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11 The numen experience in heritage tourism

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Introduction

Heritage tourism has received much attention in the past few decades. The literature has tackled basic questions such as the nature of heritage and heritage tourism, what prompts nations to create heritage attractions, the increased interest among visitors in heritage tourism, and the factors that motivate people to visit such sites (see for example Graham *et al.* 2000; Dicks 2003; Timothy and Boyd 2003; Lumley 2005; Pearce 2005; Smith 2006; Richards 2007). With respect to the growth in heritage tourism, it is assumed that several top-down and bottom-up factors account for the increased number of such sites. For example, governments of developing countries have found heritage useful for nation building particularly in new post-colonial states (Anderson 1991; AlSayyad 2001; Mitchell 2001; Robbins 2008). In addition, 'looking back' has become an effective mode of resistance against the presumed homogenizing effects of globalization (Dahles 2001). From the point of view of visitors, heritage sites that feature social history often connote a simpler, slower time. Chambers (2006: 1) calls heritage 'a major industry of the mind as well as the pocketbook' anchoring us 'against the fast-pace and uncertainty of our time, to shielding us from the seemingly rootless and transient effects of modernity and globalization'.

Heritage tourists have been found to be well educated and fairly affluent (McKercher and du Cros 2002; Timothy and Boyd 2003; Richards 2007). However, aside from this demographic attribution, they tend to be defined by their motivations rather than any intrinsic personality factors. Chen (1998) puts them into two broad categories: those who seek information and those who want personal benefits. Poria (2010), who builds on the typologies of others, classifies heritage tourists into three categories: *identity builders*, those who visit a site with which they believe they have a linked heritage; *multicultural minded* audiences, such as those who are curious and interested in others' heritage; and *guilt reducers*, those who assuage their hedonistic guilt about travel with visits to 'must-see' sites.

MacCannell (1976) argued some time ago that Western tourists seek out places that embody authenticity, where visitors can view people who seem organically connected with land, work and one another. The most humorous (and troubling)

examples of this are the infamous Cannibal Boat Tours up the Sepik River in New Guinea, where small groups of international tourists make stops to see the local people, who cash in on their image as once-fearsome cannibals. The native people submit to pictures for money, sell masks and escort the visitors into their sacred men's houses (O'Rourke 1997). Film-maker O'Rourke produced the memorable video based on one of these trips (O'Rourke 1989).

There are other motives and experiences waiting at heritage sites. These became apparent in two studies we did at historic sites in Pennsylvania. The first was an exploratory study in the historic downtown of the old city of Bethlehem to discover the appeal of museums and colonial sites. The second was research at Gettysburg National Military Park that involved both interviews and a survey. In both instances, we found that some visitors like to use their imagination in special ways to reconstruct earlier times. We discovered a surprising quality of response in which people develop a deep empathy for, and connection with, events and people depicted at sites, those who once lived, worked, fought or died there. In some cases, these feelings occur unexpectedly; in others, such feelings are anticipated and familiar. We have adapted the term *numinous* (from *numen*) from religious studies to describe such reactions. Here, we examine *numen* and *numinous* as both an experience and a motivation in heritage tourism.

The accidental discovery of *numen*

The Bethlehem survey sought to understand what people seek when they visit historic sites and museums. A total of 255 surveys administered by two interviewers were completed (Cameron and Gatewood 2003). The research led to our accidental discovery of what we eventually called 'numen-seeking'. Although Bethlehem has a strong heavy industry connection (with the now defunct Bethlehem Steel Corporation), the side north of the Lehigh River has been gentrified and restored to feature the eighteenth-century Moravian period in the downtown. The Moravians were a Protestant sect dedicated to utopian principles who founded the city in 1741. Visitors have many opportunities to shop in quaint shops, visit museums and the renovated colonial industrial quarter, and enjoy events such as the annual Christmas programme, as well as Musikfest and Celticfest, both outdoor music events (Cameron 1987, 1989; Cameron and Gatewood 1994).

The survey utilized a convenience rather than a random sample. People were intercepted by the interviewers on the street or as they were exiting the museums. They were asked a series of twelve closed-ended questions on things such as their interest in history, the historic period they preferred, the features that were important at museums and sites, their image of Bethlehem and a number of background questions. Two open-ended questions yielded some interesting results. One asked what made a visit particularly enjoyable for them; the other concerned what kind of experience they sought at a site. We called the first question ENHANCE and the second one SEEK. Responses to these questions were categorized taxonomically (see Figures 11.1 and 11.2).

