of pain and survival in a "visceral performance of reciprocity" (Gilbert 2013, 10).

As Paul Brown argues, the participatory arts provide "a space in which communities can explore their sense of unease and injustice." This can "animate the local as a source of values and understanding in an otherwise globalised, seemingly homogenous world" (Brown 2014, n. p.). Brown insists on the "bridging" function of community arts and cultural development (CACD): instead of traumas packaged and superficially consumed, knowledge can connect local communities to broader networks and so foster a more lucid commitment. In the context of Maralinga, this bridging is political. This insistence animates *Maralinga: The Anangu Story* (Yalata and Oak Valley Communities, Mattingley 2009), a multimodal work that brings together oral testimony, painting workshops, and land-based practice. For Duckworth, the multimodal dimension is here truly constitutive: Country is not merely represented, but inhabited, toured, spoken, painted, and thus transmitted across generations. The oral testimonies gathered in *The Anangu Story* do not simply document what happened at Maralinga, but enact a living relationship with place that colonial and nuclear violence attempted to sever. Similarly, the painting workshops, for instance, open up what Duckworth calls "living space", that is simultaneously cosmological and affective (Duckworth 2022, 124). In this sense, *Maralinga. The Anangu Story* functions as what I call 'communal un-forgetting': not merely the recovery of a lost past, but an active and collective recovery of and from history which is also an assertion of presentness and future hope.

'Communal un-forgetting' finds its most concrete expression in the 'Visit Maralinga' tours, led by traditional owners (Maralinga Tjarutja Inc), with Roger and Priscilla Petersen as "Caretakers." On site, there is also "a Tour Guide contractor," Robin Matthews, "the village and site manager and an accredited atomic safety officer as well as airport manager" (Maralinga Tours 2026). These tours do not position visitors as mere consumers of curated tragedy (as in the case of the Chernobyl Forbidden Zone, to cite one well-known example). Instead, they activate what Brown identifies as the bridging capacity of community-based practice, placing tourists in as true as possible a relation with the land and its custodians. Visitors here are invited or, rather, required, to listen and witness, but also to carry their witnessing forward. Radioactive contamination is not bracketed as safely historical; it is instead undeniably present and ongoing (though in 2026, visits are not allowed, due to works initiated to keep the "highest standards of safety, quality and respect for the Maralinga Tjarutja Lands"). The tours enact the temporal reframing this paper has argued for throughout: Maralinga is not a safely-bounded dark tourism site, if any such site exists, nor a romantic memoryscape: it is a living site of both colonial violence and Indigenous resilience.

Conclusion

As the article has demonstrated, Maralinga still remains a site of profoundly dissonant heritage (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). The global and specifically 'white Australian' amnesia surrounding the British nuclear tests and their aftermath is produced and reproduced by colonial logics that this paper has tried to trace across romantic novels and other forms of memorialisation. Against this amnesia, I believe that the literary and community-based practices examined here offer something that dark tourism, if intended as forms of consumption of the "pain of others" (Sontag 2003), cannot provide: instead of the extraction of economic benefit from marginalised communities, they can instate forms of 'communal un-forgetting' and "counter-mimicry" as praxis rooted in Indigenous custodianship and which powerfully inverts any "white ventriloquism of Aboriginal loss" (Huggan, Tiffin 2010, 95). Carrigan's questions related to how dark tourism analysis intersects with postcolonial critiques of globalised consumption, and what roles it might play in reinterpreting heritage and sovereignty debates, find an instructive answer at Maralinga. In a sense, the community-led practices examined here do not simply reframe dark tourism from within its existing logic, but fundamentally challenge the paradigm itself. The 'Visit Maralinga' tours, co-curated exhibitions, and intergenerational storytelling and painting workshops led by Maralinga Tjarutja traditional owners do not offer heritage as a consumable product, however sensitively packaged. Instead, they enact forms of 'communal un-forgetting': a collectively practised mode of engaging with (nuclear) colonial history that refuses both the affective distance of voyeuristic consumption and the narrative closure of romantic memorialisation. Where Carrigan identifies tourism's

potential to respond productively to postcolonial literatures and geographies, communal unforgetting goes further, insisting that the relationship between visitors and custodians must be one of accountability and reciprocity rather than consumption. In this sense, Maralinga does not merely illustrate Carrigan's critical intersections, but it rather exceeds them, demanding a different framework rooted in Indigenous sovereignty and epistemic justice.

Notes

[1] The qualifier 'so-called' acknowledges Aboriginal sovereignty claims and the ongoing debate around the legitimacy of colonial naming practices in settler states.

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From trauma to spectacle: post-October 7 tours, Gaza-facing viewpoints and the live consumption of violence

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examines how post-October 7 guided tours incorporate Gaza-facing viewpoints. Escudero's (2025) report on tourists observing Israeli bombardments from border viewpoints provided the starting point for this study. Drawing on dark tourism and tourist-gaze scholarship, it qualitatively analyses twenty-one publicly accessible tour operators' pages, municipal-tourism and guide-centred promotional pages, all in English. Close readings identify recurrent patterns of witnessing, authenticity, resilience, ethical legitimation, risk management and organised participation. Promotional pages normalise looking towards Gaza within paid and scheduled itineraries. Gaza is geographically visible as a viewpoint, but socially marginalised: the asymmetry between proximity to Israeli testimony and distance from Gaza's civilian population is dramatically clear.

Keywords
dark tourism, tour websites, war spectatorship, post-October 7 tourism, Gaza-facing viewpoints

Introduction

In 2014, Sherwood's *Guardian* article "Israelis gather on hillsides to watch and cheer as military drops bombs on Gaza" documented groups gathering near Sderot to observe Israeli strikes. She described spectators seated on sofas and chairs, bringing drinks and snacks, and using smartphones "to record the explosions" or take "selfies against a backdrop of black smoke" (Sherwood 2014). Following 7 October 2023, press coverage documented practices of observation within organised tourism. Lidman's (2024) *Associated Press* report framed tours in kibbutzim through commemoration, although its photographs also showed visitors looking towards Gaza through binoculars from an observation point in Sderot. Other reports were more critical. The phenomenon has received more visibility in public and political discourse through Escudero's news report for *Canal Cuatro*, which provided the starting point for the present study: she described post-October 7 tours as war tourism through terms such as "miradores" and "binoculars," and interviewed tourists at a viewpoint. One tourist said that he had come to "see what was going on"; another claimed: "Holocaust, we have no choice. We have to fight. They're not human beings. They're monsters. […] Either them or us" (Escudero 2025). These

statements cannot be treated as representative of tourists, but they can reveal possible moral and political positions associated with this form of dark tourism. Reports by Minisini in *Le Monde*, Hayden in *The Irish Times* and Aprati in *Rai News* gave the phenomenon further international coverage in 2025.[1]

Journalists have documented the incorporation of the Nova Site and its surroundings into tour itineraries that extend to Gaza-facing viewpoints. Minisini reported that at Kobi Hill, "the highest point overlooking the city of Sderot on the edge of the Gaza Strip," for example, he met three friends who had convened there "to talk about work, travel, and 'stock market investments'" (2025). The combination of memorial itineraries, conflict observation and ordinary social interaction raises the question of how Gaza-facing viewpoints can function as a site of geographical explanation, established tourist activity and war spectatorship. However, the landscape made visible from these viewpoints is not empty, nor only a geographical stop. Almbaid's (2016) essay on Gaza's neglected tourism potential provides a counterpoint. In her 2016 essay, she argues that, despite Israeli military invasions and bombardments, Gaza could offer many historical, cultural and archaeological sites of interest to tourism. This reference highlights the contrast between Gaza as an inhabited space, with its own cultural materiality, and Gaza as visually available to tourists from the viewpoints on the Israeli side. A related representational problem is addressed by Peled-Elhanan in the *FES* 2024 special issue *On Gaza*. She argues that abstract and generalising categories in Israeli public discourse can deprive Palestinians of their particularity and "erase their existence as social actors" (2024, 32). Although her analysis does not address tourism promotion, it clarifies why Gaza's lexical or geographical visibility should not be considered the same as the social representation of its inhabitants.

The present study investigates how post-October 7 tours organise visual access to Gaza and whether they represent Gaza as a social, inhabited and historical space or as merely a territory beyond a border. The present contribution brings dark tourism scholarship (see Lennon and Foley 2000; Stone et al. 2018; Vorina et al. 2024) into dialogue with critical approaches to tourism discourse and the tourist gaze (see Dann 1996; Urry and Larsen 2011). While press coverage is used to identify and contextualise the phenomenon, the analysis examines promotional pages, arguing that post-October 7 tours are not merely documented online but actively constructed as marketable cultural and ethical tourist products.

Dark tourism orientations

Dark tourism, which is "[r]elated to death, suffering, atrocity, tragedy or crime" (Light 2017, 277), has been systematically investigated over the last decades and across different fields (see Dann 1994; Prentice 1993; Stone and Sharpley 2008; Hartmann 2014). The term was

coined by Foley and Lennon (1996) and Smith observed that war-related sites are "the largest single category of tourist attractions in the world" (1998, 205).

Despite different approaches (e.g., Seaton 2002; Clark 2006; Sion 2014), three interconnected elements seem to emerge across dark tourism literature: temporality, commodification and affect. Dark sites may concern distant or recent events; the sites, which are often commemorative with educational values, may be exposed to voyeuristic commercialisation; the relationship between tourist and site may be shaped by empathy towards the tragic event and victims.

Dark tourism and dark gazes

Urry's concept of tourist gaze (1990, 2002) explains how travellers' experiences relate to people and places in tourism. For Urry and Larsen, "the concept of the gaze highlights that looking is a learned ability and that the pure and innocent eye is a myth," and that "just like language, one's eyes are socio-culturally framed and there are various 'ways of seeing'" (2011, 1-2). The gaze therefore structures power relations among those who organise it (i.e., tour operators), who perform it (i.e., tourists) and the communities made visible through it (Urry 1990). In digital contexts, these relations begin before the visit, since online materials may change the gaze from observation to performative practices. Within dark tourism, the tourist gaze also intersects with the moral gaze (Chen and Xu 2021; Dresler 2024), through which tourists actively evaluate the suffering they witness. The moral gaze may change over time and space. Drawing on Lennon and Foley's concept of "chronological distance" (2000, 23), Chen and Xu argue that commercial dark tourism in communities recently affected by disaster "will lead tourists to readily conclude that survivors are commercialising the deaths of their family members, thus creating moral conflicts" (2021, 27). Similarly, post-October 7 tours of massacre sites and areas surrounding an ongoing conflict, which 'stream' pain and suffering, can establish new forms of tourist and moral gazes, especially when death and violence are consumed live, as in the case of Gaza-facing viewpoints.

This immediacy also has an affective effect. Martini and Buda observe that "[m]obility, digitalization and social media make consumption of death and disaster events immediately accessible, and unfiltered" (2020, 684). Jacobsen's "Spectacular Death" (2023, 60) similarly describes death as mediatised, commercialised, and observed from a safe distance as a spectacle. This 'spectacularisation' is not merely increased visibility: it concerns the organisation of suffering as something that can be viewed and consumed.

Physical distance should be considered alongside temporal distance. Isaac, who contributed to the discussion on dark tourism from several perspectives (Isaac 2018; 2026; see also Isaac and Hall 2025), investigated travel to Palestine and showed that organised and group tours are perceived as strategies to reduce risk in destinations perceived as unsafe

(Isaac 2022). This mediation begins on promotional dark-tourism websites, which shape tourists' expectations, emotions and perceptions and which are a "deep reservoir of multimodal semiotic meaning" (Krisjanous 2016, 348).

Materials and methods

This exploratory study examines a purposive collection of publicly accessible online materials concerning guided tours to sites affected by the attacks of 7 October 2023. The starting point for identifying the material was Escudero's (2025) report on guided tours stopping at Gaza-facing viewpoints from which tourists observed Israeli bombardments. Recurring geographical terms from this report such as 'Gaza border', 'Gaza envelope', 'Gaza observation point', 'October 7', 'Sderot lookouts', and their variants, written with the word 'tour', were used as search queries. Searches were conducted through Google and Firefox from Italy between February 2026 and August 2026 and were limited to the first results page.

The materials were searched according to the criterion of searchability, intended as the public retrievability of a page through at least one of these queries. The retrieved pages were subsequently screened in full according to three inclusion criteria: they had to be publicly accessible and written in English; promote or describe tours to sites associated with the attacks of October 7; and include a Gaza-facing viewpoints or describe the observation of Gaza from border viewpoints. Table 1 shows an overview of the twenty-one webpages selected for the analysis.[2]

Data source	Genre	Number of webpages/texts
Abraham Tours	Tour website	Three
Bein Harim	Tour website	Three
My Israel Guide	Tour website	One
Otef Tours	Tour website	Two
Visit Sderot	Municipal tourism page	One
Danny the Digger	Guide-centred promotion	Five
Dror Katzman	Guide-centred promotion	One
Guided Tours of Israel	Guide-centred promotion	One

Slava Bazarsky	Guide-centred promotion	Three
Exclusive Israel Tours	Guide-centred promotion	One

Table 1. Overview of the online materials.

