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Dark Tourism Scholarship: a critical review

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Dark tourism scholarship: a critical review

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Abstract

Purpose – Commonly referred to as dark tourism or thanatourism, the act of touristic travel to sites of or sites associated with death and disaster has gained significant attention with media imaginations and academic scholarship. However, despite a growing body of literature on the representation and tourist experience of deathscapes within the visitor economy, dark tourism as a field of study is still very much in its infancy. Moreover, questions remain of the academic origins of the dark tourism concept, as well as its contribution to the broader social scientific study of tourism and death education. Thus, the purpose of this invited review for this Special Issue on dark tourism, is to offer some critical insights into thanatourism scholarship.

Design/methodology/approach – This review paper critiques the emergence and current direction of dark tourism scholarship.

Findings – The author suggests that dark tourism as an academic field of study is where death education and tourism studies collide and, as such, can offer potentially fruitful research avenues within the broad realms of thanatology. Secondly, the author outlines how dark tourism as a conceptual typology has been subject to a sustained marketization process within academia over the past decade or so. Consequently, dark tourism is now a research brand in which scholars can locate a diverse range of death-related and tourist experience studies. Finally, the author argues that the study of dark tourism is not simply a fascination with death or the macabre, but a multi-disciplinary academic lens through which to scrutinise fundamental interrelationships of the contemporary commodification of death with the cultural condition of society.

Originality/value – This review paper scrutinises dark tourism scholarship and, subsequently, offers original insights into the potential role dark tourism may play in the public representation of death, as well as highlighting broader interrelationships dark tourism has with research into the social reality of death and the significant Other dead.

Keywords Tourism, Death, Research work, Education, Dark tourism, Scholarship, Thanatology, Visitor economy

Paper type General review

Introduction

The act of travel to sites of death, disaster or the seemingly macabre – or what has commonly been referred to as *dark tourism* – is an increasingly pervasive feature within the contemporary visitor economy. Indeed, the commodification of death for popular touristic consumption, whether in the guise of memorials and museums, visitor attractions, special events and exhibitions, or specific tours, has become a focus for mainstream tourism providers. Dark tourism is concerned with tourist encounters with spaces of death or calamity that have perturbed the public consciousness, whereby actual and recreated places of the deceased, horror, atrocity, or depravity, are consumed through visitor experiences. Yet, the production of these “deathscapes” within the visitor economy and, consequently, the consumption of recent or distant trauma within a safe and socially sanctioned tourism environment, raises fundamental questions of the interrelationships between morality, mortality and contemporary approaches to death, dying, and

(re)presentation of the dead. Over the past decade or so, an increasing media scrutiny of dark tourism and activities of so-called “dark tourists” has brought the interest of visiting deathscapes into the contemporary imagination. Moreover, academic probes into the principles and practices of dark tourism have ensured a growing area of scholarly endeavour which, in turn, has witnessed a burgeoning of resources for social science teaching and learning into the present-day commodification of death. Subsequently, dark tourism as a distinct focus of social scientific pedagogy is increasingly being delivered on a range of undergraduate and further education courses in colleges and universities across the world, as well as being a popular choice for postgraduate study (Stone, 2011a).

Even though an increasing number of scholastic spotlights are now being shone on dark tourism as a contemporary visitor experience, the concept remains contested. Certainly, problematic issues with the typological and theoretical foundations of dark tourism raise complex issues regarding “dark heritage” and its representation and consumption. Furthermore, dark tourism provokes challenging debate over the relationships between “heritage that hurts” and how contemporary society deals with its significant Other dead. While dark tourism, in its broadest sense, can be considered dialogic and mediatory, the implications of dark tourism mediating death and the dead in modern society are fraught with complexities. Even so, dark tourism exposes particularities of people, place and culture, where visiting sites of mortality can reveal ontological anxieties about the past as well as the future. Dark tourism also symbolises sites of dissonant heritage, sites of selective silences, sites rendered political and ideological, sites powerfully intertwined with interpretation and meaning, and sites of the imaginary and the imagined. Therefore, analysing distinctions of dark tourism as a concept and researching its mediating interrelationships with the cultural condition of society is important in contributing to our understanding of the complex associations between (dark) heritages and the tourist experience.