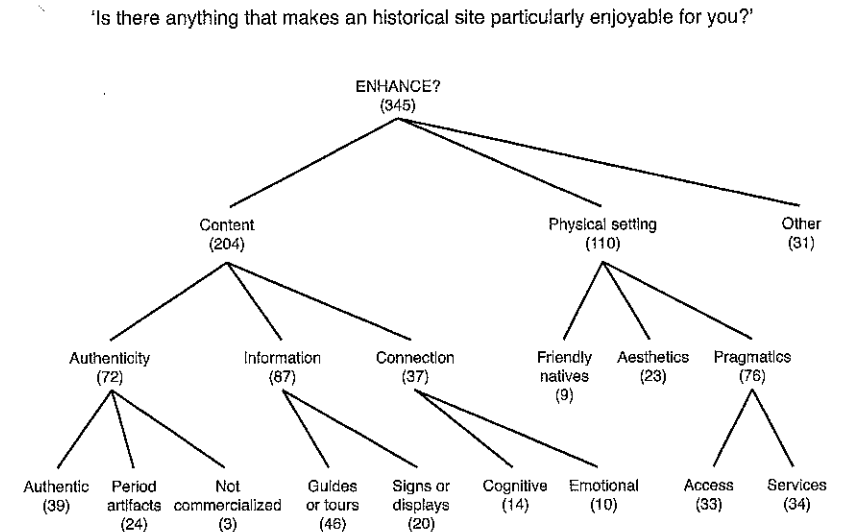


Figure 11.1 ENHANCE taxonomy.

Note: numbers in parentheses indicate 'coded responses', i.e. 255 respondents produced 345 responses. Not all responses could be coded at lower levels of the taxonomy.

The results of ENHANCE were not surprising in the sense that aspects of both the physical setting and the content were mentioned. The replies further broke down into those that stressed the importance of authenticity or accuracy (72 mentions), an informative presentation or interpretation (87 mentions), and an individual's ability to make some kind of personal connection, either emotional or cognitive (37 mentions). Specific aspects of informativeness were knowledgeable guides/good tours and good signs/displays. Under authenticity, people said they wanted 'authentic presentation'. They also said they liked sites that were *not* commercialized and contained period furnishings and costumed actors. The connection idea was sometimes expressed personally, as in 'If I had some kind of connection, like a family member', and sometimes in terms of prior knowledge, as in 'If I know ahead of time what it's about'.

The second open-ended question, SEEK, was phrased as follows: 'What do you want to get out of your visits to historic sites or museums?' Once again, we organized responses into a taxonomy (see Figure 11.2). Excluding the eleven 'other' outliers, the three categories of responses pertained to the desire for information (185 mentions), pleasure (43 mentions) and a personal experience of some kind (74 mentions). The information-seekers would often simply say 'increased knowledge,' 'learn about the history' or 'education'. The pleasure-seeking comments mentioned the desire for fun, relaxation or aesthetic appreciation, for example, 'I just want to enjoy the day,' or 'Just the pleasure of looking at things'.

'What do you want to get out of your visits to historic sites or museums?'

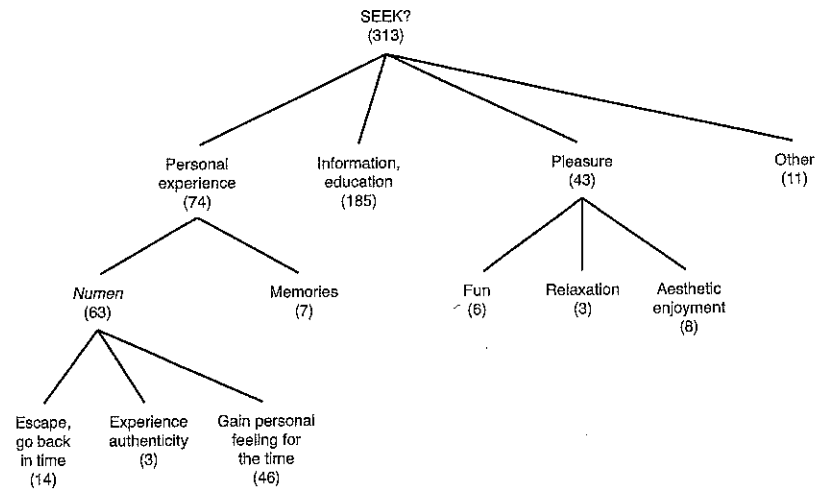


Figure 11.2 SEEK taxonomy.

