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DISCUSSION



Dark tourism geographies: ontological, epistemological and axiological perspectives

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ABSTRACT

In this state-of-the-art review, we provide an overview of past debates and current trends in dark tourism geographies, and conceptually examine its theoretical intersections with critical issues, emerging ideas, paradigmatic progress and future research directions from three perspectives: ontological, epistemological, and axiological. Axiological trends and concerns in dark tourism geographies involve: the absence of cultural humility; the 'digital turn'; and intersections between entertainment and education. Onto-epistemological observations include: the gap between theory and praxis; a reluctance to engage with real and pragmatic issues of contemporary social, political and environmental importance; and the growing use of new materialist perspectives demonstrating the potential for an interdisciplinary and changing assemblage within geography that goes beyond traditional anthropocentric views of place. Finally, we suggest that dark tourism, as a field, must include pluriversal, polyvocal and transformative possibilities and embrace the fuzziness, mobility, and fluidity of its boundaries.

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Introduction

"Dark tourism" can be formally defined as travel to places of death, disaster, and atrocities (Foley & Lennon, 1996). This locution has become the most widespread in and outside academia, but it is by no means the only one used to describe this phenomenon. In the beginning, dark tourism studies have been characterized by debates on definitions and taxonomies, developed mainly in the 1990s and early 2000s. Alternative terms range from *thanatourism* (Seaton, 1996), to *negative sightseeing* (MacCannell, 1976), *dissonant heritage* (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996), or *atrocities tourism* (Ashworth & Hartmann, 2005), amongst many others (Light, 2017; Martini & Buda, 2020). Thus, sorting and classifying dark tourism-related themes was of primary concern among the first-wave dark tourism scholars. In this phase, publications have identified lists of supply and demand factors (Stone & Sharpley, 2008), or provided categories

related to places, spaces, and locations: perilous places, houses of horror, fields of fatality, tours of torment, and themed *thanatos*, including museums and monuments (Dann, 1998). Sites have been classified according to their “shades”, from lighter to darker (Miles, 2002; Strange & Kempa, 2003); to motivations and behaviors of tourists (Seaton, 1996); or listing seven “dark” suppliers of dark tourism experiences (Stone, 2006). Motivations to visit dark places have been listed and examined from multiple perspectives and *via* several approaches: supplier motivation factors (Stone, 2006), sociocultural perspectives (Stone & Sharpley, 2008), correlations between fatal attractions and motivation (Seaton, 1996), analysis of motivational elements among potential tourists (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996), and integrated supply-demand frames (Biran et al., 2011; Sharpley, 2005).

Following similar trends in broader tourism studies, most of the work on dark tourism in the past has been concerned – with the complexity of visitors’ motivations (Iliev, 2021; Seaton & Lennon, 2004; Wight, 2006). These studies present motivations involving personal, social, and cultural drives such as showing support for the recovery of a disaster-stricken area; experiencing the thrill, risk, joy or fear; virtual nostalgia, witnessing, or remembrance. Stone (2012) argues that dark tourism may be considered a contemporary mechanism for confronting death, allowing consumers to reflect on death (*thanatopsis*), mortality, and one’s own identity, reconfiguring morality in a visible and accepted manner. Seaton (2009), on the other hand, argues that dark tourism encounters are not intrinsically dark but the mix of subjectivity, tourism narratives, preconceptions, place, and contingencies can all come together to contribute towards creating a dark experience. Since 1996, the heterogeneity in its terminology has caused this sub-field of tourism studies to be described as “eclectic and theoretically fragile” (Stone, 2006, p. 145), characterized by fuzzy and moving borders, inconsistencies, and doubts that it could even stand on its own, as its debates and tenets often mirrored those of heritage studies (Light, 2017).

A crucial element to mention in earlier debates is the presence of another term that has gained popularity as an alternative to the definition of dark tourism, which is *thanatourism* (Seaton, 1996). The term, coined by Seaton in the same year, that Foley and Lennon proposed the “dark tourism” label, has gained popularity as a more neutral alternative. However, while the two terms denote the same phenomenon, they present ontological differences. Dark tourism is a “product of the circumstances of the late modern world” (Lennon & Foley, 2000, p. 3), an intimation of postmodernity, where death becomes a commodity for consumption. On the other hand, *thanatourism* derives from *thanatopsis*, contemplation of death, and is motivated by “the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death, particularly, but not exclusively, violent death” (Seaton, 1996, p. 236). In this sense, it covers a much wider temporal dimension, proposing a historicized version of the dark tourism phenomenon dating back to early antiquity travel that involved viewing murderous Roman gladiator games.