However, despite the growing body of dark tourism related literature, questions remain of dark tourism as an area of scholarly activity. Particularly, what are the academic and conceptual origins of dark tourism? Is dark tourism simply the result of a creative research branding exercise by academics in an ever-challenging global higher education market? And, what are the consequences and contributions of studying dark tourism to broader society? The purpose of my commentary, therefore, in this Special Issue is to critically evaluate dark tourism scholarship by three central facets. Firstly, I briefly explore the evolution of death commodification as a distinct research topic and, subsequently, suggest conceptual origins of dark tourism can be located within multidisciplinary areas of thanatology – that is, the social scientific study of death and dying. Second, I examine the marketisation and branding of dark tourism as an academic construct, as well as a provocative media label and contested industry term. Finally, through a succinct examination of the key literature, I outline current parameters of dark tourism scholarship and, in particular, I argue dark tourism research is a worthy academic lens through which to critically peer at a variety of socio-cultural, political, historical and moral quandaries.

Ultimately, while dark tourism has, to some extent, domesticated death and exposes a cultural institution that mediates between the ordinary Self and the significant Other dead, dark tourism scholarship is still very much in its infancy. Therefore in order to understand fully dark tourism and its interrelationships with contemporary culture and society, a great deal needs to be done to drive the interdisciplinarity of dark tourism research, as well as engaging constructively with both industry and the media. Firstly, however, I suggest dark tourism as an academic field of study has emerged through the collision of death education and tourism scholarship, and it is to this point that I now turn.

Dark tourism as a field of study

To understand how dark tourism scholarship emerged, we must acknowledge not only the maturing if contested area of tourism studies (Sharpley, 2011), but also how dark tourism may be located within broader death studies and thanatology. Of course, I am not suggesting that dark tourism should be placed exclusively within a thanatological

framework – it should not. As evidenced later, dark tourism offers a multi-disciplinary academic lens through which to scrutinise a broad range of social, cultural, geographical, anthropological, political, managerial, and historical concerns. However, the central component of dark tourism is the (re)presentation and touristic experience of death and dying, and for that reason dark tourism has essentially emerged from a thanatopic tradition or “thanatopsis” (the private contemplation of death in public spaces) (Seaton, 1996). A full critique of dark tourism and thanatopsis is beyond the scope of my commentary, so I offer here a brief critical insight into the nature of death studies, its central theses, and the potential role dark tourism may play within the public representation of death.

While death is universal, dying is not. In other words, relationships between the living and the dead, and where the dead are placed and remembered in society, depends on particular cultural representations of mortality (Howarth, 2007). Despite in recent years an upsurge of interest in death and dying, including a fascination with death reflected in popular media such as newspapers, television documentaries, soap operas, and films, much of the academic death literature has focussed on debates of denying death within contemporary societies. Indeed, many scholarly approaches to death and dying, certainly from the 1960s onwards, have concentrated on loss of tradition and death denial within society. Particularly, the notion that societies may be death-denying was developed by cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1973) in his Pulitzer Prize award-winning book, *The Denial of Death*. The basic premise of Becker’s popular thesis is that human civilisation and the socio-cultural frameworks in which we reside are ultimately an elaborate and symbolic defence against the knowledge of our mortality. Becker goes on to assert that whole societies may adopt a maladaptive psychological response to mortality awareness.

However, a number of sociological critiques of Becker’s essentially psychological theory of the place of death in modern society have re-evaluated the issue of death denial. In particular, Allan Kellehear (1984, 2001) argues that arbitrary evidence of the denial of death was sought and attributed to social institutions such as curative education, funerary customs, and the nature of modern work, traditional religion and medical research efforts. Consequently, Kellehear’s (1984) sociological criticism argued against the seemingly catholic manner in which the death-denial thesis is applied. He contends that in contemporary Western societies the death-denial thesis “is used indiscriminately to refer to any avoidance of reality – particularly the reality of the labelling observer” (p. 713). Put another way, individual behaviour can be easily identified as death-denying without the identifier being required to provide an explanation. Of course, while the concept of “denial” is primarily psychiatric, wholesale adoption by sociologists of the death-denial thesis to describe the place of death within modern societies raises obvious confusion between personal and social systems. This confusion is explored by Walter (1991) who examines death-denial with notions of the taboo. In particular, Walter challenges the death-denial proposition by contending the increasing public presence of death, in popular culture and elsewhere, raises ambiguities for those who argue death in modern societies has been sequestered or removed from the public realm (Giddens, 1991; Mellor, 1993). Whilst sequestration is claimed to occur because death poses problems of meaning for individuals in complex postmodern societies, death is argued to be publicly absent but privately present (Mellor and Shilling, 1993). Though there is little doubting the privatisation of many aspects of death, or the social and cultural diversity of dying and grief, “it may be that in their quest to uncover hidden death, social theorists have neglected to acknowledge the more public face of death” (Howarth, 2007, p. 35).

