

# Raising the Spectre of Race: Phantoming and Phenomenologies of Whiteness in Dark Tourism

by

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B.A. Hons., University of Warwick, 2013

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(GENDER, RACE, SEXUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
(Vancouver)

December 2021

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Raising the Spectre of Race: Phantoming and Phenomenologies of Whiteness in Dark Tourism

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submitted by Keira Smalley in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree  
of

Master of Arts

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in

Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice

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## Abstract

This thesis introduces race into the academic conversation around dark tourism, where it has hitherto been overlooked or ignored. It highlights the extent to which phenomenologies of whiteness (following Ahmed, 2007) are supported and facilitated at racialised sites of dark tourism, through methods of ‘phantoming’ (enhancing or falsifying emplaced resonances of memory). Through two case studies I identify two distinct, though related, techniques of site management that accommodate the white body into racialised space - ‘narrative becoming’, and ‘narrative containment’.

First, I lay out academic foundations for my fields of study through a discussion of dark tourism literature, highlighting key debates that relate to race - authenticity, morality, commercialisation, ‘otherness’ - but never quite name it. I also discuss psychoanalytical theory on the spectral as an interruption on the present, before outlining my own definition of the phantom as the physical resonances of place-memory.

In my case study centred on Prison Escape game in The Netherlands, I theorize ‘narrative becoming’ as a process through which the white tourist self is offered a temporary experience of stereotyped Black criminality. I analyse the branding and marketing of the site to reveal how the prison is abstracted from geographical space, allowing it to become a playground of alternative desire for the white-lensed tourist.

In my second case study, the reading of ghosts becomes much more literal. The Myrtles plantation in Louisiana, USA is touted as one of America’s “most haunted homes”. Here I read

the site contrapunctually in order to highlight the various ways in which issues of race, white supremacy and anti-Black violence are omitted from the story told through the site's ghosts. I frame this silencing as 'narrative containment', showing how the site's managers control the narrative in ways that allow them to retain a public image of pure-intentioned, even honourable, heritage preservation.

I do not reconceptualise dark tourism away from its association with death and towards racially-charged encounters, but rather argue that tourists, site managers and dark tourism scholars must begin to consider what it means for sites of racialised suffering to be marketed towards a white audience as 'attraction'.



## Lay Summary

Dark Tourism - the visitation of sites that represent death and disaster - offers an alternative to overtly commercialised modes of tourism that prioritise luxury and comfort. This paper interrogates the lines of power in the tourist-toured relationship, particularly the white supremacist institutions of the prison and the plantation as sites of Black suffering that have been transformed into attractions. I am interested in how site managers alter these racialised spaces in order to welcome the white body, and maintain the ease of whiteness as a way of moving through the world. I argue that place holds memory, and that it is possible for one to step inside the lingering aura of events that have transpired. I argue that this place-memory can be enhanced, or faked, for the sake of providing tourists a thrilling and satisfying 'dark' experience, and in order to contain the potential for narratives to emerge that decentre or even criticise whiteness.

## **Preface**

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Keira Smalley.

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## Acknowledgements

*I am deeply grateful for the hard work, wisdom and support of my supervisor Dr JP Catungal, particularly in such trying times, and with the added barrier of distance. Without your guidance it's hard to imagine how this research idea could ever have left the ground. Thank you for helping me to frame the flurry of thoughts whirring around my brain, thank you for the gentle pushes in the right directions, but most of all thank you for sticking with me through everything.*

*Dr Janice Stewart gave me the strength to finish this work. Their understanding and positivity was a ladder out of a hole. I remain grateful for your perfect mixture of sincerity and humour in class, and for everything you have taught me - but perhaps especially for the advice to write about something that is going to fuel you when it gets really hard - I never let go of that energy!*

*Dr Pilar Riano-Alcala's class on historical memory and social reconstruction was the spark for all of this. I cannot say how much those readings and discussions in my first year at UBC altered my understanding of memory, memorialisation, and my perspective on interacting with place. You are a brilliant teacher and an incredibly kind person, thank you so much for your support and guidance in the early stages of this work.*

*To my entire graduate cohort - thank you for making my experience at UBC challenging, transformative and fun. Our seminars were a supportive space from the very first week; I learnt so much from each one of you, and I miss being in a classroom and/or pub together!*