Around the mid-2000s, a second phase began in which dark tourism gained momentum and different trajectories appeared in relation to approaches and methodologies. Poststructuralist epistemologies and fluid disciplinary boundaries within the social sciences have prompted works that confront the predominance of a positivist approach in tourism, and see tourism as a crucial social, political and cultural practice (Buda, 2015; Tucker, 2016). Among dark tourism scholars, a few groups have focused on a

line of inquiry that stems from geographical critical theories and new materialism, utilizing dark tourism as a case study with its own specificities and debates to be analysed using broader social sciences paradigms. Work on dark tourism from a human geography perspective started to appear after 2005, using dark tourism as a framing tool for contemporary issues and debates, such as the role of women, children, and indigenous groups in dark tourism; animal and plant studies within debates on post-humanism; crime and social justice; multispecies research; the Anthropocene and climate change; debates on postcolonialism, intersectionality, morality and ethics. Another group, predominantly trained in tourism studies and employing the theories and methodologies of business and marketing studies, has progressed work on definitions, taxonomies, motivations, as well as the management and planning of tourism sites related to death and atrocities.

A wide, in-depth examination of published scholarly papers on the geographies of dark tourism over the last two decades reveals several recurrent themes related to debates on terminologies; site classification; selective interpretation; commodification; and the complex relationship of dark tourism with dissonant heritage and pilgrimage. In the next section, we discuss current trends, narrowing our focus on the geographical aspect of dark tourism to conceptually examine the field's current trends and paradigmatic progress from an ontological, epistemological, and axiological perspective.

Research gaps, trends, and future directions

Axiological concerns in dark tourism

Dark tourism places are often ethically challenging not just for tourists but for researchers as well. Researchers' axiological stances – values, beliefs and ethical positions are of prime importance in understanding ethical principles, biases, rights, and intercultural issues in framing dark tourism scholarship as they directly impact research practices and interpretations of findings associated with geographies of dark tourism. While moral and ethical values related to research have been discussed in the past along with interspersed accounts of reflexivity in dark tourism (see Sharma, 2020), a major axiological gap in value has been the absence of cultural humility. This explains the dominance of Western scholars in shaping dark tourism theory with the creation of classification systems and frameworks that are often acontextual, geographically and culturally non-inclusive and with little or no room for non-Western interpretations and representation of death. Besides emphasizing the acknowledgement and respect of cultural differences, Foronda (2020, p. 8) outlines the attributes of cultural humility as “recognizing and minimizing power differences, promoting respect, the individual focus of not only the other but of the self, flexibility and making bias explicit” (see Yeager & Bauer-Wu, 2013). While the past 15 years have witnessed an increase in dark tourism research from Asian and non-European countries, most of them adopt positivist approaches with dominant theoretical ideas emerging primarily from the UK, Europe and the USA. However, non-western, contextual case studies that critically interrogate dark tourism places have also emerged lately albeit those written by Western scholars have rarely addressed issues like researcher reflexivity, biases,

decolonization, alterity, cross-cultural interpretations and vernacular beliefs associated with death and its representation.

A second axiological shift that has influenced the construction and identity of dark tourism geographies has been the 'digital turn' including the popularity of transmedia storytelling and its intertextual spread. Smith (2015) argues that place is a complex category, a lot more than a mere geographical category or term and that a 'key feature of place-based product development and promotion is the identification and telling the story of a place through a variety of narrative techniques' (p. 220), such as storytelling, print, video, graphic and digital media. Stories are deeply entwined with place identity and image and transmedia storytelling has significantly influenced the construction, identity reinforcement, promotion and value perception of dark tourism sites. The role of media in normalizing neoliberal ideology is well-known (Meyers, 2019), and Nhlabathi and Maharaj (2020) describe how the emergence of dark tourism scholarship was due to the corporatization of higher education, triggered by neoliberalism during the 1990s.