The small set of texts, the limited search period and the instability of website content do not allow generalisation to the broader field of post-October 7 tourism promotion. The analysis therefore provides a case-based interpretation of recurrent linguistic patterns. A short comment on images and photographs found with texts is also provided, especially when they further contextualised practices of looking, spectatorship, distance and witnessing. Methodologically, the study uses qualitative textual analysis (Fürsich 2009). The process involved repeated close readings of each text which led to the identification of recurrent vocabulary and expressions used across promotional materials, with attention to genre. Interpretation was based on textual examples and considered alongside alternative explanations.

Analysis of tour websites and guide-centred promotion

Tour websites

The texts under analysis are from four tour operators' webpages, Abraham Tours, Bein Harim, My Israel Guide, Otef Tours, together with a municipal tourism page published by Visit Sderot.

Ethical boundaries and restorative storylines

The ethical sensitivity of visiting places affected by recent violence is explicitly acknowledged in several tour descriptions. Abraham Tours provides the clearest examples: it states that "This tour is not about recounting horrors" and "This is not a tour showcasing horrors." The tour led by an October 7 survivor similarly reassures visitors that "no graphic content will be displayed" and indicates that the experience is intended for participants aged sixteen and over because of its "mature themes, stories, and visuals."

My Israel Guide adopts a similar strategy. Its tour is "not just about witnessing destruction—it is about understanding the cruelty of terrorists and hearing the human stories behind the headlines (if they are in the headlines)," while a practical information section specifies that "graphic images will not be shown during the day." The tours are presented as controlled encounters with sites and stories of violence with tour operators that want to establish their ethical boundary by describing the experience as respectful and educational.

This strategy is reinforced by a restorative vocabulary that recurs across websites. One Abraham Tours page is organised around "resilience," "hope," "rebirth," "human connection," "recovery," "rehabilitation" and a "forward-looking" approach. Bein Harim similarly refers to

"stories and strength," a "symbol of resilience," an "inspiring spirit of recovery" and the "strength and resilience" of the affected communities. Otef Tours combines "deep sorrow" with "human resilience," "community strength," "renewal and hope" and "a community growing new hope together in the face of ongoing pain." My Israel Guide describes Sderot as "a symbol of Israeli resilience," referring also to "survival, bravery, and unity," reconstruction and the capacity of communities to "stand strong despite the trauma." The texts do not erase violence, attacks or loss, but they are framed as Israeli experiences and from the Israeli perspective.

Witnessing, authenticity, promising privileged access and the commercial organisation of testimony

A second pattern constructs tourists as witnesses rather than detached observers. Abraham Tours invites participants to "witness, see, and listen" and states that "we act as witnesses and partners," through local testimony. Physical presence is presented as a form of ethical participation based on listening, learning and establishing a connection with affected communities. This promise becomes more personalised in Abraham Tours' "Gaza Envelope Tour with October 7th Survivor," whose guide, Amit, is presented as both "a survivor" and "a professional tour guide." Personal experience and professional accreditation operate together as sources of authority. The verb "share," used six times, frames the communication of trauma as an intimate and voluntary exchange. Amit will "share his personal story," provide "educational insights" and offer "a heartfelt perspective."

My Israel Guide intensifies this promise of direct access, inviting participants to "see," "witness" and acquire "firsthand" "accounts" and "insights." Its "professional and informative reality tour" promises a "deep dive into the history and impact of the attack," to gain an "unfiltered perspective" on the events and the "human stories behind the headlines." Similarly, Otef Tours invites visitors to "connect to the region's real story" and experience it "through the eyes of local residents and guides." Bein Harim promises a "deeper understanding," and an opportunity to "experience the community first-hand" with residents, under the guidance of a "fully qualified and licensed tour guide." Access remains mediated: what participants see and hear is selected through the itinerary, the guide's narration and the spatial limits of the tour.

The commercial organisation of this privileged access is particularly visible through one additional element. For instance, in Abraham Tours payments are made at each stop to support local communities. Otef Tours offers an "Optional testimony encounter" for an additional 1,300 ILS and Bein Harim charges an additional $300 per group to enter a kibbutz and hear residents' "powerful personal stories." My Israel Guide offers its private tour with a "highly personalized experience," including a symbolic donation for local reconstruction. In these cases, testimony, emotional proximity and personal access to particular sites become part of a purchasable itinerary. Across these variations, testimony can be observed as a commercial element in tour organisation.

The viewpoint as a touristic device

The Gaza-facing viewpoints is a recurrent itinerary element. Abraham Tours includes “Sderot – A Viewpoint, Historical and Geographic overview” and “viewpoint over and geographic overview,” allowing visitors to “appreciate the proximity to the Gaza border” and “take in [the] view of Gaza’s northern areas, including Jabalia, Beit Hanoun, and Gaza City.”

Observation and explanation recur in other tour products. My Israel Guide includes “a local viewpoint overlooking Gaza,” where participants will “better understand the geographical and security challenges.” Bein Harim invites visitors at Kobi Lookout to “enjoy sweeping views of the Gaza border” and “reflect on the region’s complexity.” Otef Tours also includes “Gaza overlook” in its itinerary stops and describes Kobi Lookout as a “spectacular” and “panoramic observation point overlooking the settlements around the Gaza Strip and the Gaza Strip itself.” Participants look to “understand,” “reflect,” and receive a “geographic overview.” According to these pages, observation can become awareness and knowledge about the proximity between Gaza and the Israeli border communities; however, the same educational function transforms Gaza into a distant object of organised observation.

The viewpoint is incorporated into itineraries alongside the Nova Festival Memorial, the Sderot Police Station Memorial, the burned-car site, bomb shelters, and encounters with residents or soldiers. Kobi Hill is particularly significant. Otef Tours and Bein Harim include it in their offers, while Visit Sderot describes its adaptation for tourism. This page presents the hill as a longstanding “magnet” for people seeking a high point with a “beautiful view” and reports that, during previous escalations, it attracted people wishing to see what the page calls a “war movie under production,” since rockets launched towards Israel and Israeli bombardments in response could be observed from the site. The installation of telescopic binoculars, municipal investment and its function as a “frontline position for explaining the local geopolitics” confirm its adaptation to tourist use. Bein Harim recalls that Givat Kobi became a gathering place during periods of conflict for visitors wishing to witness rocket launches and Israeli retaliatory strikes. These texts suggest once again that operators draw on the same established infrastructure for organising the view towards the border.

Gaza as visible territory and marginalised human space

Gaza is not absent from these pages. It occurs in titles and expressions such as “the Gaza Strip and its surroundings,” “the northern border with the Gaza Strip,” “both sides of the border” and the “northern areas”; Abraham Tours also mentions Jabalia, Beit Hanoun and Gaza City. My Israel Guide advertises “a local viewpoint overlooking Gaza,” Otef Tours includes a “Gaza overlook,” and Bein Harim describes the separation fence, the Erez crossing and views of the border.

However, this lexical and geographical visibility does not produce a real social representation as Gaza is generally represented through spatial and geopolitical categories rather than its civilian population. Bein Harim provides a limited exception when it describes the Erez crossing as a place through which "up to 20,000 Palestinian workers would pass through each day, en route to work in Israel." Gazan subjects therefore enter the narrative, but through their relationship to the border and the Israeli economy. The current experiences and suffering of Gaza's civilian population remain outside it.

Several explanations should be considered. These tours commemorate October 7, and the affected Israeli communities and operators cannot enter Gaza because of security restrictions. At the same time, they claim to explain regional "complexity," provide a geopolitical overview or address realities "on both sides of the border." Such claims do not find equivalent voices, sites or experiences. Bein Harim, for example, invites participants at Kobi Lookout to "reflect on the region's complexity," but the broader context and its human consequences are left unspecified.

Although current post-October 7 tour products do not explicitly promise participants the opportunity to observe live bombardments, these descriptions document the established touristic use of elevated sites to observe military exchanges. The critical issue here lies in their incorporation of the same Gaza-facing site into paid and scheduled experiences. The photographs in the tour pages contextualise this asymmetric relation. Some images show participants from behind, looking towards the horizon, sometimes using binoculars or cameras; others foreground the guide speaking to the group or pointing to a map. These photographs are consistent with the practices of looking, explanation and controlled distance described in their verbal itineraries.

The management of risk

The commercial organisation of tours is presented alongside the management of physical risk and emotional exposure. My Israel Guide describes its tour as "Safe & Secure," emphasises coordination with security advisories and excludes graphic images. Bein Harim explains that itineraries may change according to developments and instructions from the Israeli military. These measures can be understood as responsible risk management and a responsibility towards participants. At the same time, they translate the instability of an active conflict into the administrative language of a booked excursion. Proximity with an ongoing war is presented as immediate and emotionally powerful but selected and controlled. The pages employ different registers. Abraham Tours adopts a register based on "human connection," hope and resilience, whereas Otef Tours uses a more explicit national-territorial language, describing the tour as a story of "practical Zionism" and "love for people and land." My Israel Guide uses a polarised security framework focused on terrorism, cruelty, the "frontline city" and encounters

with Israeli soldiers. Bein Harim privileges a commemorative and heroic register, referring to bravery, sacrifice, resilience, describing "the site of the October 7th massacre, the worst terror attack on the Jewish people since the Holocaust."

Personalised tours: when promotion is produced by tour guides

The eleven pages examined in this second group were published by five guide-centred tour providers with a blog-style promotional structure. The selected texts range from strongly personalised, first-person writing of Slava Bazarsky and Ari Melnik to Danny the Digger's third-person style. However, what they share is that the guide is presented as the main interpreter of the touristic site and the author of the itinerary.

Personal authority promising privileged access and Israeli national framing

A key pattern is the construction of the guide as a professional and interpreter of sites and events. For instance, Slava Bazarsky introduces himself as an "IDF intelligence veteran" offering a "high-level strategic briefing" that visitors "won't find anywhere else." His promise to take participants "far beyond the headlines" draws on knowledge acquired "not from a script but from firsthand experience." He also adds expressions such as "from the inside," "firsthand military experience" and "deep intelligence analysis." Ari Melnik from Exclusive Israel Tours, similarly, combines his profiles as author, historian, licensed guide and IDF veteran. His "direct, on-the-ground documentation" promises "narrative depth, historical context, and emotional resonance" that go "far beyond standard media reporting."

Other pages personalise authority less extensively. Dror Katzman, for instance, uses the plural first person when referring to "the disaster we experienced" and explaining "what was our mistake" and "what was the Hamas mistake." Danny the Digger, instead, uses impersonal formulations more consistently but still promises a "historical and geopolitical overview" and "final reflections" at the end of the tour. Across variations, the guide emerges as witness, narrator and authorised interpreter of geopolitics.

This authority is used to authenticate access to the sites and legitimise an Israeli national interpretation of the conflict by selecting historical causes and moralising voices. Bazarsky promises an "authentic Israeli narrative" based on "strategic analysis" and "military judgement"; Danny the Digger introduces the border communities within the history of "Zionist development." Guided Tours of Israel writes "handing the Gaza Strip to Hamas without any concession," which "ultimately led to three wars," and describes political actors through the general category of "Israel's enemies." These formulations offer the guides' interpretations of causal relations, historical subjects and moral responses. Although they do not occur with the same intensity across the set of texts, they can show that guide-centred promotion may

perform a function in which personal or professional authority presents a selective national story as privileged access to the reality of the conflict.

Personalising the encounter: ethical boundaries and restorative storylines

This second pattern concerns how the tours establish their ethical legitimacy. Bazarsky and Ari Melnik directly ask in their FAQs, "Is this considered War Tourism?" Bazarsky replies that "War tourism treats tragedy as spectacle," whereas his tour "treats it as testimony" rejecting "dramatisation" and "sensationalism." Melnik similarly defines his tour as "an educational and memorial mission" in which the goal is to document history and "bear witness to events that have shaped the nation." Bazarsky's negations establish a semantic opposition between the visual consumption of tragedy and transmitting memory through "testimony." Melnik instead uses declarative sentences to illustrate the legitimacy of the tour's goal.

The other pages do not mention "war tourism" but equally highlight the instability of the boundary between testimony and spectacle. Danny the Digger describes the "Burnt cars display" as "raw display" which "is one of the most physically striking testimonies to the terror attack of Hamas on 7/10/23." Guided Tours of Israel invites visitors to "pay [their] respects." Other expressions such as "honor the memory" (Danny the Digger), "respect," "careful account of the events to help you process what happened that terrible day" (Slava Bazarsky), present the encounter with traumatic events as controlled by the guide.

Restorative storylines reinforce this position. Bazarsky connects "past trauma" with "national rebirth" and emphasises "human resilience" and reconstruction. Exclusive Israel Tours foregrounds "ongoing resilience," "survival and recovery," and Guided Tours of Israel similarly introduces communities that "continue to rebuild and move forward." Danny the Digger contrasts "fire, destruction, and loss" with new neighbourhoods, recovered industries, communal endurance and "hope for a peaceful future."

Overall, the pages do not remove death and violence from the storyline. They combine these elements with the lexical choices in the semantic field of military discourse, heroism and resilience producing a recurrent 'one-sided progression' from attack and loss to testimony and renewal.