*Lastly, a special thanks to Nora Langknecht and Savoy Williams. I could not have done this masters without you, period. We have cried together, laughed together, sung and danced together. Your friendship means the world to me and I'm forever grateful to have met you.*

## Dedication

*For Jack, who moved to a new country without a moment's hesitation so that I could do this degree. It was a dream come true, and I couldn't love you more.*



# Chapter 1: Foundations

## 1.1 Introduction: The racial politics of whiteness, racialization and tourism

Interrogating whiteness as a way of being in and of *making* the world has emerged in the last thirty to forty years (Doane, 2003, 5) as a potentially fruitful point of departure for the project of “dislodg[ing] them/us from the position of power” (Dyer, 1997, 2). Critical race studies has long been concerned with identifying the ways in which racialisation is a social process of subject-making that crafts an Other from negation, an idea of what the white Self is *not*, thus leaving whiteness to assume a universality - being the ‘norm’ from which Others deviate (Ahmed, 2007, 153). It has been established that race is a social invention employed to subjugate those of non-white ethnicities, deployed via genealogically imperial narratives that continue to facilitate the strengthening of systematic white supremacy and whiteness as a way of being in the world (McClintock, 1995; Said, 1978). Shifting the locus of attention from an examination of *how race creates subjects* to the originating *force* of that creation - the white subject-position - highlights the fabricated nature of whiteness itself, going some way toward unseating its hegemonic claim of universality, and exposing the *making* of that universality.

Rather than an “ontological given”, whiteness is an experience which is passed down - we<sup>1</sup> inherit a particular orientation in and to the world from generations of power and through institutions, which together put opportunities, habits, capacities and possibilities within our reach (Ahmed, 2007, 150). Following Sara Ahmed, I contend that this “phenomenology of

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<sup>1</sup> I position myself in this “we”, I am speaking to my own experience of being in the world.

whiteness” manifests in the physical world around us and shapes our capacity to navigate the world, crafting public space as an extension of the white body, so that we are able to move fluidly and seamlessly through a world that welcomes us, is built to fit our contours. This world-shaping occurs over generations, an effect of decisions and scripts (institutional biases; racist policing; the neoliberal market) that continue to draw certain (white, or white-reading) bodies closer whilst pushing racialised persons away.

The insidiousness with which these scripts are worked into the fabric of the material world serves to hide them from view, so that they are not often apparent unless you are the “not white” subject who occupies the position of negation - the racialised body provides tension or a pressure point against which place rubs up and blisters (Ahmed, 2007, 161). Global tourism, with its origins in an imperial European fascination with, and romanticisation of, Otherness (McClintock, 2014) is a realm in which a culturally non-white place is rewritten to welcome the white body, so that one may seamlessly travel to exciting exotic locales without losing the comfort of our usual way of interacting with the world. June Jordan effectively captures the uncomfortability and dissonance of the white commercialisation of Black culture and geography in her “Report from the Bahamas, 1982”, where the Sheraton British Colonial hotel’s branding paints a picture of its Black employees’ willing servitude to tourists (2003). She asks “Whose rights? Whose freedom? Whose desire[s]?” are being attended to with touristic interventions on island landscapes such as this hotel. All-inclusive resorts such as the Sheraton British Colonial Bahamas provide a controlled space in which guests can enjoy cultural difference from a safe distance. Other accommodations for the white body abroad are the widespread use of the

English language in popular tourist locations, and the globalisation of Western restaurant and shopping chains that ensure one is never too far from a sense of familiarity. This is not to argue that there is some ubiquitous shared desire amongst white people for comfort and concession in their travel, indeed many white holidaymakers would deride such accommodations as 'false' or inauthentic. This is simply to point to how the industry of travel and leisure have risen up to meet the white body abroad, in order to facilitate its pleasure and convenience at all times and in all places and, in so doing, encourage spending.

The antidote to this inauthenticity - the 'real', is thought to be accessed in "other times and other places" (Heitmann, 2011, 47). The Otherness of these other places is characterised by alienation from a shallow existence - i.e., detachment from capitalistic and profit-driven modes of being, luxury and consumerism - somewhere 'gritty', perhaps even grisly. Therefore, those who wish to feel they are avoiding the "Disneyization" of tourism and leisure (following Bryman, 1999) - that is, the Western commercialisation of travel, and the neat packaging of foreign culture as holiday experiences, may turn instead into the world of dark tourism, where one can get outside of one's comfort zone.