Furthermore, the recent shift from mass media to transmedia storytelling has also influenced perceptions and values in the global tourism market leading to an increased awareness, acceptance, and normalization of dark tourism as a discipline, despite its ethical dilemmas and complexities. An example is the growth in tourism to the abandoned city of Pripyat, Ukraine, and the nearby Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, influenced by the popular 2019 HBO series 'Chernobyl'. Other examples include 'Narcos', 'The Dark Tourist' and 'Ghost Hunters' on Netflix. While certain taboos may continue to persist, it can be surmised that dark tourism has permeated popular culture, mainstream media, and public discourse and is no longer an anathema.

The third axiological concern arises from the critical intersections between entertainment and education in interpreting dark tourism geographies. Lennon (2017) pointed out how 'interactivity', 'innovative exhibitory and interpretive techniques were key to 'edutainment', a category that has evolved in dark tourism representing an increasing demand for immersive, sensory-stimulating, performative, educating and engaging experiences (Ivanova & Light, 2018). The growing trend of virtual dark tourism and the use of augmented and virtual reality technologies for edutainment require a critical dialogue between practitioners and scholars especially when dark heritage places with sensitive and dissonant histories are involved. Virtual dark tourism gained momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic and this 'digital turn' presents new axiological, epistemological and methodological challenges (Addeo et al., 2021) in the representation and interpretation of places marketed as dark. For future research, Fisher and Schoemann (2018) stress that visits to dark tourism places with VR should 'utilize the affordances of the medium to facilitate new opportunities for ethical compassion and understanding in the mediation of mortality' (p. 577). This is in sync with Wright's (2022) statement on the potential of effective edutainment experiences in connecting children with difficult heritage more informatively.

Finally, the values that are attached to memories or forgotten pasts will always remain a concern when dark tourism engages with memory studies in contexts associated with violence, trauma, suppression of voices and acts of destruction and erasure. So far, many studies have addressed the complex relationship between

dark tourism and memory using different theoretical approaches (Chylińska, 2020; Marschall, 2015), spectral geographies being a potential one that can be used in the future.

Onto-epistemological concerns in dark tourism

A major critique of dark tourism and *thanatourism* in the past has been the gap between theory and praxis and as rightly pointed out by Light (2017), little engagement with broader themes in critical social science although as opposed to the frequently used positivist approaches, some elements of Critical Theory and New Materialism have been observed in recent dark tourism literature. While early literature doesn't demonstrate a close engagement with the Frankfurt School Critical theorists, barring a few exceptions (see Fisher & Schoemann, 2018; Goatcher & Brunsden, 2011), a range of theoretical approaches under the broad rubric 'critical' have been adopted where authors have called for further investigation on the intersections between dark tourism places and postcolonialism (Carrigan, 2014), feminism (Stone & Morton, 2022), deconstruction (Lennon, 2017), queer theory (Nicholls, 2018), affect (Biscaia & Marques, 2022), race (Alderman, 2017), spectrality (Tiberghien et al., 2023) and psychoanalysis (Buda & McIntosh, 2013). Apart from those belonging to the Frankfurt School such as Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, ideas of other theorists such as Derrida (hauntology), Foucault (biopolitics), Bourdieu (symbolic violence), Deleuze (aesthetics), Kant (sublime) and Žižek have also been briefly mentioned or partially used.

Although the fundamental premise of critical theory rests on the ideas of critiquing and challenging power structures, emancipation, inclusion, change and universality, dark tourism scholarship has always maintained a reluctant and distant relationship with real and pragmatic issues of contemporary social, political and environmental importance. Being a contested and divisive concept in the early years and being preoccupied with internal, conceptual and disentangling debates over terminologies and distinctions, classification frameworks and models, the real socio-political or cultural contexts in which death and suffering occur have often been rendered silent and invisible. This tendency among scholars to generalize views on mortality and morality and adoption of one-size-fits-all models and structures is one of the reasons that has led to a minimal or no engagement of dark tourism with theoretical perspectives on death and dying from other disciplines, cultures and religions. The same applies to issues such as climate change, human rights, ethics of care, social justice, strategies of peacemaking and reconciliation, migration, race, class, decolonization, gender and intersectionality within the purview of dark tourism. Additionally, a reluctance to engage with the above issues has pushed back epistemological progress and discussions on justice, equity, conflict resolution and the transformative potential of dark tourism for communities that are marginalized or share a collective trauma and difficult heritage.