Risk management and conditional access

A further pattern concerns the management of physical risk and access of tourists during an ongoing conflict. For instance, Exclusive Israel Tours includes a specific section called "How do you ensure safety?" and words recalling the sense of a professional security protocol. They state that "security is managed with the highest level of professional oversight. We operate in constant, real-time coordination with the Home Front Command. We prioritize security above all else and will reroute or reschedule if conditions or official safety guidelines change."

Similarly, Bazarsky states that the route is adjusted according to IDF Home Front Command and he takes "personal responsibility for that answer every single day." Other pages offer less elaborated texts. Guided Tours of Israel emphasises that the tour "does NOT enter the Gaza strip or into unsafe areas," while Danny the Digger warns that "[a]ccess to sites can change quickly due to security conditions" and refers to restricted entry into particular communities. Katzman, instead, provides no similar description of security procedures, showing that this pattern is not equally developed and distributed across this second group. However, all these procedures translate ongoing conflict into tourism logistics and shape the spatial organisation of tours around border zones.

The Gaza-facing viewpoints: proximity and distance

Gaza-facing viewpoints is consistent across all eleven guide-centred pages. Recurrent visual terms such as "viewpoint," "overlook," "observatory," "panoramic," "skyline" and "rooftops" identify a geographical stop and seem to organise a particular relationship between visitors and border zones. It may provide a geographical orientation, support a geographical explanation, conclude the tour or be promoted as a tourist attraction. Some adjectives also draw on the vocabulary of tourism: "best view on Gaza," "scenic lookout," "panoramic view."

Katzman's itinerary begins at Yad Mordechai with an "Outlook and introduction to the Gaza Strip tour" and later includes the Black Arrow Memorial as the "Best view on Gaza." Bazarsky advertises "Sderot Overlook" as a "panoramic observatory over the Gaza Strip and border cities" and Givat Kobi as "an observatory over Gaza." Exclusive Israel Tours similarly includes a "Sderot Viewpoint" offering a "panoramic view of the Gaza Strip and border geography." Guided Tours of Israel advertises a "View into Gaza," while Danny the Digger refers to a "scenic lookout facing Gaza," a "view toward Gaza" and a place "where a former urban skyline of Gaza is visible." Observation is then incorporated into the storyline structure of the tour in which the guide seems to regulate proximity and distance. Guided Tours of Israel provides the clearest articulation of the relationship between distance, safety and knowledge. To them the viewpoint is "very safe from a distance but close enough to get a good idea of challenges Israel faces." The view does not promise knowledge of Gaza itself and what tourists are expected to understand through the view is the set of "challenges" faced by Israel. Danny the Digger introduces the visit to the memorial garden in Netiv Ha'asarah, "the closest Israeli community to Gaza", suggesting that "[f]rom this location, the proximity to Gaza is striking and adds to the sense of the vulnerability of the community living so close to the border."

Gaza, which is presented through Hamas, danger and Israel's enemy, is therefore not presented as an inhabited space. Bazarsky describes "Hamas-run Gaza" as "the starting point of attacks or as its governing authority" and the origin of infiltration of "dozens of terrorists into the settlements in the Gaza Envelope." Bazarsky also provides a partial counterexample

concerning the Erez crossing describing it as "visible from the edge of the kibbutz, once a functioning gateway between Israel and Gaza and once considered a symbol of potential coexistence." Although these words seem to introduce a storyline of interaction, the reference is abstract and in any case Gazan people are absent.

From witnessing to participation: when volunteering is a structured activity

A final pattern extends tourists' role beyond observation, listening and commemoration. In addition to "bear witness" or "pay respect," several pages use verbs such as "meet," "volunteer," "participate," "donate," "support" and "offer encouragement." For instance, Bazarsky combines "Solidarity & Bearing Witness" at the Nova memorial site with the direct involvement of tourists. He also offers a scheduled activity at Shuva Achim: "Meet Soldiers and volunteer"; "Here you can meet the active soldiers coming from Gaza to eat and rest and also you can volunteer." Guided Tours of Israel structures participation through activities including "shopping in Sderot's commercial district," "[v]isiting a local artist who makes art out of rockets which have landed in his town" and "The Gaza Security Barrier and Ceramic project from Netiv HaAsara." Danny the Digger also organises different activities which are introduced as follows: "'Shuva Brothers' Rest Station, […] Operated entirely by civilians and supported through donations, this site serves as a warm and welcoming rest point for IDF soldiers operating in the area, including many currently engaged in combat missions inside Gaza. Visitors have the opportunity to meet soldiers face to face, offer encouragement." The pattern is less recurrent in the other pages. Katzman also includes Shuva Achim mentioning it in these terms: "Shuva Achim - offers warm meals and combat support to soldiers." Exclusive Israel Tours offers the stop "to meet the dedicated civilian volunteers who operate the refreshment station for IDF soldiers."

Taken together, all the examples show that these kinds of organised activities have different levels of tourists' participation, from visitors encountering volunteers to those donating money or actively encouraging Israeli soldiers. Whatever the level, Gazan civilians, again, remain outside this network of tourists' involvement and participation.

Concluding remarks

I would like to approach conclusions with Weizman's words on borders:

> [a]gainst the geography of stable, static places, and the balance across linear and fixed sovereign borders, frontiers are deep, shifting, fragmented and elastic territories, temporary lines of engagement, marked by makeshift boundaries, are not limited to the edges of political space but exist throughout its depth. (2024, 4)

The close and critical readings of the selected post-October 7 tours invite us to reconsider Gaza-facing viewpoints as a spatial arrangement that raises questions of mobility, testimony,

visibility and distance in immersive and mediated tourist encounters with an ongoing conflict. In general, across tour operators' webpages and private tour guide itineraries, a topography of suffering is organised as an authentic tourist experience through different levels of spatial proximity, affective intensity and visitor participation and it remains mediated by selected testimony, ethical disclaimers and controlled access.

Press coverage, particularly Escudero's (2025) report, documented how after October 7, stops at lookouts on the border of the Gaza Strip were increasingly used to witness live bombardments. In news media the phenomenon can emerge as a spectacularisation of war through viewpoints and binoculars. The opportunity to witness bombardments 'live' can be seen as a form of voyeurism: a form of 'keyhole-gaze tourism' that turns violence into something that can be watched, repeated, narrated, and even enjoyed. By contrast, tour websites and guide-centred tour providers incorporate Gaza-facing viewpoints into their itineraries without explicitly promising the observation of bombardments. The selected texts do not show that operators provide observations of bombardments, but they do show that looking towards an ongoing conflict is normalised within paid and scheduled tourist experiences. The issue, therefore, is not only whether Gaza is seen, but how it is made visible from these viewpoints. It recurs in tour titles, and some itineraries mention Jabalia and Gaza City. However, lexical and geographical visibility does not indicate a real social representation. In fact, named individuals, voices and experiences belong to the Israeli side: survivors, victims, residents, soldiers, guides, local businesses and communities attempting to rebuild a future. Gaza, instead, is represented through spatial and geopolitical categories such as "Strip," "border," "fence," "northern areas," and "the other side," rather than through the lives and experiences of its civilian population. Gaza is visually and geographically mentioned but socially underrepresented. The distinction between geographical visibility and social presence recalls Cariello's observation that Gaza's "coordinates and names" have become familiar through news reports "and yet remain distant" (2024, 112). The Gaza-facing viewpoints gives this mediated distance a material and spatial form: Gaza is brought visually closer and explained through border geography, but its inhabitants remain largely outside the testimonial structure of the tour. While the tours promise "human connection" and a "heartfelt perspective" established with Israeli people, access to Gaza is organised through distance, borders, maps, and panoramic views. The viewpoint makes Gaza visually accessible without producing an encounter with its population whose territory is being observed. In other words, looking does not generate an equal encounter with people being observed and the guides establish in advance why Gaza should be looked at and what the view is expected to demonstrate. This is a normalised shift of tours from the ethical proximity to the Israelis to the distant observation of Gaza, which makes conflict spectatorship structurally possible even when it is not explicitly advertised. The viewpoint is used to organise the tourist's visual relationship with the border

zone, in which what becomes visible is framed as evidence of Israeli vulnerability, proximity to threat and insecurity.

The mediation of the Gaza-facing view can be read through Urry and Larsen's argument that looking is socially learned, rather than the activity of a "pure and innocent eye" (2011, 1-2). Itineraries, guides' narratives and security conditions organise where visitors stand and what they see and tour guides draw on professional, personal and sometimes military authority to interpret the landscape. Lennon and Foley's (2000) "chronological distance" and Chen and Xu's (2021) moral gaze highlight the conflicts arising when recent suffering becomes a tourist product. Promotional pages cannot demonstrate tourists' moral gazes, but their disclaimers, such as Bazarsky's ones, may anticipate moral conflict by rejecting "war tourism," refusing to "showcase horrors" and reducing graphic content. The progression from attack and loss to testimony, resilience, recovery and hope can be interpreted through Martini and Buda's (2020) affective framing: it gives trauma a restorative promotional direction without eliminating its commodification.

Although Isaac (2022) examines destination-level risk rather than conflict spectatorship, his identification of organised travel as a risk-reduction strategy helps explain security checks and restricted access. They may be seen as responsible practices, but they also translate conflict into operational tourism language, making proximity selected and controlled. Paid testimony, donations, volunteering and meetings with soldiers incorporate witnessing and solidarity into purchasable itineraries, which confirms that testimony and participation may be read as 'touristified' products. Overall, post-October 7 tours may be considered a form of dark tourism practice revealing an unstable boundary between commemoration and spectatorship within which recent trauma can be transformed into a 'pay-per-view' spectacle. The 'viewpoint device' shows, then, that Gaza can be absorbed into paid and guided tours, but always asymmetrically and in relation to Israeli vulnerability.

Notes

[1] See also Press conference of 29 May 2025, for *Genocidio* (2025) book presentation of Rula Jebreal where she introduces these tours and Francesca Mannocchi's report broadcast on La7 channel (16 June 2026).

[2] The "Visit Sderot" website is entirely in Hebrew. Except "Kobe's Hill," which is written in English, the rest of the website provides only automatic Google Translate option. For this reason, only the English text on Kobe's Hill was analysed.

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Visiting Death: Dark Tourism between Theory and Practice

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Tzung-Cheng (TC) Huan, ed. *Dark Tourism: Perspectives, Post-Disaster Contexts, and Memorial Sites*. New York and London: Routledge, 2025 (216 pp.)

ABSTRACT

This contribution reviews *Dark Tourism. Perspectives, Post-Disaster Contexts, and Memorial Sites* (2025), edited by Tzung-Cheng (TC) Huan. Divided into three sections, the volume brings together a range of conceptual, empirical, and interdisciplinary approaches to dark tourism. Its case studies cover a wide variety of sites and experiences, from haunted attractions and battlefield itineraries to earthquake ruins, concentration camps, and cemeteries.

Keywords

Dark tourism, death, disaster, heritage, memorial sites

In an article published in *The Guardian* in 2019, Jessica Alice wrote: “Tourists in the hyper-curated experience of an organised tour might get physical proximity to disaster sites but are protected from the place’s real trauma” (Alice 2019). Her observation captures one of the central tensions underlying so-called ‘dark tourism’: the uneasy position of visitors who deliberately move closer to places “associated with death, disaster, and tragedy” (xi) while remaining, through the mediating institution of tourism (Walter 2009), at a safe distance from the trauma embedded in those sites. The ethical implications of turning sites of suffering and memory into destinations of consumption provide one of the recurring concerns of *Dark Tourism: Perspectives, Post-Disaster Contexts, and Memorial Sites*, edited by Tzung-Cheng (TC) Huan.

The volume’s first section, *Perspectives on Dark Tourism*, begins with Ashworth and Isaac’s “Have we illuminated the dark?,” a chapter that looks back at the development of the field while also questioning the usefulness of classifying sites according to fixed degrees of ‘darkness’. Their argument redirects attention from the supposed inherent qualities of places towards visitors’ experiences, emotions, and behaviours: as they put it, “no site is intrinsically, automatically and universally dark” (5). This perspective highlights the limitations of

taxonomies that define darkness mainly in relation to the site itself, and instead calls for greater attention to visitors' motivations and emotional responses. More radically, the authors ask whether the category of dark tourism has become so expansive that it risks losing some of its analytical value. Their provocative conclusion that, after almost twenty years of research, "it is time to move on" (10) sets up a useful challenge to the chapters that follow.

Zhang et al. explore a 'dark fun factory' in New Zealand through retrospective collaborative autoethnography. Their interpretation of the attraction as a space where human and non-human affordances, together with visitors' co-performances, "co-create an optimal affective experience" (15) is particularly relevant to the volume's broader interest in the emotional construction of darkness. At the same time, the authors are careful to acknowledge the limitations of their approach, including the possibility of "recall bias and the lack of transferability of findings to other similar cases" (21).

Chang's study of battlefield tourism in Kinmen takes a different approach, using scenario-based questionnaires to investigate visitors' preferences regarding itineraries, transportation, and souvenirs (29), presenting its findings as a potential "blueprint for tourism operators and destination managers" (38). This managerial perspective, however, raises a broader question that appears elsewhere in the volume: to what extent can places marked by warfare and collective suffering be discussed in terms of consumer preferences without overlooking, or simplifying, their historical and ethical complexity?