It is this acknowledgment of the “more public face of death” that dark tourism research has taken as its thanatological cue. Elsewhere, I have examined the role of dark tourism as a potential mediating mechanism to challenge the death-denial thesis, whereby certain kinds of death are de-sequestered back into the public domain for contemporary consumption (Stone, 2012a; Stone and Sharpley, 2008). Even so, dark tourism cannot be placed into simplistic denial/acceptance or supply/demand dichotomies. Nor can dark tourism expose diverse cultural experiences of death and dying in a single simple discourse. Death is complex and multifaceted; it appears in unexpected forms, in unnatural circumstances, and

to the reluctant. Certainly, dark tourism can portray these elements of death and dying for the contemporary visitor, yet dark tourism scholarship has hitherto to expose fully the social and cultural reality and consequences of presenting the dead for the modern-day visitor economy. Nevertheless, I suggest dark tourism scholarship is where death studies and tourism studies collide, and where fruitful research avenues of mortality saliency may be illuminated. With death education grounded in thanatology and tourism scholarship, occupying a delicate disciplinary place between business management and the broader social sciences, dark tourism can offer an empirical bridge to scrutinise modern socio-cultural complexities of mortality, as well as examining the contemporary commodification of death and the dead. Yet, while dark tourism as an act of travel has historical pedigree and may be an old concept in a new world, dark tourism as a scholarly field has undoubtedly become axiomatic since the mid-1990's, particularly from a research branding perspective, and it is this that I now turn.

The branding of dark tourism (research)

The visitor economy is one of the world's biggest employers, generating millions of jobs across a range of sectors and contributing billions of revenue to government treasuries across the globe. Therefore, with a growing international visitor economy, and to meet the demand for well-qualified service sector professionals, the design and delivery of tourism undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes has become one of the fastest-expanding areas of study in higher education (Jamal and Robinson, 2009). Consequently, since the early 1990s, tourism as a serious field of academic endeavour within both management studies and the social sciences has become firmly established (Sharpley, 2011). However, despite of or even because of debate over disciplinary foundations for the study of tourism, including dichotomised contestations over tourism as a social science or tourism as vocational management, tourism education has opened up a plethora of academic enterprises. Indeed, the maturing of tourism education, certainly in terms of reflectivity and criticality, has meant tourism research can cast crucial reflections on our contemporary world which are unhindered by disciplinary boundaries (Stone, 2011b). Importantly, therefore, a key academic enterprise originating in tourism discourse has been the study of the commodification of death within the contemporary visitor economy.

Introduced in 1996 by Malcolm Foley and John Lennon in a special edition of the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (Foley and Lennon, 1996), the term "dark tourism" has entered a contemporary academic and media lexicon to denote the touristification of death and disaster. The concept was later brought to mainstream attention in 2000 by the same authors in their intriguing yet theoretically fragile book *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* (Lennon and Foley, 2000). During the same period, Tony Seaton introduced the awkward if not more conceptually robust idiom "thanatourism" to define the act of contemporary travel to sites of death which, as an act of tourism, was historically grounded within the "memento mori" of Romanticism (Seaton, 1996). Thus, since the introduction into discourse of the popular term *dark tourism* and its scholarly sister term *thanatourism*, there has been a steady but growing base of erudite inquiries into dark tourism practices, processes, and principles. However, as Lennon and Foley (2000, p. 169) prophetically pointed out with regard to offering dark tourism as a new tourism typology, "issues which some would rather not have been raised will lead to further development and academic 'exploitation' of this field". Arguably, therefore, any exploitation of dark tourism as an academic field is due not only to the maturing of tourism scholarship as mentioned earlier, but also the fact that dark tourism is simply a fascinating and controversial area and, as revealed shortly, an area that can shine critical academic light on complex social, cultural, political, and moral issues.