Notwithstanding the complex relationship of critical theory with ontology, critical realism attenuates the perennial debate between critical theory and pragmatism. Despite their differences, critical realists lean towards pragmatism in their approach to methodology and methods yet are closely connected to critical theorists due to

their Marxist origins and emancipatory nature. Recent studies of dark tourism on geographies of children and young people (Israfilova, & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019; Kerr, Stone, & Price, 2022) reveal an engagement with critical realism, particularly its capacity as a framework for research on children (Alderson, 2015). A promising example is the focus on real issues such as disability and accessibility, particularly that of children at dark tourism sites (Kerr et al., 2022; Dresler, 2024).

In line with what Stone (2012) rightly pointed out that understanding dark tourism requires an understanding of the changing nature of societal relationships with death, dying and the dead, future studies in dark tourism geographies need to expand the range and scope of critical engagement to address the changing societal, political and ethical relationships with death in the Anthropocene.

Following critical theoretical approaches, another influence that has recently been observed in framing dark tourism geographies has been the growing use of new materialist perspectives demonstrating the potential for an interdisciplinary and changing assemblage within the field that goes beyond traditional anthropocentric views of place. The New materialist approaches call for a view that transcends the duality between ontology and epistemology, between nature and culture and focuses on cross-disciplinary efforts challenging assumptions about humans and the non- or other-than-human world. Work on the intersections between dark tourism and geographies of affect have been published recently (Martini & Buda, 2020; Pimentel Biscaia & Marques, 2022). A few studies (Golańska, 2016; López-López & Venegas, 2021; Yerbury, 2023) have also effectively deployed new materialist frameworks and the idea of posthumanism to discuss the ethical implications of dark tourism in the context of non-human animals, thereby challenging anthropocentric and hierarchical narratives of human exceptionalism and the limitations of critical theory in addressing the ecological crisis, non-human justice and the binaries of nature/culture, human/non-human, etc. Fennell et al. (2021) point out the human–animal binary in dark tourism and present a prototype of non-human animals as dark tourism attractions and experiences, thereby moving towards a new ethico-onto-epistemology. Therefore, recognising the subjective, interpersonal and more-than-human affects and affective atmospheres, as well as non-representational approaches to both theories and methods in dark tourism geographies, can be effective in overcoming dichotomies and foster more diverse, inclusive, nuanced, and (positively) fluid research, where the agentic power of (non)human subjectivities is recognised.

Conclusion

This state-of-the-art review of dark tourism scholarship discussed the axiological, ontological and epistemological progress in the field, current trends, associated drawbacks and future directions. Earlier research on dark tourism has tended to establish the field by adopting narrow, positivist approaches or bibliometric analyses that are often subject to criticism, while at the same time recognizing the potential of working on a field that unites analysis of tourism experiences and encounters with contemporary work on place and death.

With the shortcomings of postmodernism and the dominance of poststructuralist perspectives, many feminists, indigenous, and new materialist scholars find critical realism as an alternative calling for a consideration of epistemology and ontology as co-constitutive and embracing a pluriversal praxis. Kayumova and Strom (2023) discuss pluriversal praxis in terms of an onto- epistemological shift based on relationality, interdependence, embodiment, ethics, and care toward youth, diverse communities, and more-than-human collectives. This definition can be extended to incorporate reflexivity, intersectionality, contextuality and non-human-centered approaches in dark tourism, free from anthropocentric approaches and the hegemonic dominance of Western ideas on mortality and ethics. Taking as an example critical emancipatory and inclusive human and non-human discourses brought forth by posthuman geographies, future research on dark tourism should keep its focus on the importance of the interplay between site-specific relationships and mobile flux of human and non-human experiences, narratives, and exchanges. At the same time, it is imperative to recognize and engage with the polyvocality of non-Western debates, adopting a pluriversal and transformative praxis by transcending disciplinary boundaries and embracing the fact that dark tourism might not be a fully formed field (yet?), but can surely be an effective and porous container for critical and contextual knowledge on the nexus between places, people, and death. We suggest that its success, in the future, in line with new trends in geography, might come not by delineating more precise or strict borders through models, frameworks or classifications, but on the contrary, by accepting dark tourism with its fuzzy, mobile, and fluid boundaries and, by embracing the messiness of everything that it entails.

Disclosure statement

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