Note: numbers in parentheses indicate 'coded responses', i.e. 255 respondents produced 313 responses. Not all responses could be coded at lower levels of the taxonomy.

The seventy-four personal experience responses varied. So, we distinguished between comments indicating that visits to historic sites are a way to create memories (7 mentions) – e.g. 'To leave with lasting memories' or 'Something I can soak up and remember' – and comments expressing a desire to make a personal connection with the place (63 mentions). For the latter, there were three ways of expressing this desire. One group said they sought to go back in time or escape, e.g. 'I like to feel that for a short time you return to an era that's no longer there' or '[I want to take] a mental sabbatical into the past'. A second group made reference to authenticity once again, e.g. 'I want to see the real thing, no reconstructions'. The third group stressed the importance of gaining information, but in a deeper way, often using the phrase as in 'get a feel for' that time or place. Some of the best examples of this turn of mind are as follows:

To be able to develop a feel of the experience of the people of that time, what they were thinking, what their reality was . . .

(Bethlehem Survey, Case 151)

. . . a feeling of the place, a way to connect with what was . . .

(Bethlehem Survey, Case 166)

To be able to make a connection with the events that took place in a specific time period . . .

(Bethlehem Survey, Case 202)

Just to get a feel for that time, something that is memorable. I like to reflect and remember it. To be part of it.

(Bethlehem Survey, Case 49)

I want to feel the aura of the period, gain a sense of connectedness with the way people lived. I want to have used my mind to experience it, not just the externals.

(Bethlehem Survey, Case 74)

Thus, based on our content coding of responses to this open-ended question, about 27 per cent of the sample (70 of the 255 respondents) made one or more comments indicating that they desire some sort of personal experience from their visits to historic sites and museums. Whether this percentage can be generalized to other audiences or populations was not statically validated since it was a convenience sample. Indeed, considering the social contexts in which the survey took place (people intercepted in the streets), the obtained percentage almost certainly underestimates the true proportionality at heritage sites.

The verbatim remarks that people made went well beyond the desire to simply learn about and enjoy historic sites. Clearly, there were some who described what they sought using highly affective language such as 'escaping into the past', 'connecting with what was' and 'reflecting and remembering'. Borrowing from religious studies, we adapted the terms 'numen' and 'numinous' to describe the essential quality of visitors' personal experiences. In its Latin etymology, numen means a nod or beckoning from the gods, an invitation to make contact with the sacred. Rudolf Otto (1946) used 'numinous' to describe a religious emotion in the presence of something sacred or holy. Oubré, an anthropologist, explored the prehistory of the numinous mind in humans, making the claim that a numinous consciousness dates back two million or so years and is the first glimmering of religious imagination (Oubré 1997).

The numen concept moved into public history in the innovative work of Maines and Glynn (1993). For them, numinous objects in museum collections can have special psychological significance, evoking strong associations and emotional response among the visitors: 'It is as if they are, to borrow a term from Roman paganism, inhabited by a numen or spirit that calls for in many of us a reaction of awe and reverence' (Maines and Glynn 1993: 9). Such material objects may or may not have merit historically, but they do convey emotional significance for the viewer, endowing them with a 'special socio-cultural magic (Maines and Glynn 1993: 10). Examples range from Amelia Earhart's white silk scarf to lengths of nooses used to hang criminals. The authors argue that the most potent objects embody artefacts of group suffering associated with fire-fighting, war, disaster,

forced migrations, slavery, grief, and loss. Battlefields are highly numinous, along with famous places in public memory, for example, the Vietnam War Memorial. While numinous objects are highly appealing to visitors, Maines and Glynn argue they are often viewed with reservation by museum professionals since they may not embody genuine significance as historical objects. Hence they are problematic in museum display and should be used sparingly.

Indicators of numen-seeking

The Bethlehem survey suggested to us that numen was an idea worth exploring further, particularly in special places where visitors might feel emotion or connection with the people or events at sites. It seemed likely that places that depict extraordinary public figures (such as Abraham Lincoln at New Salem, Illinois), as well as ones of possible emotional impact – battlefields and soldiers' cemeteries, Holocaust and other atrocity sites – would be places in which to further explore the numen response. We selected Gettysburg National Military Park (GNMP) in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, as our next site (Gatewood and Cameron 2004). The 3,500-acre park, which is administered by the US Park Service, chronicles the conflict between the union and confederacy in 1863 on a vast marked landscape, with special attention to the three-day battle in July that became the turning point of the war. The topography, the park rangers, and the restored detritus of nineteenth-century warfare all make for an effective experience for the 1.6 million people who visit every year.