Some argue that the practice of gazing upon mass death and suffering, which are the main tenets of dark tourism, is "as old as history itself", citing public executions and gladiatorial combat as ancient examples (Hodgkinson and Urquart, 2016, 40). However the majority of authors agree that dark tourism as we know it today has 'boomed' in recent years, with Stone noting an increasing number of dark sites available to visit, and Sharpley a rise in tourists'

interest in visiting them (both qtd in Ashworth, 2015, 317). Dark tourism sites offer tourists access to something 'real', a sense of history and meaning, while the proximity of death provides a thrill that satisfies the need for a unique travelling experience, the "plaintive need to dissociate themselves from other tourists" (Mahrouse, 2011, 378). Accessing 'authenticity' has long been a practice of those who occupy a white identity border-crossing into the sphere of racialisation (Bruner, 1991). Indeed, It has been argued that these particular desires and pleasures are a particular aspect of Westerners' practice of dark tourism (Lennon and Foley, qtd in Stone, 2006, 149). Case studies from several Asian countries have found, for example, that interaction with deathly sites is "generally patterned on traditional customs of ancestor worship" rather than leisure, and more prevalent at smaller, unstructured memorial locations than touristically-framed sites of mass death (Cohen, 2018, 169). When Western tourists visit dark sites in countries in the global East or South therefore, there can be a conflict of motivations between tourists and locals, which makes presenting the site challenging for its managers (Van Broek, 2018). Where locals may wish to leave a particular tragedy in the past, or honour victims in their own personal way, the revenue generated by tourist interest makes it economically beneficial to facilitate continued engagement with it on a larger scale (ibid.). It is again apparent how the broader world shifts to accommodate the white body and its desires.

I am interested in the extent, or *depth*, of the effect of a phenomenology of whiteness within the dark tourism sphere. Scant attention has been paid to dark tourism's racial dimensions, or the power imbalances in the tourist-toured relationship at certain sites. The seriousness and historical relevance of the events that dark sites represent confer onto them a sacred status

based on a kind of implicit authentic 'truth' that they hold as places. In such touristic place, the affect of *being there* provides one with a sense of having seen it and felt it for oneself; a sense of liveness and closeness begets a keener sense of veracity than one can glean in, say, a written archive. The stakes of the sociopolitical representations transmitted by the site are therefore high, closely associated as they are with historical truth. I intend to contrapuntally read the use of race at the sites I examine, by attending to political practices of racial representation and narrativising as key to the production of these dark tourist sites, highlighting in particular how these practices also strategically produce gaps, erasures and silences in order to promote and facilitate a white lens (Chowdhry, 2007, 102).

A key mode of racial representation that will be of particular interest in my analysis is what I refer to as the 'phantom', or the spectral place-memory that ruptures organised and structured space. Following Avery Gordon, hauntings are the way in which past unresolved traumas, wrongdoings, or exploitations make themselves known in the present, urging our attention, imploring us to address them (1997). Sites of mass death or pain are saturated with these kinds of presences, the eerie aura of suffering that lingers. For some they may take the form of spectral bodies, the literal ghosts, while for others it may be more of a sensation - some quality of the air, some overwhelming emotion, some nagging sense of a present absence. These echoes from the past have the potential to inspire action in the present; they are the sign that calls for something to be done (ibid., 8). It is our reminder that the past is "anything but dead and over", wrongs must be addressed, and action must be taken that cannot be satisfied by simple reflectionism (ibid., 12-13). This is a key part of the sense of *being there* which I believe

draws people to dark sites: the desire to get close to or even *inside* this haunting aura, as an alternative to the over-commercialization and 'safety' of traditional tourism.

The project of accounting for and addressing these phantoms is not the work of this research. Indeed I am not convinced they *could* or *should* be empirically 'studied' within the conventional language and structures of a graduate thesis. It would take lengthy, open-hearted and emplaced inquiry, a methodology that allowed for fluidity, and a vernacular able to carry the indescribable expressions/affect of place-memory and haunting. Instead, my interest lies in how the desire to access the phantoms of dark place is operationalised by site managers. How is the *idea* of the phantom put to work for the economic and ideological benefit of dark tourist stakeholders? How are the appeals of haunting and dark place-memory played with, and used to market the site? How are memories that linger in place plastered over and reformed, filtered through a white lens, to better accommodate the white body and, in turn, generate revenue?