Even so, despite obvious claims about the specific fascination of dark tourism, both as an activity and concept, or the development of dark tourism academic discourse in general, I suggest dark tourism scholarship has been popularised through a purposeful blend of traditional academic output and contemporary research branding. In other words, the very idea of dark tourism as a multidisciplinary field of study has resolutely been subject to

creative branding techniques not uncommon to the marketisation of a private sector product. Indeed, in an era where tourism education is being scrutinised as either a discipline, a field of study, or as sectoral study, scholars attempting to carve out credible research agendas and scholarly identity in a crowded academic marketplace have, perhaps, viewed dark tourism as enticing to create a persuasive research appellation. This is no more so than in my own personal research arena, where internal policies and politics at my own institution has ensured a research-informed teaching agenda and a criteria for academic success based (almost solely) on the premise of “publish or perish”. Therefore, with my inherent research interest in the broad realms of dark tourism, and with a professional background in management consultancy and marketing within the private sector, it is probably fair to suggest that I have been in the vanguard of creating a global dark tourism subject “brand”. Specifically, in 2005, I launched The Dark Tourism Forum at www.dark-tourism.org.uk as an online resource repository dedicated to the study of dark tourism. Consequently, the virtual Forum acted as a world-wide marketing device to expose the emerging yet intriguing field of dark tourism which, in turn, created appeal and significant (brand) awareness of the subject. The web site has now evolved to become the official site of the recently launched Institute for Dark Tourism Research (iDTR) at the University of Central Lancashire in England, and continues to trademark dark tourism scholarship. Indeed, with over two million unique web hits since its 2005 launch from individuals based in over 100 countries, in addition to creating dedicated social media presence, including on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Tumblr, dark tourism as an academic research activity has “been taken to market”. Augmenting this marketisation process, there has been significant media interest over the past eight years or so in the idea of dark tourism, with the iDTR and others conducting a substantial number of newspaper, magazine, radio and television interviews with media organisations from across the world (iDTR, 2013).

What has transpired is a research field which has gained popular momentum, not only with the media, but also with undergraduate and postgraduate students from a variety of disciplines as well as with a growing number of international social science scholars. Of course, the purposeful branding of dark tourism as a research field, arguably driven by my own enterprises, but also supplemented by academic colleagues from around the globe, means that Lennon and Foley’s initial typological classification of dark tourism has been “exploited” in terms of mass appeal. That said, however, in many ways dark tourism as a typology and research brand that incorporates multiple case studies and theoretical perspectives might be deemed by some as contrary and unhelpful. With the juxtaposition of the words “dark” and “tourism”, the branding of dark tourism is not without its critics and the notion of dark tourism has even been examined as a kind of “deviant leisure” (Stone, 2013a). However, despite some obvious and legitimate criticisms, and despite the inherent issues of branding a “new” field of study, dark tourism as a scholarly activity exposes valuable and relevant conceptions. Subsequently, I now turn to dark tourism as providing an interdisciplinary academic lens through which to scrutinise important interrelationships with the cultural condition of contemporary society.

Dark tourism as an academic lens

At the most rudimentary level, tourism is simply the “movement of people”. While this “movement” requires managing from a commercial perspective, the touristic moving of people also generates specific socio-cultural, economic, and political implications. In other words, the mobility of tourism is integrated into our contemporary world and, as such, offers us a research window in which to observe the structures, processes, institutions, transformations and challenges of our world (Sharpley, 2011). When applied to the field of dark tourism, these “research windows” allow us to glimpse fundamental practices and visitor experiences that mediate between the contemporary production and consumption of significant death, dying, and the dead. In short, dark tourism is not simply an elementary “fascination” with death, but a powerful lens through which contemporary life and death may be witnessed and relationships with broader society and culture discerned. It is this, perhaps, that research into dark tourism has contributed to the social scientific study of

death and dying in general and, in particular, has enhanced the legitimacy of dark tourism scholarship. As the remainder of my commentary now outlines, a range of social science topics have been theoretically and empirically examined through a dark tourism lens.