In our multi-method research strategy, we took tours of the park, consulted archival material in the library, interviewed guides, rangers and visitors and, finally, distributed a survey to 400 people we intercepted on site. Respondents mailed the surveys back to us and we received 253 returns, a response rate of 63 per cent. We used the surveys and face-to-face interviews to interpret Gettysburg and its impact on visitors.

Responses to the standard demographic questions asked in the survey suggested that respondents tended to be well educated, affluent and middle-aged. About 55 per cent were return visitors, while 45 per cent were first timers. The main reason given for visiting the park was a 'casual interest in history' (52.6 per cent), followed by a 'serious interest in history' (15 per cent), next a 'convenient stop' (13.4 per cent), and a good destination for a family outing (9.9 per cent). An image question on the park that used an agreement scale for seventeen adjectives – from historic to run down and boring – overwhelming showed that Gettysburg strikes people as historic, interesting, meaningful, enriching, authentic, emotional, and serene among other things (see Figure 11.3).

There is no doubt that Gettysburg is a very effective classroom that brings history to life for the adults and children who visit. There are serious enthusiasts, members of the Friends of the National Parks at Gettysburg, who spend weekends attending talks and tours. They also help with restoration projects. An interesting subset of supporters is the group of re-enactors – soldiers, nurses, sharpshooters – who entertain visitors on site. The enthusiasts find Gettysburg an endless source of

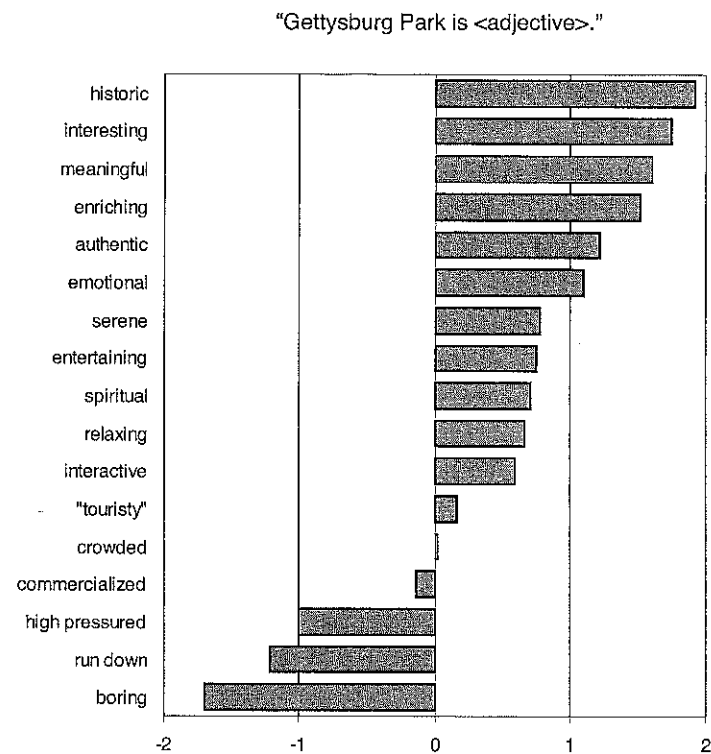


Figure 11.3 Average ratings for the seventeen adjectives.

information, and they come back regularly, usually finding something new to learn. As one woman said to us, 'the more you learn, the more you want to learn' (GNMP Interview 6, 23 July 1999).

In designing the Gettysburg survey form, we decided it would be useful to develop quantitative measures for three motives people may have for visiting heritage sites: numen-seeking, information-seeking, and fun-seeking. Toward that end, the questionnaire included 34 items (with responses being: (1) strongly disagree; (2) disagree; (3) neutral; (4) agree; and (5) strongly agree). Since this battery of questions was intended to gauge people's preferences for desired experiences at historic sites, the questions asked about historic sites in general, not Gettysburg specifically. The patterning of responses to these questions indicated that different subsets of items were reasonable measures of numen-seeking, information-seeking and fun-seeking, respectively. Here, we only report for numen-seeking.