To put it another way, I want to make visible the invisible scripts that write/formulate touristic place. I contend that 'phantoming' is used as a technique of deepening investment in a phenomenology of whiteness, and as a "technology for the reproduction of whiteness", at dark tourist sites (Ahmed, 2007, 157). I will explore the ways in which the conceptual (discourse/fantasies sold through marketing) and material (physical, on site) contours of space are shaped and narrated by, and for the benefit of, whiteness as a way of being, and the neoliberal systems of white supremacy that have colonial genealogies.

However, as Ahmed has argued, “whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it” (ibid.)

Placing too much emphasis on the invisibility or universality of whiteness risks ignoring the ways in which whiteness is also a mode of particularity, and thus exclusion. How discourses of white supremacy and their effects formulate the world in immediate, significant and unhidden ways (i.e. in ways that need not be coaxed out by attending to silences or absences), should not be disregarded or understated. I will therefore need to be cognizant of how whiteness operates as an exclusionary universal both *at the surface* and *within the layers* of touristic place-making.

My case studies focus on two dark tourist sites that represent Black suffering in the Western world. I was drawn to these examples for their potential to offer a radical commentary on the racial structures of our world. Their settings - a prison and a plantation respectively - have long-standing and deeply embedded links to colonial world-making and the subjugation of the Black body and spirit (McKittrick, 2011). They are both institutions that have historically used the unpaid labour of Black people for the profit generation of whites. They are both deeply classed institutions, generated out of the desire to protect and elevate those with money and opportunities, while further stripping the lower classes of rights and autonomy. It is well studied and documented that the industrial prison system is effectually a continuation of slavery - the combination of an anti-Black criminal justice system, with laws that sanction the use of prisoners as an unpaid industrial production line, result in a global population of incarcerated Black people whose punishment is servitude to the state and its neoliberal systems of profiteering (Gilmore, 2007; Davis, 2005; McKittrick, 2011). My case studies therefore trace this transition, and expose the continuation of an anti-Black sensibility from their punitive and

oppressive roles as active institutions, to their after-lives as tourist sites. The sites I study represent an opportunity for engagement with issues of institutionalised racism past and present but, as will become evident, such opportunities are eschewed in favour of re-narrativising the sites as places of white luxury, white heroism, and white thrill. The 'dark' side of these sites as locations of multi-generational torture of the Black body is hinted at in order to excite white desires for transgression and "race pleasure" - the witnessing of the Black body in pain in order to confirm white superiority (Anthony Farley, qtd in Razack, 2007, 378), but not strongly enough to locate blame, or force an upfront confrontation with the violent brutality of white supremacy. Although categorising particular tourism locations as 'dark' is a contentious practice, due to the multiplicity of motivations for tourist visitation, and the "fluid and mobile" interpretations they offer (Hannam, 2018, 319), it is clear at both of these sites that particular fears are being activated in order to draw in potential visitors.

At the prison site, realising the fears of incarceration and the label of criminality is offered to tourists as a temporary break from the familiarity of their ordered lives. A project of 'narrative becoming' is installed via faux phantoms (constructed by the site managers) of stereotyped racialised prisoners whose subject-positions the white tourists are invited to step into. Following Ahmed, becoming is a process of movement between one entity and another, which is motivated by a phantasy, or unconscious desire, of proximity (2000). Due to the fact that the identity (of the prisoner) being taken on is itself a fantasy - constructed by the very subject who is attempting to try it on - this becoming will never lead to *being*. As Ahmed puts it, what fascinates "is always already *an image of the otherness of the other*" (ibid., 53, original



emphasis). It is their very *difference* that constitutes their appeal, and once the gap is closed in the mind of the white subject, this appeal ceases. As I will argue, Prison Escape Game reaffirms the already-racialised nature of the prison as an institution, and offers it up as a playground of transgression, a temporary trip into Otherness. The tourist, through a process of narrative becoming propelled by a worldly phenomenology of whiteness, overcomes the boundaries between the Self and the Other, thereby re-asserting their agency and ability to 'move'. With this 'move', fears of incarceration, criminality and Blackness are managed (starting with confrontation - entering the site, donning the uniform of inmate, and ending with disaffiliation - "escape" from prison, leaving the site). Within this narrative becoming, the white subject is therefore glorified or made hero twice - through his/her ability to border-cross, and through his/her ability to return.