A similar interest in tourism behaviour shapes Cifci, Rather, Taspinar, and Altunel's study of destination attachment, self-congruity, and revisit intention in Çanakkale. Their attention to gender addresses a comparatively underdeveloped dimension of dark-tourism research (e.g., Stone and Morton 2022, Finkel and Dashper 2025). At the same time, the use of a binary male/female classification of participants limits the scope of the analysis and points to the need for future research to account for a broader range of gender identities and experiences. The limitations identified by the authors themselves, including issues of sampling and the timing of data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic, limit the extent to which the findings can be generalized (51).

Machado Carvalho's chapter on Rome's Capuchin Crypt moves the discussion towards the 'lighter' end of dark tourism. Rather than examining actual visitors, Carvalho focuses on prospective ones and identifies several important motivations, including reflection on mortality, learning and curiosity, fascination with darkness, and prestige. Particularly interesting is the suggestion that reflection on mortality may precede rather than simply result from the experience of the site (65).

The section concludes with Lennon and Tiberghien's study of Kazakhstan's Gulag heritage, which turns to questions of memory politics, selective commemoration, and the vulnerability of material heritage. Their observation that the terror of the camps has not simply

been forgotten but is "only partially remembered" (71) points to more political questions and effectively captures the tensions between managerial and critical approaches explored throughout the chapter. Taken as a whole, the section leaves several important questions open, especially about the relationship between affect, commodification, and commemoration, visitor motivation, and the communities for whom these landscapes remain part of lived history.

If the first section highlights the conceptual breadth of dark tourism, the second – *Dark Tourism in Post-disaster Contexts* – considers how these questions play out in post-disaster contexts, where tourism develops alongside mourning, reconstruction, interpretation, and collective memory. Zhang, Coghlan, and Knox open the section with a study of the sites affected by the 2008 Sichuan earthquake in Beichuan and Yingxiu. Drawing on Self-Categorisation Theory and a netnographic analysis of visitors' online reviews, they examine what the theory calls 'depersonalisation', a shift "from a unique individual to a group member" (85). One of the most compelling aspects of the chapter is its discussion of different levels of belonging. Visitors position themselves at different moments as individuals, as members of the Chinese nation, and more broadly as human beings confronted with the destructive power of nature. The findings also show how commemoration can strengthen collective identity and social cohesion. The authors acknowledge the cultural specificity of their Chinese sample and point to the need for comparative research in other contexts.

Questions of mediation are explored more directly in Wright and Sharpley's chapter on Roberto Grillo's photographic representation of the 2009 L'Aquila earthquake. The photographs provide a way of asking how visitors move from seeing physical destruction to engaging with the human experience behind it. Interviews suggest that Grillo's constructed images helped tourists establish a stronger emotional connection with victims than more conventional forms of documentary photography, contributing to what the authors describe as a "more meaningful, less voyeuristic experience" (110). The chapter returns to a tension already raised in this review: physical proximity to a devastated site does not necessarily entail a deeper understanding of the trauma associated with it. Interpretive mediation may help bridge that gap, but it may also reinforce it.

Lennon's discussion of Cambodia shifts the focus from natural disaster to the complex institutional legacy of mass violence. Through the sites of Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek, he examines the deterioration of material heritage, selective interpretation, and the uneasy relationship between tourism, memory, and justice. Lennon suggests that tourists may become "unlikely guardians of tragic heritage" (119), since international visitation can contribute to preserving sites that receive limited political or financial support at the domestic level. At the same time, inadequate interpretation and commercial development can turn evidence of historical violence into spectacle, thus altering the meaning through which the past is

encountered. This makes the chapter one of the section's strongest reflections on the ethical challenges of preserving difficult heritage.

The relationship between disaster and tourism becomes more structural in Cohen's comparison of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the 2005 flash floods in Pai, Thailand. His analysis challenges the idea that disasters are entirely external to tourism by showing how tourism development can itself increase vulnerability, particularly through construction in hazardous areas and environmental degradation. The reluctance to "rock the (tourist) boat" (135) by drawing attention to potential hazards reveals another tension: destinations must balance visitor safety against the economic pressure to maintain a reassuring and attractive image.

Wen, Ying, Nguyen, and Teo examine the 2019 Australian bushfires through interviews with prospective Chinese tourists. Their respondents appear more willing to negotiate risk than conventional accounts of risk-averse Chinese tourism might suggest. At the same time, concerns about climate change, government crisis management, and opportunities for volunteering all shape their perceptions of Australia. The study offers a useful starting point for further research on tourism resilience in the aftermath of crises, although the size and composition of the sample suggest that its conclusions should be considered exploratory.

The second section concludes with Seaton's study of battlefield tourism on the Somme and in Flanders. Through participant observation, he identifies substantial differences among visitors who are often grouped together under the broad label of 'tourists.' This leads him to argue that "meaning rather than motivation" (156) may offer a more productive way of understanding their behaviour. His discussion of military enthusiasts also complicates the assumption that such visitors are primarily drawn by voyeuristic fascination with death. Instead, their practices often involve remembrance, historical research, and a strong attachment to individual lives and personal histories.

The final section – *Memorial and Heritage Sites of Dark Tourism* – turns more directly to the relationship between tourism, commemoration, and the construction of historical memory. Hartmann's chapter on the Dachau Memorial Site and Museum examines both visitors' motivations and the more complex relationship between the memorial and the city that surrounds it. Lennon and Smith compare Terezin and Lety in the Czech Republic. The contrast is telling: while Terezin has developed an extensive network of museums, exhibitions, and archives, Lety was for decades characterised by limited commemoration and by the presence of an industrial pig farm on the site of the former camp. The comparison shows how remembrance is shaped by political priorities, prejudice, and material investment. As the authors observe, "The past is more than chronology" (175), and the way sites are interpreted plays an important role in determining which victims become part of collective memory.

Paraskevaidis and Andriotis extend the category of tourism by considering medical volunteers working during the European refugee crisis as 'accidental tourists.' For these professionals, "tourism was merely a welcome side-effect" (183) of humanitarian work rather than a reason for travelling in the first place. Seaton, by contrast, closes the section with a discussion of cemeteries, churchyards, and funerary sites as forms of both sacred and secular pilgrimage. His historical overview shows that visiting burial places long predates the concept of dark tourism and has always involved a wide range of motivations.

Across its three sections, *Dark Tourism: Perspectives, Post-Disaster Contexts, and Memorial Sites* illustrates both the difficulty and the continuing relevance of defining a field that encompasses such different sites and experiences, from haunted attractions and battlefield tours to earthquake ruins, concentration camps, and cemeteries. The volume also returns to the ethical tension introduced at the beginning of this review: the desire to approach and understand suffering while remaining, as visitors, at some distance from its lived reality. This tension remains one of the central questions running through dark-tourism research.

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Between Trauma and Attraction: The Dissonant Heritage and Paradoxes of Dark Tourism in the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone

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Magdalena Banaszkiewicz. *Tourism and Heritage in the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone*. London and New York: Routledge, 2023 (229 pp.)

ABSTRACT

This review examines Magdalena Banaszkiewicz's monograph, which is devoted to an ethnographic analysis of the phenomenon of Chornobyl tourism and the transformation of the Exclusion Zone as an object of dissonant cultural heritage. The review analyses key theoretical and empirical aspects of the work: the multi-layered nature of memory of the disaster, leading to the formation of a dissonant Chornobyl heritage; the influence of global media and popular culture on the rise in tourist interest in the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone; a profile of the Chornobyl tourist; the phenomenon of Chornobyl guides as principal interpreters of the Zone's space; and prospects for the preservation and revitalisation of the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone and Chornobyl's cultural heritage.

Keywords

Chornobyl Exclusion Zone, dark tourism, dissonant cultural heritage, Chornobyl guides, ethnography

26 April 2026 marked the 40th anniversary of the Chornobyl disaster — a tragedy that divided the lives of millions of people into 'before' and 'after.' Over the past decades, "Chornobyl became a universal symbol of post-catastrophic heritage" (Banaszkiewicz 2023, XI). Magdalena Banaszkiewicz examines Chornobyl from an ethnographic perspective as one of the most popular destinations for dark tourism. The author highlights the contradictory nature of Chornobyl heritage, which attracts thousands of visitors. What is a site of trauma for some is, for others, a commercialised dark tourism destination. The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including the temporary occupation of the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Station, have temporarily halted tourist flows, but at the same time have introduced new contradictions into the interpretation of the cultural and natural heritage of the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone. Time is gradually eroding the physical sites of memory associated with the Anthropocene era; yet, at the same time, new practices and meanings are emerging, generated by the tourism industry.

In the introduction, Banaszkiewicz traces the chronology of events surrounding the Chornobyl disaster, demonstrating how the once densely populated and developed area around the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Station was transformed into a desolate wasteland in a matter of days. The key focus of the study is the 30-kilometre Chornobyl Exclusion Zone, which was established on 2 May 1986 for safety reasons and which quite rapidly became "a particular microcosm governed by its own rules and inaccessible to unauthorised people" (Banaszkiewicz 2023, 2). The research focuses on the specific nature of the relationship between tourism and the cultural heritage of the Zone. To carry out this project, Banaszkiewicz employs a combination of qualitative field and desk-based methods: whilst working on the book, she made 12 trips to the Zone, explored the area, and conducted a series of ethnographic interviews with Chornobyl guides.

In the first chapter, Banaszkiewicz identifies the underlying factors behind tourists' interest in the Chornobyl heritage, conceptualising it as dissonant. According to the author, dissonance in the field of heritage arises at the intersection of three interrelated areas: knowledge, emotions and values, the configuration of which may differ amongst various stakeholders or come into direct conflict. An additional source of tension is the polysemantic structure of the Chornobyl heritage, which, in the author's view, encompasses such modes as post-communist heritage, heirless heritage, industrial heritage, the heritage of trauma, and post-apocalyptic and postcolonial heritages. Drawing on the research of Philip Stone (2013), Banaszkiewicz emphasises that Chornobyl represents a "monument to the secrecy and failings of the Cold War" (Banaszkiewicz 2023, 40) and a kind of necropolis for the Soviet modernisation project. In the case of Chornobyl, various registers of memory intersect: individual, collective, traumatic and cultural. As the disaster recedes into the past, postmemory (Hirsch 1997) and prosthetic memory (Landsberg 2004) begin to play an increasingly prominent role. The degree of dissonance is also heightened by the multiplicity of actors exercising control over the past: the state; displaced persons (former residents of Prypiat and the surrounding villages); self-settlers who have returned to their abandoned homes; accident liquidators; tour operators and guides; tourists; and stalkers (illegal explorers of the Zone). The result is a hybrid cultural heritage of Chornobyl, which acts as a 'contact zone' for these diverse actors: "The dissonance of Chornobyl heritage emerges from various memories of the disaster: memories that developed from keeping silent, the memories entangled in current social and cultural issues, the memories that surf the wave of nostalgia and are anchored in trauma, memories that are manufactured, and above all, memories that are permeated with the emotions and projections of the future. These representations of the past at both individual and collective levels determine the interpretations and narratives about the CEZ and influence the positions of individual stakeholders" (Banaszkiewicz 2023, 48). According to Banaszkiewicz, the distinguishing feature of Chornobyl's dissonant heritage lies in the fact that

it is shaped not only by the past and by memory, but also by the present, which actively transforms our perception of past events.

The second chapter examines the interdependence of tourism and representations of Chornobyl in cultural texts: "Chornobyl is a cultural product that can sell as a film, comic, photograph, novel, game, artistic installation, and music – the numerous means of expression as well as interpretations give artists an unlimited field for developing narratives that shape the tourists' imagination" (Banaszkiewicz 2023, 49). Stories relating to the accident take on a life of their own thanks to large-scale media coverage. Drawing on existing historical accounts, the creators of new narratives often bring peripheral elements of meaning to the fore, superimposing various cultural codes upon one another. This leads to the coexistence of two paradigms of (non)representation of Chornobyl, as described by Tamara Hundorova (Hundorova 2019) – Chornobyl catastrophism and Chornobyl stalkerism. Within the first paradigm, the tragedy is turned into a simulacrum and transformed into a spectacle: tourists travel to the Zone to see the real-life settings after watching the HBO mini-series *Chernobyl* or seeing popular posts on social media. In the second case, the Zone is perceived in the present tense – as the territory of the stalker, the topos of the Other, "a place of safety that gives you power" (Banaszkiewicz 2023, 58). Tourists, inspired by the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* video game franchise, films about stalkers and social media posts by stalkers, come here seeking an opportunity to experience a direct connection with the environment and overcome their own existential anxieties. According to Banaszkiewicz, "Chornobyl would never have become such a popular tourist destination if not for cultural texts" (Banaszkiewicz 2023, 62). It is precisely global media coverage that has cemented the Zone's status as one of the leading post-apocalyptic destinations for dark tourism, where enduring associations with ruins, an invisible threat and radiation only serve to enhance its appeal to tourists.