Conceptually, numen can be said to involve three aspects: (1) Deep Engagement – a transcendent experience in which one often loses the sense of time passing,

something that Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988) call flow; (2) Empathy – a strongly affective experience in which the individual tries to conjure the thoughts, feelings and experiences, including hardships and suffering, of those who lived at an earlier time; and (3) Awe or Reverence – an experience of being in the presence of something holy or of spiritual communion with something or someone.

Seven of the thirty-four items in the Gettysburg survey turned out to be good indicators of numen-seeking. These items had strong inter-item correlations (Cronbach's alpha on standardized items = 0.803), and principal components analysis showed they loaded on a single underlying factor. By these criteria, they constitute the best additive index of numen-seeking we could find from the Gettysburg survey. Table 11.1 shows the constituent items in the index and Figure 11.4 shows the distribution of index scores for the Gettysburg sample.

The quantitative index based on seven items also correlated well with a qualitative measure of numen-seeking. Using respondents' open-ended answers to several questions, we categorized individuals into one of three groups based on how clearly their verbatim responses indicated a numen impulse: (1) low, (2) moderate or (3) high. The mean numen-index scores of these qualitatively-identified groups were significantly different from one another and in the predicted direction ($F = 16.052$, $df = 2/250$, $prob. = 0.000$, $est. \omega^2 = 11.4$ per cent). This further corroborates the validity of the seven-item index.

Is numen-seeking associated with demographic characteristics such as age, sex, income or education? Not in the Gettysburg sample. No demographic variable was associated with respondents' numen-index scores. The only statistically significant effect, and it is not particularly strong, concerned a behavioural variable, whether one had visited Gettysburg before. First-time visitors tended to have lower numen-index scores than did return visitors ($F = 7.948$, $df = 1/251$, $prob. = 0.005$, $est. \omega^2 = 3.1$ per cent). This is quite interpretable in the sense that when the bug bites a

Table 11.1 Components of the numen-seeking index from Gettysburg Survey

Item-by-index correlation ^a	Questionnaire item
0.631	I like to use my mind to go back in time while visiting historic sites and museums.
0.570	I am sometimes able to connect deeply with the objects displayed in exhibits.
0.563	I enjoy imagining the day-to-day life of people who lived in the past.
0.533	While at historic sites, I try to feel the aura or spirit of earlier times.
0.514	Some sites and museums provoke an almost 'spiritual' response in me.
0.484	When I was a child, I used to imagine what it would have been like to live in the past.
0.441	At some historic sites and museums, I lose my sense of time passing.

Note: ^a this is the correlation of an item vis-à-vis the index when calculated without that item.

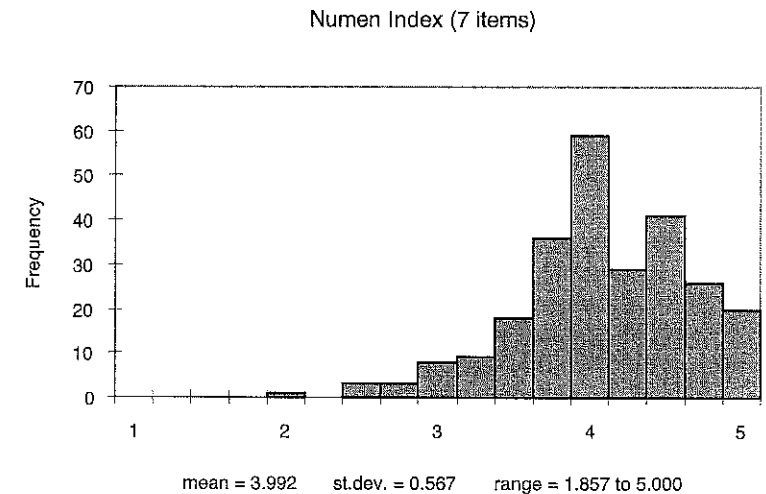


Figure 11.4 Histogram of the numen-index scores for the Gettysburg sample.

numen-seeker during an initial trip, the visitor is likely to return for more of the same experience, and Gettysburg is certainly a satisfying site for numen-seekers.