At the plantation site, The Myrtles, the fears on offer are first, the generalised paranormal - that is, the abstract possibility of ghosts. The site has been proclaimed one of "America's most haunted homes" (a title it promotes readily), so is already positioning itself within the dark tourism realm, an opportunity to enter a heterotopic space usually characterised by unease or terror. This generalised paranormal 'darkness' is compounded by the spectre of slavery that the site's marketing leaves unspoken and unacknowledged. Through a project of 'narrative containment', the tortured phantoms of white supremacy's legacy are managed and repackaged in service of the phenomenology of whiteness that refuses to face its guilt. Ghosts of slavery are recast as colourful characters of stereotypical Black female promiscuity, exoticism and deviousness. A white lens and a white mode of being is accommodated via first the thrill of the

*possibility* of encountering ghosts, and the *possibility* of encountering slaves, and second through their containment, the technologies of narrativising that ensure these fears do not outbalance leisurely enjoyment.

‘Narrative becoming’ and ‘narrative containment’ are the frames through which I will examine what these dark sites are *doing* with Blackness, in service of the combined thrill and comfort of a white mode of being.

### **1.1.1 Methods**

Research on dark tourism has tended to favour either supply or demand perspectives in its methodological approach. That is, authors variously foreground the site management and marketing *or* tourist motivation as the primary way in to analysing and characterising the site in the context of dark tourism. Creating such a dichotomy forecloses the way that the meaning or ‘darkness’ of a site can be produced as these elements interact. Following Biran and Poria then, I will instead adopt an “*experiential approach*” (their emphasis, 2012, 65), which accounts for the site as a whole experience formed by visitor, place and employees.

To that end, I will be employing case studies as my primary method of analysis. Case studies are a common qualitative method that allow for an in-depth exploration of a ‘contemporary phenomenon in its real life context’ (Yin, 2009, 13), here meaning an exploration of how problematic racialisation manifests at and through dark tourist sites. The level of detail case studies enable will allow for a more holistic view of each dark tourism experience, allowing me

to draw out any relationships that emerge or patterns that are indicated between examples.

Case studies also provide the flexibility of using a variety of types and sources of data depending on what will best speak to each case (Creswell, 2013, 98), meaning I am able to attend to the “particularity and complexity” of each as they present themselves contextually (Stake, 1995, xi).

Resulting from this relative freedom of exploration, one potential drawback to this methodological choice is that, as Stake puts it, case studies are a “poor basis for generalisation” (ibid., 7). Fortunately for this project, my intention is not to generalise my argument to *all* dark tourism; indeed, any generalisations in a field so broad and diverse would be ill advised and unproductive. Rather, I hope to point out, through the two case studies here proposed, that to entirely ignore race and its intersections as a factor in the dark tourism industry is to further heighten the imbalances already woven into structures of the tourist-toured relationship.

I will be analysing a variety of written and visual discourses for my case studies that more holistically capture a sense of the experiences and meanings being produced at particular dark tourist locations. The sources of data I have access to are largely secondary. This means I must consider the ways in which representation is at play in how I am able to read these sites, as each source will have specific intentions that colour the way the site is presented (for example, marketing materials will of course use particularly positive language). I am informed by a feminist, queer and anti-colonial methodological lens, which means attendance to the sociopolitical intersections at play in the texts I examine, as well as the impetus to “view emotion as a legitimate source of knowledge” (Fonow and Cook, 2005, 2215). This means I will

not prioritise supposedly ‘detached’ or ‘impartial’ forms of knowledge, such as journalistic articles, over related personal experiences, such as reviews, blogs or video snippets that represent one person’s personal/emotional experience. No form of knowledge will be more ‘legitimate’ than another in my data collection and analysis.