The third chapter analyses the origins and structure of Chornobyl tourism through the lens of Richard Butler's tourism destination life-cycle model (Butler 2006): from the exploration stage (1986–2010) through the engagement stage (2011–2016) to the phase of large-scale development and mass tourism (2016–2021). Whilst visits to the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone were initially strictly regulated and intended primarily for research delegations, from 2011 the Zone was officially positioned as a destination for extreme tourism. Specialist tour operators are entering the market, developing safe, standardised itineraries. Banaszkiewicz examines in detail the visitor regulations, the evolution of the infrastructure, visitor statistics for 2011–2021, as well as the national, age and gender profile of the average visitor to the Zone. Particular attention is paid to the phenomenon of 'stalkerism', which operates in opposition to institutionalised tourism. Banaszkiewicz notes that, although visits to the Zone are traditionally categorised as a form of dark tourism, "that is not the only category that could be used to

describe the location" (Banaszkiewicz 2023, 97). In this context, dark tourism is inextricably intertwined with heritage tourism, nuclear tourism, and disaster tourism.

Today, Chornobyl dark tourism constitutes an institutionalised system bringing together government bodies (which regulate access and approve itineraries), specialist agencies and guides. It is to the latter – as key mediators and interpreters – that the fourth chapter is devoted: "Due to the extraordinary nature of the Zone as a destination (increased risk to health and life, border area, industrial and military facilities), entering it requires the supervision of a certified companion, responsible not only for sharing information but also, first of all, guaranteeing the safety of the visitors" (Banaszkiewicz 2023, 106). The author proposes a detailed typology of the professional community. Firstly, there are the 'old guides' – eyewitnesses of the events and those involved in the clean-up operations, for whom guiding stems naturally from their personal life stories. These are insiders of the Zone who convey knowledge rooted in autobiographical memory. Secondly, there are the 'professionals' – specialists who have come from outside the Zone and undergone institutional training. A notable sub-category here is that of former stalkers, who possess unique knowledge of the local topography and microstructure of the Zone. Thirdly, there is a young generation of freelance guides. Having learnt the factual material from external sources, they actively use social media for professional self-promotion and convey an aestheticized image of the Zone: "Ruins belong to the landscape, harmoniously blending with the wilderness of nature and seem a part of it rather than relics of human presence" (Banaszkiewicz 2023, 113). The nature of the work carried out by Chornobyl guides is determined by the fact that "every guided tour challenges the guide to meet the expectations of the group, follow the regulations of the visit and the requirements of the employer, and also achieve satisfaction from guiding the tour" (Banaszkiewicz 2023, 121). The key distinguishing feature of Chornobyl as a dark tourism destination is the presence of radiation: "Radiation is an invisible enemy. The consequences may become visible in several years or decades, or perhaps in the next generation" (Banaszkiewicz 2023, 124). For this reason, a visit to the Zone becomes a strictly controlled game of chance, in which the guide ensures the visitors' physical and psychological safety.

The argument that "visiting the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) differs significantly from visiting a museum or walking around a city" (Banaszkiewicz 2023, 162) is developed in detail in the concluding fifth chapter. Upon entering the Zone, visitors encounter a series of paradoxes: "something that is seemingly safe is actually dangerous (radiation is invisible, and buildings are decaying), something that seems dangerous is in fact safe (the life of the samosely, work in the Zone)" (Banaszkiewicz 2023, 162). Contrary to common clichés about a 'dead zone', the Exclusion Zone is a dynamic environment: technological processes to ensure safety continue at the station, the daily lives of the few self-settlers go on, and

environmental conservation initiatives are being implemented (in particular, as part of the Chornobyl Radiation and Ecological Biosphere Reserve).

Summarising the findings of her research, Banaszkiewicz concludes that "the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) is a perfect example of dissonant heritage" (Banaszkiewicz 2023, 173), where the site of trauma simultaneously becomes a space of revitalisation. Unlike areas affected by other anthropogenic disasters, the radiation factor precludes the territory's full return to economic use; however, administrative activities, the functioning of infrastructure and tourism practices simultaneously erode the Zone's physical fabric whilst stimulating its preservation and a reinterpretation of its meaning. In the Chornobyl context, memory, conservation and innovation do not exclude one another, but instead operate in mutually reinforcing ways.

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Narrative, Governance, and the Limits of Sustainable Dark Tourism

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Pawan Kumar, Gurmeet Singh, Vipin Nadda, Bindu Aggarwal, and Ranjeet Verma, eds. *Sustainable Dark Tourism: Trends and Insights from the Globe*. New York and London: Routledge, 2026 (256 pp.)

ABSTRACT

This review examines *Sustainable Dark Tourism*, a collection which addresses trauma, memory, and sustainability in relation to so-called dark tourism. Its contributions deal, among other issues, with environmental and economic sustainability, and with the ethics and governance of 'dark' sites. They are held together by a sustained investigation into the narratives of those sites, as well as new immersive technologies and the controversial (and material) potentialities of narrating and marketing trauma-related sites and tourist 'experiences.' The review identifies the collection's strengths, particularly some of the practical proposals suggested by contributors on sustainable engagement models and international frameworks. Yet, it also raises concerns about its over-reliance on canonical Western case studies, and the depoliticising potential of the term "disaster memorials" when applied to sites of human violence. The review expresses the hope that the expert contributors to the volume will continue their work by pursuing a more consistently decolonial framework.

Keywords

Dark tourism, sustainability, memory studies, decolonial perspectives, Asia

Owning the narrative of dark tourism sites is a question which surfaces, sometimes only implicitly, across all the twelve chapters in this volume: ownership here is both symbolic and material, since it relates to who narrates and is considered entitled to narrate trauma, but also who is compensated for doing so, if at all. *Sustainable Dark Tourism* does not always resolve this question, but its recurring presence gives the collection a coherence that its individual chapters, considered separately, do not always achieve.

The volume's twelve chapters can be grouped into four thematic clusters. The first three chapters lay historical foundations for dark tourism, addressing the psychological and cultural motivations behind this practical and theoretical concept, its evolution, and some of the emerging global trends contributors detect worldwide, particularly in relation to immersive technologies. Chapters four through six pivot toward environmental, community-based, and economic sustainability, as promised by the general title. Chapters seven, eight and nine

address questions of ethics and governance through case studies and comparative analysis. Chapters ten to twelve turn to policy-making, especially within an international panorama, and to the monetisation of the profits of dark tourism. This makes sense in an edited collection aimed at readers relatively new to dark tourism and thanatourism studies, while specialists may find themselves wishing for greater depth in places and for fewer repetitions of the same reference titles.

Chapter 3, by Nirbhay Sharma and Shabnam Gulati, is among the more engaging ones, offering welcome specificity through terminology such as EIDT (Ethical Immersive Dark Tourism) and discussing immersive technologies such as VR, via the addition of concrete data, including the example of Auschwitz's measured reduction in visitor numbers and energy consumption. Yet the chapter's enthusiasm for AI- and VR-driven experiences as a sustainable future for dark tourism feels, at times, naïve: the same empirical rigour applied to physical site management is not extended to the considerable energy and water demands of the digital infrastructures proposed as alternatives.

Chapter 5 (Shashi Kant, Maheshwaran Muthuraman, and Pawan Kumar) offers valuable attention to the underexplored case of Zambia, both as a tourism site and as a field of scholarly inquiry. Given this lack of attention, one might have hoped for closer dialogue between this chapter and the environmental sustainability discussion of Chapter 4, weaving environmental and community dimensions together through this underrepresented regional lens.

Chapter 7 takes readers to Europe, to a less well-known and still politically controversial – for some – case, with Alessandro Ferrazza's study of the Fosse Ardeatine. This chapter is one of the volume's genuine highlights: culturally attuned, it is sustained in its engagement – and the author’s declared affective engagement – with a single site's complex historical and political afterlife. This is not to suggest that meaningful scholarship on a place requires being ‘from’ that place; rather, as anticipated, subtly underlying the chapters stands the mentioned question of who owns the narrative, and how proximity may shape which stories dark tourism scholarship tells in depth, and which it tells only in passing, often alongside the now-familiar comparative anchors of Auschwitz, Chernobyl, and Hiroshima.

The volume's strongest sustained argument, in my view, emerges across Chapters 8 through 11, which trace governance from the national to the international level. Chapter 8 (Priyakrushna Mohanty, Manogna Reddy, and James Kennell) departs from the well-worn topic of visitor motivation, already covered in many studies as well as in Chapters 1 and 9, to examine the comparatively undertheorized role of states as active agents of memory (and amnesia), rather than as neutral regulators. The authors describe the conflictual positions governments often occupy regarding the sites they (should) oversee, and their caution against excessive securitization (154) feels especially timely given increasing surveillance measures at memorial and disaster sites worldwide. Chapter 9 (Devika Sood, Swati Sharma, and Akshita

Tiwari) also builds on this by proposing a global "sustainable engagement model" (170, 174, 177). Such a model risks appearing utopian, but it nonetheless offers a normative compass which may help in channeling governmental attention toward shared standards even where full implementation remains a political aspiration, at a time in which the global geopolitical situation seems to offer no space for international peaceful organisations. Chapter 10 (Nishtha Lalit, Nilesh Arora, and Sudhir Rana) extends this discussion to international bodies, such as UNESCO, UNWTO, ICOMOS, and Indian initiatives such as PRASHAD, engaging directly with critiques of UNESCO for perpetuating "inequalities in the representation of Global South sites" (189).

Chapter 11 pushes this critique still further. Shalini Aggarwal, Prerna Dhawan, and Mujtaba Momin argue here that existing international charters remain too vague, offering little in the way of practical, sustainable site protocols. Their discussion of Cambodia's Tuol Sleng is particularly effective, identifying how there is a striking lack of community involvement, and, crucially, of revenue accruing to local communities at this site of genocidal memory, deeply embedded in Cambodia's colonial history (201). The chapter also turns to Jallianwala Bagh, site of the 1919 Amritsar massacre, identifying a genuine double bind: the risk of *kitschification*, a trivializing commodification of atrocity, set against the equally troubling possibility of nationalist appropriation of the site's narrative (203). This is a much welcome instance in the volume where a Global South site receives the kind of sustained critical attention this review and some of the volume's contributors have argued is too often reserved for canonical Global North cases. Tellingly, the authors also note an "immense gap in research" on non-Western contexts (206). The chapter concludes by suggesting that a unified international framework might serve as a counterweight to national political priorities, which tend to be volatile and unpredictable (204).

The final chapter, Chapter 12, grounds the volume's central question in its most literal register, presenting comparative data on revenue models across global and Indian dark tourism sites. The resulting table is revealing: government-funded sites such as Auschwitz-Birkenau and Jallianwala Bagh rely on state grants and donations; privatized or hybrid models, as at Chernobyl and the 9/11 Memorial, draw on private tours, merchandise, and ticket sales; while the Bhopal Gas Tragedy site remains dangerously "informal," since it is sustained by donations and survivor-led tours alone. This last entry is perhaps the volume's most quietly devastating point: where neither state nor market claims ownership of a tragedy's narrative, the burden of memory-work and its financial precarity falls to survivors themselves. The fact that two Indian sites of tragedy, Jallianwala Bagh and Bhopal, occupy opposite ends of this spectrum somehow highlights how unevenly national governments distribute recognition and resources even within their own borders, depending on a tragedy's perceived political utility.

The volume comes full circle in its final pages. Authors Pankhuri Kapoor and Tushinder Preet Kaur acknowledge the difficulty of balancing revenue generation, community respect, environmental and financial sustainability. They eventually focus on the India case, proposing as a practical remedy to inconsistent involvement the establishment of a "national fund for disaster memorials" in India (227). The term "disaster" itself, however, deserves further scrutiny, in that many of the sites discussed across these twelve chapters, for instance Jallianwala Bagh, Bhopal, Auschwitz, Tuol Sleng, are not disasters in any accidental sense, but the direct results of human slow or explosive violence in the form of genocidal massacre and criminal corporate negligence (to say the least). The expression "disaster memorials" might cause a subtle elision, shifting attention away from perpetrators and political responsibility, toward a more comfortable, depoliticized language of 'misfortune.'

To conclude, *Sustainable Dark Tourism* is a useful volume, particularly for its practical proposals: the sustainable engagement model of Chapter 9 and the call for a unified international framework in Chapter 11, which offer potential guidance for policymakers and tourism-related organisations. This practical orientation is one of the collection's real strengths. Yet the book would have benefited from insisting more consistently on its contributors' own evident expertise in Indian and Asian dark tourism contexts, rather than allowing this knowledge to surface only intermittently, while continuing to allow sustained analytical attention to canonical Western case studies. Culturally and theoretically, the volume tends toward survey and analytical data rather than toward the kind of decolonial reading that its own focus, and its own contributors' expertise, would readily support. As I made clear at the start, the question of who owns the narrative of dark tourism is asked throughout this book, but I believe there are many more opportunities for decolonising dark tourism from a consistent Global South scholarly perspective, and I wish these very same scholars might soon engage with it.

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Rooted fascination, multiple perspectives and ethical implications of dark tourism: an interview with Professor Charles Forsdick

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ABSTRACT

This interview with Charles Forsdick, conducted by Donatella Marcatajo,[1] examines the intersections of dark tourism, memory, and French colonial history through a postcolonial and interdisciplinary lens. While often framed as a contemporary phenomenon, dark tourism is traced back to older traditions of meditation on death and memorialisation, as well as to forms of sensationalism and morbidity, highlighting the ways in which societies engage with difficult pasts and human mortality. The discussion foregrounds the ethical tensions surrounding sites linked to slavery, colonial violence, and trauma, particularly the balance between education, commodification, and spectatorship. It also considers how representations and practices vary across Europe, West Africa, and the Americas, shaped by different colonial histories and political contexts. These differences reveal the entanglement of dark tourism with questions of race, inequality, mobility, and global power. The interview further considers literature as a space that can complement historiography and archival work, offering alternative ways of engaging with memory and with the silences of the archive. Ultimately, emphasis is placed on contrapuntal approaches, which resist simplified or homogenising narratives and instead hold multiple perspectives in tension. Such approaches allow for a more nuanced understanding of how the legacies of empire are negotiated and reimagined across different sites and cultural forms.