One of the most useful questions for our purposes was a very simple open-ended one: 'What is the most meaningful aspect of Gettysburg to you?' It was possible to collapse the 246 responses into four general content categories, which were: (1) the historical significance of the place; (2) the drama of the battle and battlefield; (3) some aspect of the physical site or program; and (4) some mention of personal connection or reaction. Not surprisingly, over a third (36.2 per cent) stressed historical significance, while over a quarter (27.6 per cent) mentioned the drama of the battlefield, and 16.7 per cent made reference to some specific feature of the site. Almost a fifth of the respondents wrote evocative personal statements, some bordering on religious. This could translate as a kind of awe that one could be standing on the very spot where the two sides fought so fiercely. Some used the language of pilgrimage, as in 'going on a pilgrimage' or 'remember, honour and walking in their footsteps'. Others expressed great reverence for the places where men sacrificed themselves for separate causes.

We found similar comments in the short interviews we did with informants. For example, one man who makes frequent trips said, 'This place is sacred to me' (GNMP Interview 9, 22 July 1999). A woman who visits the Park several times a year said that the power of Gettysburg to her was that 'I pray better at Gettysburg than I do anywhere else' (GNMP Interview 10, 25 July 1999).

Gettysburg has well marked topography with good signage, monuments, canons, soldier sculptures, and other built structures. Visitors are well aware they are walking where soldiers fought, struggled, suffered, and died. Being on the actual

place seems to add to the depth of people's reactions. People gazing from Little Round Top (the hill where Union troops engaged with Confederates) said the vista helped them imagine the dreadful battle. One woman wrote, 'Regardless of where you walk on the battlefield, I am very aware that I may be standing on the ground where men have spilled their blood or even died. The enormity of that thought can be overwhelming' (GNMP Survey, Case 105). Walking through Soldiers' National Cemetery induced sober and emotional reactions, too, as people read the simple tomb stones.

As noted, our sample included many repeat visitors (55 per cent). These people found the place enriching enough to return again and again. One American man who lives in Australia visits Gettysburg every two years when he comes home. The Friends of Gettysburg make more frequent visits. Gettysburg seems to 'convert' people into a kind of fan club. Most come for an outing or to learn. Some are startled by the power of the place to make them consider more than just the historic facts. When we contemplated the power of Gettysburg, it is clearly more than an effective classroom. It is a site of great political significance, but it is also a place where people seem to contemplate ultimate concerns – death, sacrifice, courage, and national destiny. Return visitors are familiar with and expectant of the power of the place. Newcomers find Gettysburg to be an emotional surprise.

Thanatouristic sites

Our Gettysburg study is one of many studies of battlefields. Many scholars have examined visitation to the European battlefields (see for example Walter 1993; Lloyd 1998; Seaton 1999; Baldwin and Sharpley 2009). Visits to these battlefields and cemeteries became popular in the inter-war and post-Second World War period after Thomas Cook began package tours to the continent. Initially, the tours were taken by both surviving war veterans and families who had not been able to bury their soldiers on native ground. Walter (1993: 70) makes the case in his book that visitation to battlefields should cease when all the widows, children, and veterans die. He suggests that battlefield 'pilgrimage' is a temporary phenomenon of the twentieth century. However, this assumption has not been supported since visitation has not diminished and those who tour battle sites generally have no direct link. In the case of Gettysburg, Weeks (2003: 4) suggests 'its power appears to grow instead of diminish as the battle recedes in time'.

Battlefields are only one type in the list of dark sites. Thanatourism (from the Greek *thanatos* meaning death, especially violent death) is variously called dark or atrocity tourism (Sharpley and Stone 2009). Logan and Reeves (2009) call all such sites 'places of pain and shame', pain for the sufferers and shame for the perpetrators. Sharpley (2009: 11–15) reviews several ways to organize dark sites into a typology. For example, he describes Seaton's (1996) categories of dark travel, which include visits to witness public enactments of death, to sites of mass death after they have occurred, to memorials or internment sites, to symbolic representations of death, and to see re-enactments of death.

Some dark sites have been inscribed as World Heritage sites, such as Gorée Island, a slave depot in Senegal, which was inscribed as early as 1978, and two slave castles – Cape Coast and Elmina – in Ghana, both of which were inscribed in 1991. As strange it is sounds, Logan and Reeves (2009) citing Paul Williams (2007), make the case that pain and shame tourism is one kind of heritage that is on the rise. They note, for example, that Auschwitz-Birkenau receives over a million tourists annually, some of them Jewish, many of them not.

Thana-sites are not neutral in any sense. They often conjure strong feelings among visitors mostly for the suffering and death that they reveal but sometimes for the stories they do not tell or the whitewashing that transpires. It is often difficult to interpret the whole story of oppression and death, either because the authorities intervene in the curation or because the curators may be concerned about offending some group. These places qualify in the top spot for what Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) term 'dissonant heritage', that which is left untold or misconstrued.