Pilgrimages to places associated with death have occurred as long as people have been able to travel. In other words, it has always been an identifiable form of tourism, though socio-cultural contexts in which death-related travel transpired have obviously changed throughout the ages. This latter point is beyond the scope of my review, though Seaton (2010) argues dark tourism was traditional travel that evolved through profound shifts in the history of European culture, influenced by Christianity, Antiquarianism, and Romanticism. However, as general participation in tourism has grown, particularly since the mid-twentieth century, so too has the demand for and supply of dark tourism. For example, visitor sites associated with war probably constitute the largest single category of tourist attractions in the world (Smith, 1998). However, as Butler and Suntikul (2013) argue, the blunt categorisation of all war-related tourism as “dark tourism” is perhaps misguided. Even so, Thompson (2004, p. xii) in his *25 Best World War Two Sites* tourist guide states that “a battlefield where thousands died isn’t necessarily a good place, but it’s often an important one” (original emphasis). Slade (2003, p. 782) recognises this importance and suggests Gallipoli, the battlefield where Australia and New Zealand suffered massive casualties during World War One, was where both countries, respectively, have their “*de facto* psychological and cultural origins” and where modern visitors now enact a kind of secular pilgrimage to the site (Hyde and Harman, 2011). Chronis (2005) also recognises how war landscapes, such as those at Gettysburg, the site of one of the bloodiest battles during the American Civil War, can be symbolically transformed and used by service providers and tourists alike to negotiate, define, and strengthen social values of patriotism and national unity through the death of others. Similarly, Carr (2010) notes how war-tourism sites can control or censor accounts of the past. In particular, she examines touristification tensions within the Channel Islands’ war heritage and the Nazi occupation it serves to represent. Ultimately, Carr suggests wartime narratives in the Channel Islands, which are delivered through fragmented and contested memorialisation at various bunker sites, are directly analogous to other formerly-occupied Western European countries, rather than being identified with a British Churchillian paradigm – namely, that the British were not a nation of victims, but of victors.

Yet war-tourism attractions, though themselves diverse, are a subset of the totality of tourist sites associated with death and suffering. While there is no universal typology of dark tourism, or even a universally accepted definition, reference is frequently made, for instance, to specific destinations, such as the Sixth Floor in Dallas, Texas, site of one of the most infamous assassinations of the twentieth century (Foley and Lennon, 1996). Alternatively, reference is also made to specific forms of tourism, such as visits to graveyards and cemeteries (Seaton, 2002), Holocaust sites (Beech, 2009), places of atrocity (Ashworth and Hartmann, 2005), prisons and crime sites (Wilson, 2008; Dalton, 2013), and slavery-heritage attractions (Dann and Seaton, 2001; Rice, 2009). Augmenting various typologies of dark tourism, alternative terminology has also been applied to the phenomenon. For example, labels include morbid tourism (Blom, 2000), black spot tourism (Rojek, 1993), grief tourism (West, 2004) or as Dann (1998) alliterates, “milking the macabre”. More specifically, Bristow and Newman (2004) introduce the term fright tourism, a variation of dark tourism whereby individuals may seek a thrill or shock from the experience. Meanwhile, Dann (1998, p. 15) suggests that “dicing with death” – that is, seeking experiences that heighten tourists’ own sense of mortality – may be considered a particular consequence of dark tourism. Dunkley *et al.* (2007) add to the definitional debate and offer various categories, including horror tourism, hardship tourism, tragedy tourism, warfare tourism, genocide tourism and extreme thanatourism. The latter category, according to these authors at least, involve a marketable live-event aspect of death and dying, and they cite (Western) visits to private cremations in India or to public executions in the Middle East as particular examples. Evidently, therefore, a blurring of typological parameters has occurred with regard to dark tourism and, as such, full categorisations are extremely complex (but, see Stone, 2006).