Keywords

dark tourism, slavery, ethics of tourism, Francophone literature, postcolonial memory

Introduction

DM: In recent years, your work has spanned a number of fields, from French and Francophone Literature and History to Translation Studies, from Comics Studies to Medical Humanities, from Travel Literature to Postcolonial and Slavery Studies. Within this multidisciplinary framework, many of your works focus on the intersection between mobility, memory, and colonial history. What led you to take an interest in these topics and how did these interests intertwine in your research?

CF: I like your question because it gives me the opportunity to discuss something we do not often talk about, namely the stories behind how we arrive at the topics of our research. My

research path may appear eclectic, but it is grounded in a clear coherence that goes back to my PhD, completed in 1995. In a thirty-year career, it is inevitable to explore multiple fields, yet in my case everything can be traced back to a walk (I also work within travel writing studies on pedestrianism). Aged nineteen, I was in France teaching English in Brittany and I discovered a memory site in the forest of the town where I was working: it was the place where an author called Victor Segalen had taken his own life in 1919. Segalen was a naval doctor, a writer and a traveller across Polynesia and China. He worked across multiple genres, and he followed in the footsteps of Gauguin, acquiring a lot of his works at auction. He wrote a remarkably prescient text called *Essay on Exoticism*.

He acted as a kind of 'matrix' in my academic career, opening up multiple avenues. It is incredible how a single author can become this sort of figure, because everything you have mentioned, I can link back to him. Two of his most important readers in the 1950s were Francophone authors, the Martinican writer Édouard Glissant and the Moroccan Abdelkebir Khatibi. This led me toward Francophone and Postcolonial Literature, encouraging me to move beyond a strictly metropolitan French canon. Through Glissant, who wrote a play called *Monsieur Toussaint* on Toussaint Louverture, I also developed an interest in Haiti and the history of slavery, which was later reinforced by circumstances, for I ended up working in Liverpool and being closely involved with the International Slavery Museum. Also, Segalen was a translingual and travel writer, he wrote in French and Chinese, and fostered my engagement with Translation Studies and travel writing. So, it is almost as if he was the kernel of all this and all my other interests fanned out from engagement with him.

DM: So, Segalen was really a key figure in your path.

CF: Yes, I continue to work on him. Many researchers, particularly those who write a PhD thesis on a single author, have had enough by the time they have defended their dissertation and want to move on to studying other subjects, writers or forms. That is not my case. It is almost as if Segalen 'haunted' me. Every year I go back to that site, the place where he died, and his nearby grave. It is not a real pilgrimage, but I think it is important for me. That encounter was a foundational moment and experience.

My life is scattered with projects I may never complete, but one idea I keep returning to is a book on cemeteries. I often encourage my students, especially during their year abroad, to think ethnographically: when you arrive in a new culture, go to the cemetery, because it reveals how people remember and respect the dead. Cemeteries differ greatly across cultures, and I find them fascinating. I have imagined a book that would connect cemeteries with dark tourism, memory, and ethnography, alongside a section based on the many different cemeteries I have visited. I am particularly interested in those of the Chinese Labour Corps from the First World War in northern France, as well as cemeteries in penal colonies. Reflecting

on these, I wonder whether this interest might be part of a wider commitment to studying the ritual dimensions underlying our engagement with different cultures.

DM: One of your major research fields, as you said, is dark tourism, also known as 'grief tourism' or 'thanatourism,' which has become an established field of academic inquiry. This is actually an umbrella term to describe many practices of tourist mobility, which are intertwined with death, suffering, trauma, war, genocide, and many other forms of violence and suffering. Is there a specific aspect of it that you focus on in your research?

CF: I would make just three comments on terminology. First, 'dark tourism' can be too broad a term: if it becomes too elastic and covers too much, it risks losing meaning and I have a worry about that. For this reason, I have worked with a former PhD student of mine in Liverpool on breaking it down into subfields and a clearer taxonomy, such as slavery-related tourism and penal tourism. Second, there is an issue of translatability. The concept seems largely a construction of the Anglophone academy: equivalents in French, such as '*tourisme noir*' or '*tourisme macabre*', do not resonate fully with some of my French colleagues, with whom I worked on a Labex-funded project concerning Holocaust or genocide tourism and prison tourism. I guess it is because in the French imagination such visits are often understood as forms of memory practice rather than tourism. Another point concerns the distinctiveness of dark tourism, which struck me in 2007 in Ghana during the bicentenary celebrations for the abolition of the British slave trade. I realised that dark tourism is often part of a blended experience, where leisure and memory experiences coexist — for example, visiting beaches in the morning and then slave forts in Elmina or Cape Coast, or combining nightlife in Kraków with a visit to Auschwitz. This blending or juxtaposition raises pressing ethical questions about how tourism, typically associated with pleasure, relates to sites of suffering and enslavement.

To come back to your specific question, my main research interests within this field are slavery-related tourism — across Europe, West Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas. This includes plantations, historical sites and memorial sites which are constructed, notably museums and monuments. Another strand in which I am very interested is 'penal tourism0, particularly how prisons and penal colonies become tourist destinations. I am involved in a project at the moment on penal heritage and I would say that these two areas reveal a strong contrast: sites linked to slavery or genocide tend to be heavily prescriptive for visitors, imposing respectful, regulated behaviour (at Auschwitz, for example, there are all the controversies about the so-called 'Auschwitz selfie'), while prison sites are often more sensationalist and less attentive to past suffering, and there is little or no respect for the victims (prisoners in the nineteenth century were subject to really inhumane conditions and may often be seen as victims of the criminalisation of poverty). This contrast between these two examples, slave-related tourism and penal tourism, helps us to compare practices and assumptions. And they

allow us to think, what is it about dark tourism that allows us to understand society, but also ourselves?

DM: And do you think that this contrast can be due to a specific consumerist, Western-white way of engaging with these places, cultures and histories?

CF: To a certain extent, obviously, I think tourist practices are culturally conditioned and shaped by social factors such as class and gender. However, in the case of slavery-related tourism, the picture is more complex, particularly when considering 'roots tourism,' which is specifically associated with African American visitors. Here, things get more complicated. For people of African descent in the diaspora, there is often a tension between, on the one hand, a shared experience and stake in the legacies of enslavement, and, on the other, individual histories. This is why a comparative approach is important to me: slavery-related tourism takes different forms in different contexts, for example in West Africa compared to the Caribbean, the Americas or the United States.

DM: As for the motivations of these travels, you emphasised the ambivalence of the phenomenon. In your opinion, is dark tourism more of a cultural practice, a memorial device, or just a way of consuming things?

CF: Great question. It is really a combination of all these factors, isn't it? It also reflects the elasticity of 'dark tourism' as a term. One of the main challenges in this field is understanding motivation: I think that motivation and affective response are partly conditioned by cultural and social variables, but they are also deeply individual, and often people visit these sites because they perceive or actually have a personal connection with them. For this reason, it is important to be cautious, in my opinion, in leaping to any conclusions.

Audience research — carried out by other scholars, whose methodologies are more anthropological or sociological than my own — tries to clarify why people visit these places and how they engage with them. On a macro level, dark tourism is an industry and can be seen, cynically, in economic and consumerist terms: we can analyse it as a neo-liberal strategy to increase visitor numbers and diversify tourist offerings, an exploitation of resources in one part of the world by people in another. I am not criticising that, but it is just the economic mechanisms we need to see underpinning this. We can think about dark tourism in a consumerist frame.

At the same time, more recent work emphasises its ritual and personal dimensions, highlighting how encounters with such sites can be deeply individual. What is particularly striking to me is that these different motivations coexist and often remain in tension. This is similar to travel writing and travel more generally: those spaces are inhabited by people with very different experiences, resources, and degrees of mobility depending on resources or on whether they have the right passport or not. So, I suppose that the analysis of dark tourism requires both a macro level and a micro one, with the latter focused on individual experiences.

On the historicisation of dark tourism

DM: Indeed, some scholars have noted these controversial aspects, but also a sort of historical continuity with other practices of the past. On the one hand, there are forms of *thanatophilia*, meaning a morbid fascination with death, such as gladiator fights in ancient Rome or public executions during the medieval period. On the other hand, there are early practices of *thanatopsis*, that is, meditation on death, such as the nineteenth-century Romantic aesthetic of the sublime. So, do you feel that there are two opposing aspects and feelings, one that considers dark tourism as a new form of Vanitas, a *memento mori* translated into travel, and another one that highlights a kind of inherent sensationalist morbidity in human nature?

CF: I could not agree more, and I think your point usefully historicises the practice. One of the main assumptions concerning dark tourism is that it is often seen as a hyper-contemporary phenomenon, linked to contemporary and postmodern dysfunctions. This is arguably exemplified by the study of those who visit sites connected to recent deaths, such as the place where Princess Diana died in Paris, or where Martin Luther King was shot, or other crime-related sites, an aspect I have never worked on. Wanting to go where particularly gruesome murders occurred, there is a whole industry around that.

Yet there is also a longer history behind it, as you have said. Early dark tourist scholars like Tony Seaton have shown how these practices resemble older forms of pilgrimage, driven by a desire to see relics and saints' remains. This 'scopic' desire to see exotic and strange things connects to other historical phenomena, such as ethnographic exhibitions or so-called human zoos which were popular between 1870s and 1930s, reflecting a long-standing fascination with the exotic and the sensational. Such practices raise clear ethical questions about spectatorship — whether we have the right to look, and under what conditions, in terms of which ethical standards and agreed behaviours. Such practices involve a tension between education and entertainment. Even when framed as educational, they can still rely on a form of exoticism: a desire to observe without necessarily being challenged or changed, and this is also true concerning 'poverty tourism' or 'favela tourism,' for instance. In these cases, tourism does not contribute systematically to alleviating poverty really and it does not seem to be ethically justifiable to me. A similar issue appears in historical practices like 'asylum tourism,' very common in the nineteenth century, where people visited those living with mental illness, sometimes under the guise of reform but often for entertainment. This highlights the importance of studying how and why people engage with such sites.

At the same time, there is another tradition, as you have suggested, closer to *memento mori* or *danse macabre*, which is something rather different. It frames these encounters as reflective and introspective on the nature of being human, a sort of reminder of the inevitability of death. I suppose what interests me is the role of individual agency, as visitors navigate different modes of engagement. These experiences are often shaped by rather cynical forms

of instrumentalisation and exploitation, as seen for example in prison museums that deliberately emphasise shock and sensationalism. But I think that the historical precedents you mentioned — gladiatorial combat in the ancient world or parading captives who were brought back from war — are particularly of interest in the field. Some of the most compelling work in dark tourism focuses on its ritual dimensions, which justifies it in some ways as a practice: the experience goes beyond mere observation or sensation and moves toward questions of the quality of engagement. In these cases, visits can become more personal and reflective, contributing to a deeper consideration of what it means to be human and mortal.

DM: Concerning the oxymoronic aspect of dark tourism, this conversation made me think about an Italian philosopher, Carlo Michelstaedter, who said that human beings are afraid to look into their own darkness, to listen to the inner voice of their own pain, and in order to escape the terror of death and the atrocity of the world, they seek pleasant and reassuring distractions, such as faith, pleasure in general, and even voluntary amnesia to distract themselves from their own powerlessness. Some of these travels are indeed seen as secular pilgrimages to find consciousness or gratification. Do you think that dark tourism can defuse or domesticate this sort of anguish, like a sort of catharsis?

CF: This is a brilliant reflection that returns to the question of historicisation, and whether there is an actual difference between medieval pilgrimage and contemporary dark tourism. Part of this difference lies in the social construction of attitudes towards death: in modern societies, death and illness have increasingly been pushed to the margins and confined to specific quarantined spaces, such as hospitals or residential homes, minimising awareness of mortality. Dark tourism, however, brings death back into focus, particularly in forms like thanatourism that foreground death. Often it singularises death, because it involves individual or celebrity deaths, whereas genocide tourism shifts attention to mass, industrialised death. This raises again the question of whether such histories are being turned into something consumable — experiences that can be packaged, consumed and then accompanied by gift shops at the end of the visit.

It is interesting you mentioned religion. For at the same time, if dark tourism loses sight of a shared sense of humanity, it becomes problematic. But when we talk about rituals, I indeed ask myself what are the links between dark tourism and religion? In a post-religious age like ours, might dark tourism function as a secular form of religion? I am not sure, in some ways, it might be as a substitute form of engagement with mortality, one of those shrinking spaces where people confront directly the reality of human finitude.

DM: So, do you think that this risks neutralising or trivialising the trauma?