Those who visit thana-sites are under no illusions that they are about to see displays of 'happy heritage'. What brings them there and what kind of experience do they have? Those questions have been answered better with conjecture and anecdotes than with empirical studies (Sharpley 2009). Logan and Reeves (2009: 4–5) wonder if viewing places of atrocity simply comforts the viewers with the knowledge that they are the lucky ones. Sharpley (2009: 11) examines the attempts to account for people's motives for dark tourism consumption. Some of these – for example, the desire to celebrate crime, basic bloodlust, and morbid curiosity – do not speak to the nobler virtues of humans.

One group of atrocity sites that have been studied ethnographically are the slave depots of West Africa (Teye and Timothy 2004; Reed 2004, 2006; Bruner 2005; Austin 2007). These are the holding castles (a label that some reject in favour of dungeons) for captured Africans awaiting the Middle Passage on slave ships to the New World. Three castles have been 'restored' and opened to visitation: Gorée in Senegal in 1978 (the earliest), and more recently in Ghana, Cape Coast, and Elmina. All are popular tourist destinations and important income earners for the host countries. They receive both domestic and international visitors. Of the latter, a sizeable number are African Americans who regard themselves more as pilgrims than tourists.

The castles have been used for different functions since their construction centuries ago, but have been restored to display the slave trade period of about 1700 to 1850. The holding areas for slaves in the bowels of the castles are dark and hot, and vaguely smell of the human excrement that is cement-hard on the floor. Occasional attempts to clean up and paint the walls have been met with the charge of whitewashing history. Gorée castle features the famous 'Door of No Return' through which captive Africans walked on African ground for the last time before leaving their homeland forever. Tour guides inform the visitors about the facts of the trade and the way the castle functioned at the time.

The tours have the greatest impact on African Americans, many of whom regard the trip to Africa as a return to the homeland. Bruner (2005), citing diasporan

literature, describes Africa as a mythic place of pride, freedom, and dignity for returning blacks. The tours evoke rage, sadness, empathy in many; few are left emotionally untouched. But, some visitors are said to report great pride that their ancestors were strong enough to survive the conditions of capture and time in the dungeon. Bruner (2005: 103) cites the case of a woman who fasted in the dungeon for three weeks, which led to a vivid experience of communion with her ancestors.

Comments made by diasporan Africans give a glimmering of the impact of the place and the tour narrative. Reed (2006: 169) provides the following evocative quotes:

I am forever changed. I felt almost as if I could feel the spirits of my tortured ancestors and I felt apologetic.

My visit has affected me profoundly. I imagined the absolute horror my ancestors must have experienced and I was deeply saddened and enraged.

This tour is on my 54th birthday – I still hear the cries of my ancestors and family from the ground.

[Coming here] connects me on a deeper level with my ancestors, with my Creator, with who I am and whose I am.

Reed (2006) reports that Ghanaians and other African tourists seem the least emotionally touched by their visits and more interested in historical detail. She explains this with the point that Africans, though they have endured the repression of colonialism, do not carry the bitter scars of slavery in their collective memory. Some whites, both European and American, experience guilt in some measure, as seen in this comment: 'What a mixture of horror, guilt, and responsibility I feel as a white American . . . and look at what has happened in the USA with the African Americans. We owe them so much, but give so little'. (Reed 2006: 177). Black anger frequently leads to the segregation of tour groups on racial lines. Being sensitive to the expectations of visitor groups, tour guides alter their narratives according to the racial make-up of those groups. Diasporan Americans have no patience with chatter, laughter, and inappropriate comments by some whites and Africans on tours. This short description of what is also termed pilgrimage, roots and slave tourism at West African castles provides additional and vivid illustration of the power of such heritage sites to induce a numinous response, particularly among African Americans. No doubt, many visit Ghana and Senegal with curiosity and expectations of being moved. However, once there, they appear to be met with a setting more powerful in its impact than they might have imagined beforehand.