### **1.1.2 Positionality**

My own interest in this topic was developed as I attempted to unpack some of the ways in which I, a white ciswoman from a colonising country, take from cultures that are marginalised by the racist systems invented and sustained by white people, including the ways that these racist systems are enfolded into capitalist imperatives of profit maximization, land theft, resource extraction and labour exploitation. In considering the acts of cultural appropriation I have undertaken in the past, I began to wonder at the difference between hijacking ‘positive’ cultural signs – those that are considered cool, funny, or sexy and are resultingly taken into white cis-hetero mainstream culture, and ‘negative’ cultural signs – those that are considered weird, frightening, ‘dark’, and remain somewhat at the margins. Whilst the pleasure that emerges from the former is blatant, and has been discussed at length both in both popular media and academic literature (hooks; 1992; Zubaran & de Vargas, 2015; Stadnick, 2012i; Oh, 2017; Schönfeldt-Aultman, 2013; Laidlaw, 2010; Rodriguez, 2006), the latter has been comparatively unattended to. This interest in how some Othered subjects are “invited into life”, made visible, held up as exceptional in their association with popularly desirable cultural signs, while some are “marked for death”, both metaphorically and literally left behind (Haritaworn et

al., 2014, 2) despite being equally as valuable as subjects (/objects) of white intrigue, led me to the world of dark tourism: where displeasure and desire meet for the consumer.

As a white settler student producing this work on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples, including the territories of the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Stó:lō and Səlílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tseil-Waututh) Nations, I am a visitor to the place known as Vancouver. I must be attendant to the ways in which this positionality implicates me in ongoing systems of colonialism, land theft and Indigenous cultural erasure. I must also be careful to tread carefully when, as is an inevitable part of qualitative research, making assertions or assumptions that are in no small part a result of the particular lens through which I view the world. I state this to implicate myself in this research, to position my voice *as a voice*, with biases and subjectivities, rather than attempting to make any claim to objectivity or the production of ‘truths’ (McCorkel and Myers, 2003, 200). This is of particular importance given that my area of research deals with processes of racialisation with diverse meanings that are constantly in flux - processes which I, as a white subject of this world, am directly involved in and actively benefit from. Locating myself will therefore be an ongoing process throughout this work rather than a simple acknowledgement, a process of ensuring that my work does not attempt to conflate “the other woman over there and the one who speaks for her here” (Kahn, 2005, 2023). Whilst examining the lines of power between the ‘tourist’ and the ‘toured’, I must also consider the lines of power between the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched’. Keeping this in mind will also ground my critique of the dark tourism industry, ensuring it does not cross too heavily into unproductive judgement upon

individual tourists, and remains focussed more on the structural, historical and institutional production of dark tourism as a racialized and classed field of practice.

### **1.1.3 Structure of the thesis**

The remainder of this chapter, “Foundations”, will locate this work in the broader nexus of dark tourism research, providing an overview of its main debates, and highlighting the gaps where the racial dimensions of touring sites of suffering are left unconsidered. It will also provide a more detailed account of how I define the concept of the ‘phantom’, and so too the process of ‘phantoming’ that I argue is undertaken by dark tourism stakeholders.

Chapter 2 is the first of my case studies, where I examine how a racialised site of suffering, one usually characterised by fear and social condemnation, has been transformed into a playground of ‘narrative becoming’ marketed towards a white target audience. Through analysis of the branding and marketing of Prison Escape game in The Netherlands, I illustrate how desires to border-cross into racialised space, and ‘try on’ a racialised experience of incarceration, are aided by a phantoming of the site that reinforces criminal stereotypes, and covers-over the emplaced histories and emplaced memories in the prison.

The second of my case studies, analysed in Chapter 3, shows how ‘narrative containment’ is employed at The Myrtles plantation to stifle the brutality of the violent histories of slavery that the site bears. In order to appeal to tourists looking for a darker thrill, such histories are

gestured to, but filtered through a cast of ghosts that carefully manage the story so as not to elicit guilt from ticket-buying white tourists. I show how sensations of shock and awe are facilitated by the site, and erotic fantasies stirred up, all under a cloak of Good Old Fashioned Christian Southern Hospitality that claims innocence and the preservation of history.