CF: Yes, very much so, and this connects to what we discussed earlier. Prison museums are a good example, as they often rely on sensationalism, which can end up trivialising deeply traumatic social experiences. At the same time, sites related to enslavement or genocide raise

a different concern: the risk of imposing a predetermined, homogenised response on visitors. Even if this is ethically motivated, it can limit individual engagement and potentially neutralise the meanings and ongoing afterlives of these histories.

DM: Because they rely on a created pattern, a path to follow, right?

CF: Yes, it is almost a prescription. What interests me instead is an agonistic approach, where museums and sites of historical trauma can hold multiple perspectives in tension rather than imposing a single narrative or implying a singular expected response. While this is difficult — especially in the case of a genocide museum, where a reaction of horror seems inevitable. But it becomes clearer in sites related to war, where there is a clash of contrasting memories between combatants, between the victors and the vanquished. In such cases, sites that reproduce a single national narrative can be very limiting. Countries like Vietnam, for example, shaped by both the Indochina and Vietnam wars, show how their national perspectives can probably be in tension with a French or a US set of expectations. This highlights the need for representations and management that are less prescriptive or reductive and more open-ended, more challenging for the visitor. Because there is nothing less challenging than arriving and being told this is the story, this is how you react, and you can move on, you can buy your fridge magnet and move on. The most meaningful form of dark tourism, in my opinion, is one that forces visitors to think rather than guiding them toward a fixed response, and that makes them feel uncomfortable, ideally leading them to some form of inner questioning and possibly even transformation.

On slavery heritage tourism and contrapuntal memory

DM: Getting more specific on your research, one of your central topics is slavery and the Atlantic slave trade, particularly in relation to the French Atlantic (West Africa, the Caribbean, and France). In what ways do the sites and practices related to slave heritage tourism in these places differ from those in the US or UK, for example?

CF: There is a clear need for nuance when discussing dark tourist sites, as they involve many variables, including location. Slave-related sites differ significantly between Europe, West Africa, and the Americas, but also in terms of heritage practices, museological assumptions, and how these sites are socially fashioned and conditioned. In West Africa, for example — places like Gorée Island, where I have been recently, or Cape Coast Castle or Elmina in Ghana — although they are within a British or a French imperial context, there is often a shared international grammar of representation, with recurring iconic elements such as the ‘door of no return.’ In contrast, European sites, such as those in Liverpool, Nantes, or Bordeaux, tend to be more differentiated, for they are regional heritage sites but also tourist sites. Nantes and Bordeaux usually present a factual historical account of enslavement within a regional narrative, while Liverpool adopts a more interactive and challenging museological approach,

partly informed by local community engagement and influenced by more critical, even decolonial understandings of museology, which is perhaps the result of a different function of museums in the UK.

In the Americas, differences also reflect political contexts: Martinique, as a French department that remains a neocolony, differs from independent states like Trinidad or Jamaica, and this inevitably affects how slavery is represented. At the same time, it is not possible to singularise, for variation exists even within a single country. Plantation museums in Louisiana, for instance, range from sites that minimise or deny the history of enslavement, mentioning only 'servants' rather than enslaved people, to those like the Whitney Plantation, which foregrounds the experience of a visit from the perspective of an enslaved child and emphasises active memorialisation. In this plantation there are purposeful memorials to enslaved victims of a slave revolt. It is a place of commemoration.

Overall, there are shared international patterns of commemoration, for example, walls of names related to those that emerged from the First World War, but the impact of local colonial histories and contemporary manifestations produce important differences. I think those slaves plantations are so striking because they offer multiple approaches within the same State of the US. This is why it is essential not to be reductive: alongside macro-level patterns, close engagement with specific sites — through direct, embodied experience — is crucial to understanding both continuities and discontinuities.

DM: Indeed, in one of your articles you mentioned this "contrapuntal memory," underlining that these spaces function as places of contested memory, traversed by divergent narratives. Do you believe that they can be considered "contact zones," in the sense used by Mary Louise Pratt, or would that be a way of softening the violent narrative?

CF: Yes, absolutely, I do not see this as a way of softening narratives; on the contrary, it is important to avoid a kind of cosmopolitan or transnational 'fudge' that does exactly that. This contrapuntal memory connects to the idea of the 'agonistic' I mentioned above. In teaching Memory Studies to my students, I often present different models emerged in recent transnational studies on memory — palimpsestic, traveling, agonistic memory — and stress that the same memorial context can be interpreted in multiple ways, so methodological choices must be made very carefully.

I am particularly interested in contrapuntal memory, which takes me back to my career-long engagement with the writings of Edward Said and his work on culture and imperialism, and in the different model of comparatism that he proposes. I wrote an article on my discovery of Said's *Culture and Imperialism* when I was a doctoral student, and I remember the impact it had on me. It was one of those books that stick with you, one of those that force you to rethink many of your assumptions. Counterpoint is useful because it allows different cultural forms and artefacts — canonical and popular or even ephemeral — to be read together, to be blended,

without hierarchy, highlighting multiple levels of 'voicing.' That is why I think counterpoint is a really powerful critical and analytical tool.

This helps move away from simplistic ideas of shared memory. One particular example that I have worked on for a long time is New Caledonia: Melanesia, in the Pacific, is a site of sustained colonial violence and conflict since first colonial contact. There were rebellions, such as the Ataï Rebellion of 1878, the impact of which was experienced for decades and reached a peak in the 1980s when the Kanak independence movement led to a number of violent standoffs with representatives of the French state. In 1988, a massacre occurred in which 19 Kanak hostage-takers were killed by French special forces, leading to the later processes of reconciliation. This is central to the idea of shared memory, which is quite different from a singularised one. It should not erase differences and different narratives, keeping different memory traditions in tension, in a way that is not antagonistic. Contrapuntal memory allows multiple memory traditions or memory spaces to coexist without being reduced to a single narrative. This also resonates with the idea of the contact zone developed by Mary Louise Pratt that you mentioned: I think that one of her ideas is that there are spaces where different cultures, languages, perspectives and power dynamics meet, interact, and coexist in ways that are not inevitably destructive or hierarchical.

DM: At least some, maybe.

CF: Yes, exactly. I think that the softening of violent legacies tends to come from consensus, singularisation, and flattening, rather than from a contrapuntal approach. The latter allows tensions from the past to be maintained without turning them into ongoing conflict in the present. For me, contrapuntal memory is about avoiding amnesia and resisting the reduction of difficult histories. It does not require denying or erasing the shaming past — as in the case of Britain's actions in Haiti between 1793 and 1798 — but rather acknowledging it without necessarily making it a source of continued contention. And I think contrapuntal memory is one way of doing that. Different memory narratives can coexist around the same events, offering distinct interpretations. And I think that dark tourist sites that 'succeed' are those that allow these multiple perspectives to remain in tension.

On France's controversial relationship with slavery memory

DM: And what about France? What is its relationship with their colonial and slavery memory and legacy?

CF: I do think there has been some movement in France in recent years. For decades after the Algerian War of Independence, the trauma of decolonisation meant that the colonial past — and its persistent effects in the present — was not widely acknowledged. I think this is partly linked to a broader sense of colonial loss, including in relation to Haiti. Across French history, a pattern of significant losses of territory to the British is vible, whether in North America,

whether in India, which helps explain attitudes around colonial history and memory. In more recent years, however, there has been increased visibility, particularly through memory activism in civil society — around history of slavery in cities like Nantes and Bordeaux, or the Algerian War of Independence.

This has led to initiatives such as state-sponsored memory commissions under the President Emmanuel Macron, focusing on Algeria, Haiti, and Madagascar (notably, the 1947 massacre, where about 80,000 people were killed, which remains largely unacknowledged in France). Yet there is concern that these commissions may simply 'contain' these histories, shelving them so they are never discussed again, rather than lead to deeper engagement.

Although there is greater visibility, I think that there is still no fully active processing of the colonial past, for a number of reasons. One of the main ones is political, and this goes back to Haiti. This links back to the limits of French Revolution ideals, *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, which did not extend universal emancipation across gender or ethnicity, and continues to shape contemporary debates around secularism and national identity, in which speakers of Arabic adherence to the Muslim faith are treated as somehow not French. In today's political populist climate, these issues remain highly sensitive, politicised and contested.

France thus presents a paradox: institutions, like the *Fondation pour la Mémoire de l'Esclavage* that I work with, promote reflection and even reparative justice, yet there is still state-level resistance to initiatives such as a national museum of colonialism. That is paradoxical. Yet, at the same time, there is a tendency to 'recuperate' challenging histories. Obviously, the Haitian Revolution and the French Revolution are remembered differently in France and Haiti because of the outcomes and because of current social and political conditions. Nevertheless, figures like Toussaint Louverture are often evoked in France, but framed within a French Republican narrative: he was a French Republican general and was part of the French Revolutionary Project. So, this neutralises historical narratives, rather than fully acknowledging their more disruptive historical significance.

DM: You mentioned Toussaint Louverture, one of the greatest anti-imperialist fighters who fought in the Haitian Revolution, the only slave revolt that led to independence. Is his legacy still felt by French and Caribbean authors, is he represented in both French and Caribbean literature?

CF: Toussaint Louverture is very visible in France — across places in Paris, Bordeaux, Nantes, and at the Fort de Joux near Pontalier, where he died — and is often integrated into a French Republican narrative and there are even many new memory sites associated with Louverture. By contrast, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who declared Haitian independence, is largely absent or viewed more negatively. I think that Louverture, the 'Precursor,' is seen as a more 'acceptable' vehicle for the Revolution, whereas Dessalines, who was the 'liberator' who

declared independence and defended the gains of the revolution against the French, is seen as a more negative figure.

The situation is reversed in Haiti, where Dessalines is far more prominent than Louverture. He is a *lwa* in the Vodou pantheon and the national anthem is named after him, This highlights dynamics of remembering and forgetting that are crucial and relative: different figures are emphasised or marginalised depending on the context. Once again, memory works contrapuntally, with different narratives — sometimes in a 'major' or 'minor' key — coexisting and intertwining.

On memory: the role of orality and of literature

DM: I have a question about the survival of oral tradition in certain cultural contexts. For example, the Caribbean is very tied to oral tradition and we have to consider this in relation to the epistemic and epistemological violence of colonialism. Saidiya Hartman famously spoke about "the violence of archives." Have you encountered these gaps or silences, for example, when working on the biography of Toussaint Louverture you wrote with Christian Høgsbjerg?

CF: Yes, absolutely, and this is not limited to the colonial context. A key development in recent years has been a stronger awareness of the constructed nature of the archive, as emphasised by scholars like Michel-Rolph Trouillot. This implies that the archive should be seen as a starting point rather than an endpoint. As researchers — whether literary critics, historians or cultural analysts — we have a responsibility to question state-endorsed and officially constructed archives and seek alternative voices and sources. This includes not only oral traditions, where possible, but also more ephemeral traces that rarely enter official archives and that has always fascinated me.

Methodologically and ethically, this means recognising the limits of archival completeness, especially when working on marginalised or dehumanised populations, such as the enslaved or incarcerated, particularly prisoners who are transported within penal colonies. In this context, approaches such as reading against the grain become essential, as does a willingness to be more creative. Working with my students, Hartman is a major inspiration and stimulus there. I remember spending a week in Toulon once, examining the navy's logbooks. It was a tedious task, because not much happens on board a ship. For me, though, it was a genuine exercise in discipline, involving in-depth analysis of the archive and an attempt to reintegrate the human dimension into documentation that mostly tries to standardise historical experience. So, in a sense, it has to do with reading practices, but it also involves identifying alternative sources that can be read in a contrapuntal way. The work of Hartman, particularly her idea of "critical fabulation," is especially influential here. It shows how creative forms of criticism can complement traditional archival research and open up new ways of understanding the past. While many scholars in the humanities remain deeply reliant on the archives, they

are also increasingly aware of their limits, of their constructed nature, and the need to combine close reading, alternative sources, and more imaginative methodologies to recover more complex historical experiences.

DM: You mentioned critical fabulation and I was thinking about the power of literature in filling the gaps. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* or Maryse Condé's *Moi Tituba, sorcière…noire de Salem* spring to my mind. Do you think that in some ways literary texts can contribute to constructing or even challenging dominant historical narratives?

CF: Working in travel writing studies, I became quite frustrated at an early stage with the ways in which many historians used travel narratives. This is, of course, a sweeping and somewhat provocative statement to many of my friends and colleagues who are historians. I think that things have certainly improved since then, but there has been a tendency to treat travel narratives as unproblematic source material, as if such a thing as an 'unproblematic source' ever existed. Every text, every textual artefact is 'made': not made up, but 'made.' The ability of literary scholars to recognise this 'constructedness' seems crucial to me. So I would actually take your question one step back and suggest that, in several strands of historiography, there is already a reliance on creative forms of writing that is often not acknowledged as such. Without falling into a kind of historiographical relativism that claims anything goes, I think this is an important point to make.

The other aspect I find particularly striking, especially in the context of colonial history and memory, is literature that is not counterfactual in the sense of offering alternative version of the past, but rather anticipatory. There are some striking examples of this in France. One of the most important for me is October 17, 1961, when there was an Algerian independence demonstration in Paris, brutally suppressed by the police, with around two hundred demonstrators killed and many bodies thrown into the Seine. This event was long silenced, part of a broader process of amnesia surrounding Algerian independence. What is striking is that it re-emerged through fiction, in particular through a detective novel by Didier Daeninckx. There are other similar cases: in New Caledonia, for instance, fictional narratives have brought to public attention the events I have mentioned earlier, events that had largely been marginalised or repressed.