The three studies examined in this chapter show that the numen experience is a strong emotional reaction seen among a good portion of tourists at heritage sites. Clearly, the reaction goes beyond simple enjoyment or edification. It is a time of deep engagement – what the editors of this volume describe as a 'cultural moment'. Those sites such as Gettysburg and the slave castles often surprise first-time visitors

with their power to invoke sadness, awe, and empathy. Return visitors who may know the power of the sites still react with deep emotion. Beyond engagement, a numinous response entails a leap of imagination in which the visitor can conjure the time period being displayed, particularly the experiences, bad or good, of the historical actors. In the case of Gettysburg, people feel great empathy for the soldiers on the battlefield – young men in woollen uniforms during several blazing hot July days running the gauntlet of cannon and musket shot. People are amazed at the young soldiers' courage and bravery, and feel grief for their suffering and death. In the case of the African slave castles, many visitors conjure with some anguish the experience of the terrified captives being held in the crowded, filthy dungeons awaiting an unknown future. African American visitors who may have felt a disconnection from their own heritage and identity in America are able to forge a link with some unknown ancestor in Africa, the homeland. Such visits become a pilgrimage to a sacred place that renews them.

Finally, a numinous response includes strong feelings of reverence and awe in visitors, particularly when they are physically standing in the same place as the imagined social actors. Many Gettysburg visitors have such emotional responses to the battlegrounds, which they see as sanctified by the blood of the soldiers. Equally strong reactions have been recorded at the slave castles where African American pilgrims wander through the dungeons imagining the terror and misery their ancestors experienced.

Implications of numen for heritage sites

In their book directed at museum professionals, Alderson and Low (1996) assert that visitor motivation is difficult to assess in museum studies. Curators make assumptions about visitor motivation – education for children, nostalgia, and the search for roots, entertainment, or curiosity. Schouten (1995: 21) states that visitors to historic sites are looking for a different experience, 'a new reality based on the tangible remains of the past'. Light (1995) describes multiple motivations based on research of three presumed market segments: the dedicated learners, those with some interest and the uninterested. Rosenzweig and Thelen (1998), in the large national survey of what they term the 'popular uses of history in American life', argue that people are most drawn to history that connects with them personally. Their respondents are highly critical of the kind of history they learned in school. On outings, they seek an experience that is active and collaborative.

If the objective of heritage site designers is to create places that are pleasing, stimulating, and accessible, but most of all pedagogical, seeking to educate visitors about a time, place, and people, then their task is a daunting one. Kammen (1991: 666–67) characterizes the lay person's memory as 'people-oriented, impressionistic, and imprecise . . .'. While curators hope for visitors who are enthusiastic learners, what Moscardo (2007) terms 'mindful' visitors who actively learn from the well-placed signs, artefacts, and tour narratives, the reality is that most people do not like heavily didactic displays. They regard historic sites and museums as informal educational settings (Falk and Dierking 1992). Korn and Associates

(1997), in a study done for the Smithsonian, discovered that people wanted an experience different from school, one that is experiential and interactive.

Given people's poor recall of history and their penchant for sites that nurture sensations, feelings, and the exercise of imagination, should site designers focus mainly on what is dramatic? Maines and Glynn (1993) weigh the pros and cons of using numinous objects or relics in historic displays. They note that museum professionals tend to discount the value of such objects because their historic value often cannot be authenticated. They cite one public historian who has a very clear criterion for display objects: 'An historically significant object contributes to a clearer understanding of some former custom, activity, episode, or personality' (Guthe cited in Maines and Glynn 1993: 20).

We agree with Maines and Glynn that site design should not be a simple choice between information and theatre. A site that nurtures the imagination as well as providing information clearly enhances the visitor experience. In our view, Gettysburg is one of the best examples of a site that both teaches and touches its visitors. The pedagogical aspects of the park include the lectures by the highly trained park rangers and tour guides, informational CDs, and well-placed signage. The numinous features of the park include the vast topography that has been transformed into an 'ideologically encoded landscape' (Diller and Scofidio 1994: 47). Places have been marked with hundreds of statues, cannons, and monuments. The fields, valleys, hills, and orchards, which are otherwise just part of the natural landscape, have been given names that evoke moments in the battle – e.g. Little Round Top, Cemetery Hill, and Devil's Den. The landscape is heavily laden with meaning.

There is one final argument for the value of numen for dark sites especially battlefields, political prisons, Holocaust death camps, and slave dungeons. Though some visitors (as noted for Africans at Elmina and Cape Coast) may find a tour affectively neutral, most do not. These places of high numen offer visitors the opportunity to reflect on those ideas of ultimate concern – suffering, sacrifice, and death. We who live in the secular West do not have many occasions to contemplate mortality, and we do not often pause to consider the cruel side of human nature. Thana-sites insist we address ultimate concerns and philosophical issues about human history and nature. In our view, this gives them great value as public places.

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