Nonetheless, despite the diverse range of sites and tourist experiences, Tarlow (2005, p. 48) identifies dark tourism as “visitations to places where tragedies or historically noteworthy death has occurred and that continue to impact our lives” – a characterisation that aligns dark tourism somewhat narrowly to certain sites and that, perhaps, hints at particular motives. However, it excludes many shades of dark sites and attractions related to, but not necessarily the site of, death and disaster (Miles, 2002; Stone, 2006). Consequently, Cohen (2011) addresses location aspects of dark tourism through a paradigm of geographical authenticity and sense of victimhood. Meanwhile, Biran *et al.* (2011) examine sought benefits of dark tourism within a framework of dialogic meaning making (also Kang *et al.*, 2011). Jamal and Lelo (2011) also explore the conceptual and analytical framing of dark tourism, and suggest notions of darkness in dark tourism are socially constructed, rather than objective fact. Meanwhile, Bowman and Pezzullo (2009) interrogate the scholarly and political attachments of the trope “dark” in relation to “tourism”. Drawing on performance theory, Bowman and Pezzullo suggest dark tourism scholarship can be a productive approach to explore the intersections of death and tourism, including broader questions of ritual, play, identity, everyday life, and embodiment. Likewise, Osbaldiston and Petray (2011) suggest touristic engagement with “dark” sites is a source of ritual and, in particular, they argue tourists’ cannot only be enlightened by their sacred experience, but also disturbed by it. They go on to suggest that tourists’ negotiate “dark properties” of places, particular those with national or international heritage value. Similarly, White and Frew (2013) offer an edited collection of case studies that examine the intersection between dark tourism, place identity, and imagined collective communities, whereby dark heritage sites and attractions can help disseminate a discourse of national inclusion and a shared past.

However, notwithstanding diverse facets of both the conception and application of dark tourism, Skinner (2012) edits an ethnographic volume dedicated to “writing the dark side of travel”. In particular, he and his co-contributors explore the writings and texts of so-called dark journeys and the implications and consequences of travelling over the dead, among the dead, and alongside the suffering. Consequently, Skinner suggests that from the tour of humanity’s violence and misery, comes poignancy in the characterisation of plight and, ultimately, dark tourism allows for a sense of the profound and for spiritual journeys to be undertaken that record and memorialise tragedy. This aspect of recording tragedy, particularly from a political ideological perspective is examined by Lee *et al.* (2011). Specifically, they locate dark tourism within a peace paradigm between North and South Korea and suggest Western hegemonic constructions of tourism generally and, dark tourism in particular, means that Euro-centric perspectives of dark tourism are not applicable to other indigenous (Oriental) perspectives. They go on to argue that the recent killing of a South Korean tourist in the North Korean Mt Kumgang tourist resort – once seen as a peace tourism site when policies of rapprochement guided inter-Korean strategy – is now a Foucaultian heterotopian space, which combines dark tourism with idealised cultural narratives within a contradictory geopolitical place. Similarly, I too examine dark tourism and the conception of heterotopia but within the context of a post-apocalyptic Chernobyl – the site of the world’s worst nuclear accident (Stone, 2013b). In locating dark tourism experiences within a heterotopian framework, I argue that Chernobyl is a space of technical, political and cultural importance which, through its touristic production and consumption, allows for a valorisation of an alternate social ordering whereby the familiar and the uncanny collide.

Meanwhile, Seaton (2009) addresses how dark tourism sites should be managed – especially within the milieu of Other death. Seaton concludes that thanatourism sites are unique auratic spaces whose evolutionary diversity and polysemic nature demand managerial strategies that differ from other tourist sites. By the same token, Knudsen (2011) examines this notion of “aura” from a tourist experience perspective, and suggests the interactive design and representation of difficult heritage should allow tourists to feel alive in their reconnection with the past and to feel empathy with victims. Indeed, within the context of business practice and consumer research, Coats and Ferguson (2013) examine dark tourism within a framework of post-earthquake perceptions in New Zealand. In particular, they argue inherent emotional tensions between residents of a disaster zone and

subsequent visitors should always be aligned with unbiased interpretation that offers an opportunity for catharsis, acceptance, as well as grieving for a sense of loss of both people and place.