Throughout what follows I aim to demonstrate how claims to authenticity (and its association with 'truth') promoted by the sites I study, through marketing narratives of heritage preservation and an emphasis on the *realness* of the location, mislead tourists about the histories they consume. I argue that the phantoming of sites is a key method used to draw tourists in, meet expectations of dark tourism, and, crucially, rewrite narratives in a way that appears natural - as though representative of the site's own emplaced memory. The damaging sociopolitical meanings produced at the site are the direct effect of prioritising profit and the maintenance of a phenomenology of whiteness above radical confrontations with the structures of colonialism, neoliberalism and racism embedded in these sites as institutions. I do not attempt to apply my analysis of these particular sites to dark tourism writ large, instead I hope to offer new modes of thinking dark sites for future academic work: modes that attend to the racial dimensions of the tourist-toured relationships, and what worldly phenomenologies of whiteness bring to bear on racialised space.

## 1.2 Literature Review: Dark Tourism

In 1996 the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* released an issue featuring articles on the closely-related topics of “dark tourism” (by John Lennon and Malcolm Foley), and “thanatourism” (by A.V. Seaton). This was the introduction of the phrase dark tourism to the academic lexicon, and the catalyst for what has since become a sizeable sub-discipline of tourism studies – capturing the interest of scores of researchers from a variety of subject areas, and leading to the creation of the Dark Tourism Institute at the University of Central Lancaster. The ever-growing appetite for research on the nexus of death and tourism has led to a proliferation of definitions, scales, disciplines and lenses through which dark tourism is viewed and discussed as writers attempt to come to grips with the fundamental questions of *what counts* as dark tourism and *why* are tourists drawn to such places?

This rapid growth has meant an overextension of meaning and the expansion of the scope of the concept. Dark tourism has been used to refer to sites as diverse as genocide memorials, former battlefields, ruins in the wake of natural disaster, famous assassination spots, London Dungeons, prison museums, former plantations, pagan ritual sites – to name but a few examples. The range of research questions asked about these sites as ‘dark’ are just as broad. Indeed, perhaps the only thing that can be agreed upon by scholars in the field is that despite its common usage, the concept of dark tourism remains “theoretically fragile” (Stone and Sharpley, 2008, 575) and “poorly conceptualized” (Jamal and Lelo, 2011, 31). Contrary to those who would, in response to this fuzziness, call for yet further attempts to neatly define and boundary the phrase once and for all (Dale and Robinson, 2011), or suggest that it has become



too protean to be useful (Ashworth, 2015, 323), I contend that it is this very ambiguity and slipperiness that makes dark tourism a productive site of study. By defying straightforward categorisation, dark tourism can be used as a theoretical tool with which to explore a broad range of topics related to “dissonant heritage” (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1995)<sup>2</sup>, and encourage cross-disciplinary engagement with the fields of leisure and tourism. To demonstrate this scope, and provide context for my own working definition, I will now briefly summarise what I see as the central debates that characterise dark tourism scholarship to date.

### **1.2.1 Dark Tourism, thanatourism and other names**

In serving as a catch-all phrase for a broad range of sites and experience, dark tourism has been re-named and subcategorised many times over. The most common alternative is “thanatourism” – coined by A.V. Seaton in the same 1996 journal issue where “dark tourism” first made its appearance, with the specific meaning of tourism to sites of death. Dunkley et al describe thanatourism as the “technical” version of dark tourism (2007, 56), though if we take the definitions proposed by each term’s originator there are some marked differences. Where Seaton traces the origins of the thanatouristic tradition back to the Middle Ages (1996, 235), Lennon and Foley’s dark tourism is fundamentally an “intimation of post-modernity”, a designation only applicable to sites related to events in living memory (2000, 11). Further, while thanatourism describes visitation to solely and purely places of death, dark tourism’s original characterisation included not only representations of death, but also “disasters and atrocities”

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<sup>2</sup> The idea of dissonant heritage is used to refer to historical sites that preserve or recall events that are discordant with today’s values and experiences.

(Lennon and Foley, "Editorial", 1996, 195). Other names that have emerged to specify particular branches of dark tourism include: "black spots" – describing primarily death sites as "mass-produced spectacle" (Rojek, 1993, 136); "grief tourism" (Bowman and Pezzullo, 2009); "atrocities tourism" (Ashworth and Hartmann, 2005); "morbid tourism" (Blom, 2000); and "phoenix tourism" – describing post-conflict tourism "in the context of social renewal of the destination and its people" (Causevic and Lynch, 2011, 780). For the purposes of this thesis, I use dark tourism as a broad and comprehensive phrase to cover both thanatouristic engagements and all other sub-types of macabre tourism listed above. The next section discusses the parameters that distinguish 'dark' tourism from regular tourism, and how I define it in my own understanding.

