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WRITING THE DARK SIDE OF TRAVEL, SKINNER, J. (ED.)

Review by Tony Johnston

This edited collection by Jonathan Skinner is a timely piece, demonstrating further evidence of the maturation and on-going evolution of thanatourism as a subject meriting serious academic attention. The book comprises contributions from sociologists, anthropologists, literary scholars and artists which both highlights the inter-disciplinary interest in the dark side of travel but usefully also provides new conceptual lenses with which to approach the consumption of death. This breadth will likely be welcome to those conducting thanatourism research across the disciplines, as indeed many of the chapter contributors ignore disciplinary boundaries altogether and draw on wide ranging scholarship to frame their empirical material.

Rather than critique what is a quite disparate set of chapters individually it seems more appropriate to seek out the common themes raised in a more general sense. Skinner's collection makes three important contributions to thanatourism scholarship. Firstly, the book's focus on the negotiation of unsettling journeys in literature, journalism and the arts is both as welcome as it is novel. The use of the creative arts and cultural studies as a source for understanding journeys to the dark side is deeply sympathetic to the complexities of experiencing or consuming trauma, and it is this contribution which makes the book stand out. Drawing on sources ranging from Joe Sacco's Bosnian and Palestinian graphic novels to

participant observations on the Camino de Santiago, the book weaves travel experiences filled with personal and societal trauma together into a series of ontologically provocative arguments. In Chapter 2 for example, Simon Cooke visits the writings of W.G. Sebald, depicting those who follow in the footsteps of the great writer as having distinctly thanatouristic motivations. In a chapter which will likely have resonance with readers of Harrison's (2003) *The Dominion of the Dead*, Cooke argues that we should not think of the dead as isolated beings; rather they are part of the journey of life.

The second contribution made by the book lies in the utilisation of a wide range of methodological techniques. Chapters throughout the book draw upon literary and archival material, the creative arts, journalism sources, participant observation, ethnography and unstructured interviews. This refreshing diversity of methods demonstrates a willingness to adapt to the complexities and sensitivities of the thanatourism research process. In the final chapter for example, sociologist Jennifer Iles adopts an ethnographic approach to understanding the consumption of battlefields. Set on the Western Front, Iles' chapter explores commemorative landscape features, framed within emotion, identity and memory discourses. Although the chapter is drawn from a larger study, the author's empathy for the complexities of battlefield research is evident throughout, explicitly in her discussion of affect, her own positionality and personal experiences. This awareness of position is evident throughout the book; with several of the authors using personal experience as a tool to reflect on travel of the dark side, as opposed to simply refocusing attention on themselves. Those seeking new approaches to data collection in thanatourism research may benefit from similar self-reflection.

The third contribution made by the book is the attempt to situate thanatourism within broader tourism and development frameworks. The book is opened by anthropologist John Nagle with an exploration of peace building in post-conflict Belfast. While Nagle introduces many of the themes which run throughout the book, notably the fluidity of landscapes, the air-brushing of history, authenticity of experience, memory and social amnesia, the real focus of the chapter is a critique of the two main approaches to developing tourism growth in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement; namely the arrival of FDI driven strategies on one hand and the preservation and representation of victimhood on the other. In Nagle's view these strategies contribute little to sustainable peace, as neither facilitates cooperation or societal reconciliation. While Nagle's chapter may offer a somewhat alternative position to the concept of 'Phoenix Tourism' recently proposed by Causevic and Lynch (2011), he usefully situates the commodification of trauma in a post-conflict development framework. This wider situation of the consumption of death continues in other chapters, with the positive power and healing potential of memorialising trauma explored as an alternative in Chapter 8. Anthropologist Fiona Murray negotiates the history of the 'Stolen Generations' in Australia; for some a therapeutic landscape, for others a poorly memorialised site of suffering.

One minor criticism of the book however is its dominant Western approach to darker forms of travel. While documenting non-Western consumption of death was likely impractical in this volume, only three of the nine chapters are set outside Europe but even these largely consider Western thanatopsis. While thanatourism research has blossomed in recent years, little knowledge has been produced on non-Western consumption of death. However, despite this call for widening thanatourism research, overall the book makes a timely contribution to

thanatourism research, particularly given its emotive style, empathetic approach and dedication to understanding the allure of death from both personal and societal perspectives.

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