In terms of the politicisation of dark tourism, Sharpley (2009) examines notions of dissonance and the influence of political ideology conveyed in dark tourism interpretation, and goes on to outline a stakeholder model of dark heritage governance. Specifically, Sharpley argues such a model provides a basis for encouraging harmony and reconciliation, as well as understanding or learning through a more inclusive memorialisation and interpretation of challenging heritages. Sharpley and Stone (2009) also examine (re)presentations of tragedy and, in particular, locate dark tourism interpretation within a paradigm of kitsch and the commodification of (tragic) memories. In so doing, we suggest that death is inevitably vulnerable to kitschification, as it “requires inoculation and thus rendering into something else that is comfortable and safe to deal with and to contemplate” (original emphasis – Sharpley and Stone, 2009, p. 127). We go on to conclude that concerns within dark tourism interpretations remain and revolve around interrelationships between kitsch, nostalgia and melancholy and the meanings that are consequentially projected and consumed. Elsewhere, I also recognise these concerns and suggest ethical ambiguities inherent within dark tourism are systematic of broader secular moral dilemmas in conveying narratives of death (Stone, 2009a, 2013a). In particular, I propose dark tourism and the tourist experience it entails – which some might consider “dark leisure” – signifies a contemporary communicative mechanism of morality in that “dark tourism may not only act as a guardian of history in heritage terms, but also as moral guardian of a contemporary society which appears to be in a midst of resurgent effervescent moral vitality” (Stone, 2009a, p. 72).

Though the morality of dark tourism is often the subject of academic discourse and media commentary, so too is discussion on the mortality aspects of the touristification of death. As noted earlier, dark tourism and its relationship with the thanatological condition of contemporary society has been scrutinised. Consequently, dark tourism has been suggested to be a mediating institution of mortality and, in particular, I have argued that in Western secular society where ordinary death is often sequestered behind medical and professional façades, yet extraordinary death is recreated for popular consumption, dark tourism mediates a potential if not complex and relative social filter between life and death (Stone and Sharpley, 2008; Stone, 2009b, 2011c, d; 2012b). In summary, therefore, while a full critique of dark tourism in all its manifestations is beyond the scope of my review, evidently there appears to be a myriad of fundamental interrelationships that exist between dark tourism and the cultural condition of society. Moreover, despite the diversity of sites and relative experiences, a common factor of dark tourism is the association, in one way or another, between a tourist experience and the touristic representation of death and the dead. It is these interrelationships and associations that provide the rationale to study death and dying as a commodity within the visitor economy. In so doing, dark tourism scholarship can provide an academic lens through which research windows are opened and, consequently, critical approaches adopted to examine the contemporary social reality of death.

Concluding thoughts

Despite dark tourism being a contested term, my commentary has aimed to provide a critical insight into the emergence and current direction of dark tourism scholarship, in addition to highlighting dark tourism as a branded field of academic study. This is particularly relevant considering the evident practice of travel to and experience of sites of death, disaster or the seemingly macabre within the global visitor economy. Moreover, I have suggested dark tourism as an academic construct and research area is now established which, in turn, essentially emerged through a collision of death education and tourism studies. Subsequently, dark tourism as a field of study within higher education has been marketized and branded for scholarship and academic inquiry. As a result, dark tourism is identifiable as a broad area in which social scientists may peer at diverse socio-cultural

quandaries that impact on death and the dead as contemporary commodities. Indeed, dark tourism exposes a cultural institution and practice that blurs the line between commemoration of the dead and commodification of death. In so doing, those professionals who work on the front line in what might be considered dark tourism sites, attractions, and exhibitions are faced with unprecedented moral, managerial and political challenges. The management of remembrance, the interpretation of tragedy and suffering, distinctions between difficult heritage and tragic history, the effect of chronological distance and the fading of the significant Other dead into the past, are just some of the complex issues tourism memory managers are encountering. Moreover, tourist encounters of places of tragedy and death and, crucially, the consequences of those encounters for broader society remain a crux of dark tourism research. Ironically, therefore, dark tourism is concerned with death and dying, yet through its social scientific study, tells us more about life and the living. For that reason, dark tourism scholarship should continue to shine a critical light on how societies deal with and present their dead, and in doing so, offer multidisciplinary discourse on the darker side of travel.

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