So, I am very interested in the anticipatory (as opposed to the counterfactual) capacity of literature, which allows us to speak about the past in ways that may not be fully permitted or encouraged within historiographical or official memory frameworks. That seems to me crucial for recovering the kinds of stories we have been discussing. At the same time, and this connects to the question of archival gaps, literature also has a complementary function: it can be a space where the traces of the past can be reworked, building on existing traces, and where silenced voices can be reimagined and made audible again. Of course, we need to be careful — the historical novel is not a historical monograph — but I am also wary of a certain

fetishisation of the historical monograph itself, because if it is based on limited sources that reflect only certain voices and experiences, then it is also, in a sense, partial and fictional. This is a position that is often challenging for historians, but I think we need to remain cautious here, and to recognise the power of fiction and creativity, especially in their complementary relationship with historical writing.

DM: In your opinion, can literary texts function as spaces of memory? How does the representation of trauma change when it shifts from the spatial dimension (i.e., the site) to the narrative dimension (i.e., the text)?

CF: One issue I have been thinking about for some time — and that I often challenge my students on — relates to Pierre Nora and the idea of sites of memory. If we look at *Les Lieux de mémoire*, there are indeed examples of literary texts included as sites of memory. But it is not quite so straightforward, because they function as such only when there is a sense of collective ownership — texts that are widely read and shared, such as school textbooks or even something like Marcel Proust, works which are sufficiently widely read to become repositories of some shared memory. So, I approach your question from a slightly different angle: I do think literary texts can be sites of memory, as opposed to simply repositories of memory, which any account of the past is in some way. But there are important differences. With spatial sites of memory, unless they are artificially or subsequently constructed — like museums or monuments — there is often an alignment between the place of remembering and the place where history occurred. That brings us back to phenomena like cemeteries, and even to somewhat unfashionable notions like aura: a sense of connection between past and present that is experienced in situ.

I sometimes think about this in relation to travel writing. I find myself wanting to visit the places described, when I am analysing the literary account. There is something about wanting to understand the original trigger. So place-based sites of memory seem to offer a kind of connection — I would never use the term ‘authenticity’ but I would foreground an experiential link between past and present, which can be manifest in a sense of aura in the contemporary experience.

Literary texts, by contrast, operate differently. They are a form of translation, often through multiple stages, producing a new artefact. While a physical site may be supplemented by texts — monuments, labels, heritage discourse — the site itself remains. A literary text, however, is always a mediated, post-facto representation of the past. This also relates to materiality: a book is a material object, but not one directly connected to the event in the way a museum artefact might be, even if both refer to the same history.

For me, the challenge is to read these forms together, without establishing a hierarchy that privileges materiality or so-called authenticity over creative representation. As you said, mentioning scholars like Saidiya Hartman, creative work can actually produce different — and

sometimes more challenging — ways of engaging with the past. Not necessarily more accurate, but capable of opening up perspectives that are not available through being physically present at a site. There is a persistent assumption that being in a place gives direct access to history, but in reality it offers instead access to layers of memory, much like literary representation does. So, we need to distinguish between different media and genres — since they involve different processes — yet we also need to recognise their convergences, how they function in similar ways, and to resist fetishising the material or the 'authentic' at the expense of cultural representations, which can be equally significant.

I am not sure what your views are on this, but for me two major debates in the humanities at the moment revolve around materiality and embodiment. This becomes very clear, for instance, when working with manuscripts. The author I mentioned earlier [Victor Segalen] — whose work I study — has had all his manuscripts digitised. I no longer need to go to Paris to consult them, and in some ways the digital versions are even more useful: I can zoom in, examine details closely, and address issues of transcription more easily. And yet, perhaps this risks being a kind of romanticisation of the research process, but I still find it important to handle a manuscript that he wrote in China, or in Tahiti — something that the screen simply cannot reproduce. I am not entirely sure how to explain it; perhaps it relates again to that idea of 'aura.' At the same time, I do not think it fundamentally changes the quality of my scholarship and this brings also to practical concerns in terms of cost or environmental sustainability. Yet there is still something different about being physically present in a shared space, also in terms of spontaneity and interaction with other people. This touches on fundamental questions about what it means to be human.

On the ethics of dark tourism

DM: Going back to dark tourism, I wanted to put some emphasis on the experience of the Black diaspora community. How is dark tourism rethought from a postcolonial or decolonial perspective concerning, for example, the experience of Black people?

CF: Yes, this is a key question. The first thing I would say is that we need again to problematise the term 'dark tourism' itself. It is striking how rarely this happens, given that the term can implicitly draw on associations with darkness that intersect with histories of racialisation, shadism and colourism, which underpin historic and contemporary racism. For this reason, alternative terms — such as 'tourisme macabre' or 'thanatourism' — seem to move away from those connotations. So, I think it is crucial to reflect on dark tourism in relation to ethnicity.

A particularly telling example, which we have already discussed, concerns sites linked to enslavement. What stands out are two key dimensions of the experience. First, when visiting sites in West Africa, one often encounters tensions between nation and diaspora. The phenomenon of 'roots tourism,' especially as promoted in places like Ghana, highlights this

clearly. While it attracts diasporic visitors and generates revenue, it can also result in the exclusion of local populations — either actively or simply because access is unaffordable. This raises important questions about inclusion and exclusion we need to reflect on.

At the same time, from a postcolonial perspective that actively critiques dark tourism, it is essential to consider the diversity of motivations among visitors we mentioned earlier. At a plantation site in the United States, for instance, different people are there for very different reasons, and these motivations are often shaped by race or ethnicity. This dimension is still insufficiently addressed and understood. One of the limitations of the concept of dark tourism is that it is often framed in universal terms, without acknowledging how different groups experience the same site in profoundly different ways. More broadly, this connects to a wider decolonial critique of tourism. Examples such as 'favela tourism' or 'poverty tourism' that we have discussed already highlight practices that many would consider inherently problematic, if not exploitative, and which are difficult to justify from a critical perspective.

DM: Indeed, concerning the ethical implications of dark tourism, who actually benefits from it, economically and symbolically?

CF: This is an important question because one can imagine community-based models in which local communities themselves control tourism and directly benefit from it. These models do exist in some contexts, but still very rarely. They point toward possible alternatives grounded in a more explicitly decolonial approach, one that challenges the broader logic of global tourism and attempts to reconfigure it.

At the same time, similar dynamics can be observed beyond dark tourism, for instance in ecotourism. There are different models, some of which are indeed devolved to local communities. However, this introduces another issue: affordability. Forms of tourism that are ethically more responsible — where revenue is reinvested locally — often end up being affordable only by a relatively small Western elite.

DM: So, the privileged people.

CF: Yes, exactly, what Susan George calls the 'fast castes.' If we assume that these forms of tourism offer educational or even ideological benefits — such as fostering intercultural understanding — then the problem is that these benefits remain accessible only to a relatively small social group. As soon as we begin to approach these questions from an ethical perspective, the situation becomes highly complex: each potential solution tends to generate new problems rather than resolving the existing ones.

On translation and untranslatability

DM: My last question is about translation, which is another strand of your research. You have explored the concept of World literature and the role of translation and untranslatability and I was thinking about the "archipelagic thought" of Caribbean thinkers and writers. Caribbean

literature is characterised by specific features that challenge the totalising system of reasoning and Western paradigms. I can mention the so-called *opacité* to which Édouard Glissant refers, but also, narrative fragmentation, polyphony, creolisation of languages and cultural traditions. How does the meaning of these texts change when they are translated into another language and read in other contexts?

CF: A few years ago, the editors of *Small Axe* asked me to write a piece on Caribbean studies and translation studies, which pushed me to reflect on many of the issues you have raised, especially in relation to language. I have been particularly interested in the work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan writer whose politics of language in Africa seeks to overturn the dominance of colonial languages and reassert the role of indigenous ones. The difficulty, however, is that this model is not easily transferable to the Caribbean context, where the genocidal violence of European colonialism has largely eradicated Indigenous languages. While traces remain, especially in Creoles, the possibility of a comparable decolonisation in the language and creative practices is far more limited. So, I think that the linguistic specificity of the Caribbean is really important.

Caribbean literary production takes multiple forms. In the francophone context, for instance, writers such as Édouard Glissant and Aimé Césaire write in French, though not necessarily in a metropolitan French form. Césaire's language, for example, is deeply influenced by the surrealists. I have translated Glissant, and the challenges there are not strictly linguistic, but rather stylistic and conceptual: his writing is digressive, often unfolding complex ideas across extended sentences that last a whole paragraph.

DM: Sometimes they are even contradictory ideas.

CF: Exactly. So, the translation challenges in Glissant, although they are inflected by Caribbean culture, are not necessarily linguistic. Alongside this, there are authors who write in Creole, or in hybrid, interlingual forms. Writers such as Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant and, perhaps most strikingly, the poet Monchoachi develop what might be described as a *français creolisé*, a form of interlinguistic writing that resists standardisation. This highlights an important point: translation in the Caribbean cannot be reduced to a single set of challenges, given the diversity of literary practices.

So, concerning translation, there are almost two issues that stand out in particular. First, multilingual writing poses a specific problem, since such texts are often written already 'in translation.' In these cases, the multilingual should perhaps not be translated, as it is deliberately designed to challenge readers and their assumptions. Second, as you pointed out, translating Caribbean texts means engaging with this deep substratum of ideas and layers — questions of translatability, opacity, and the presence of other languages. Glissant's notion of implicit multilingualism, that is, his assumption to "write in the presence of all the languages of the world", is central here: even when writing in French, his work resonates with other

languages, he also wrote extensively on language and translation, and this inevitably shapes the translator's approach.

More broadly, I believe that Caribbean literature offers a powerful testing ground for translation studies, challenging many of its assumptions. This is why the intersection between translation studies and Caribbean studies remains so important and still under-explored. In a multilingual region with Creolophone, Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone populations, translation becomes, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o said, a "language of languages." It becomes a currency for navigating across those spaces, escaping any siloing of the Caribbean into its original colonial containers.

At the same time, concepts such as opacity and untranslatability require further attention. Opacity functions as a form of resistance, and untranslatability may be part of that resistance. Translation is not always a neutral or celebratory practice: it can also be reductive, even destructive with cultures, contributing to what some scholars describe as epistemicide — the erasure of epistemological complexity and the flattening of linguistic and cultural specificity. Scholars and translators such as Laetitia de Saint-Joubert have begun to explore these issues, but much more work remains to be done. And I think Glissant's role as a theorist of translation needs to be teased out more.

Conclusion

DM: Closing the interview, I would like to know what your current or next research projects are.
CF: I am currently working on a number of projects. In the short term, I am working on a translation of Édouard Glissant's major book on the memory of enslavement, *Mémoires des esclavages*. At the same time, I am finishing a short book on travel writing and the body. This project moves away from more familiar approaches that focus on gender, race, or sexuality, and instead looks quite literally at the travelling body and its limitations. It explores the experiences of blind and deaf travellers, those with reduced mobility, as well as elderly and ill travellers. In this sense, it engages with a less conventional corpus that challenges the traditional assumption — prevalent at least until the interwar period — that travel writing was primarily the domain of young, white, educated, able-bodied (or more accurately non-disabled) men.

Alongside this, I have some other projects in preparation. I am currently involved in a major administrative role, but once that is completed, I would like to return more fully to work in Memory Studies. This is why I appreciated this conversation. In particular, I am interested in working on cemeteries. While there is existing research in anthropology and some work in travel writing, I think there is still scope for further exploration from my own disciplinary perspective.

I am also keen to develop the concept of contrapuntal memory, which I began to explore some time ago but have not yet fully elaborated. Closely related to this is an interest in ruination and postcolonial ruins. I have been particularly influenced by Ann Laura Stoler, especially her book *Duress*, where she argues that terms such as 'afterlives' or 'legacies' of empire imply a linear and predictable continuity. Ruination, by contrast, offers a more complex model: ruins are unstable, contingent, and often curated. I would like to engage with this idea both in a literal and a metaphorical sense. Some of my work in French Guiana, for example, involved physically searching in the rainforest for the remains of former penal colonies. But ruins also provide a way of thinking more broadly and figuratively about the traces of empire, particularly in France and across the wider francophone world.

So, there are several projects underway, and, as always, it remains to be seen how many I will be able to complete. Another initiative I am pursuing is a short book, co-authored with a colleague in Canada, on Gillo Pontecorvo's film *Queimada*, one of his lesser-known films. While *The Battle of Algiers* is widely recognised, this other work has received far less attention. Pontecorvo's papers are held in Turin, and as far as I know they have not been digitised, so I will likely need to consult them in person at some point.

One area we have not discussed much, but with which I continue to engage actively, is graphic fiction and comics. In France especially, this has become an important medium through which memory is revisited, reworked, and transmitted to new generations. More broadly, then, I find myself repeatedly returning to Memory Studies, which remains a particularly rich field — not only because of its political relevance, but also for its creative dimensions, as you suggested.

Notes

[1] The interview was conducted and recorded in person at the University of Padua on April 24, 2026, and was subsequently edited for publication.

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