### **1.2.2 Parameters – what constitutes 'dark'?**

Doubtless one of the most well-worn topics in dark tourism scholarship, attempts to define and bound the phrase primarily focus on the meaning of 'darkness'. Indeed, part of the reason scholars have reached for alternative titles mentioned above is due to the negative connotations of 'dark' or 'darkness' mainly in Western cultures (Biran and Poria, 2012, 60), meaning it is rare for both site visitors and site managers to self-describe as 'dark tourists' or a 'dark tourist attraction'. If those persons who make up the so-called dark tourism industry do not themselves identify with the concept, how can we presume to clearly define it? Jamal and Lelo propose that the notion of darkness is a socially constructed one rather than an objective fact, contending "there is no 'essence' of darkness that imbues [a] site" (2011, 40), and thus is

being produced in a variety of different ways by different person-site interactions on any given day. This provides a little more space to account for a plethora of ways to 'do' dark tourism, without necessarily intending to. Lennon and Foley, founders of the phrase, go so far as to claim that accidental or serendipitous dark tourism is the very basis of the phenomenon (2000, 23). Although I agree that ignoring unwitting versions of dark tourism would severely limit the scope of its relevance, for me there is specificity and significance to *purposeful* forms of engagement with dark tourism. The knowing commodification and knowing visitation of places representative of trauma and disaster posits many worthwhile questions about the nature of our psychological and sociological investment in the macabre, particularly through the lens of leisure and pleasure.

Another attempt to resolve the gap between academic theorising about the meaning of dark tourism and the common unwillingness by those participating to identify with it is Biran and Poria's proposition that 'darkness' here centres on activities "perverse and socially condemned" (2012, 67). Dark tourism, they argue, is that which is taken part in with full knowledge that "if such activities were revealed to those in his/her home environment" there would be "negative social consequences" (ibid., 70). This model uses the uncomfortability of tourists to admit to their dark desires as a definition in itself. The issue with this, of course, is that distaste or disapproval are not ubiquitous reactions to any one site or experience, even within the same society, or even the same family or friendship group. So it does not truly bring us any closer to placing parameters around 'darkness', other than to say: 'it's dark if people think it is'.

As is often the case in the academic lifespan of a phrase with ambiguous cultural meaning, many attempts to narrow and define dark tourism have led to its further broadening. Robb suggests that it refers to destinations in which violence, as well as death, is the main attraction (2009, 51); Jamal and Lelo also argue for the inclusion of segregation, crime and war (2011, 40); Stone opts for the more general description of “death, suffering and the seemingly macabre” (2012, 1568), with the crucial caveat that the death on show is “spectacular death”, i.e. in unusual or violent circumstances (2018, 189); Tony Seaton argues that rather than an encounter with death itself, dark tourism provides encounters with “*remembrance* of death and the dead, induced by *symbolic representations*” (2018, 13, his emphasis).

Although my initial instinct is to resist adding my own singular definition to the ever-growing pile, due primarily to my wish to resist practicing the Enlightenment method of forcing boundaries around concepts in order to keep them neat and ordered, it is of course necessary to establish parameters to support my own investigation into dark sites. Furthermore, I remain convinced that each theorist’s retooling and reestablishing of the phrase serves to make it an ever-more relevant and rich site of study, and this in itself works to dispel any false notion of objectivity applied by those who claim to have ‘defined’ it.

For me, ‘suffering’ is a word that captures the events represented at a great many (if not all) dark tourism locations. Whether a site symbolises environmental or manmade disaster, war, atrocity, slavery, crime, poverty, violence or death, human and other-than-human suffering has taken place. This is the keyword I will use as a metric to guide my labelling of particular tourist

attractions or artefacts as 'dark'. While death is also an important component, I include symbolic or social 'deaths' in my dark tourism definition, following Haritaworn et al's conceptualisation of abjected populations "marked for death", i.e. left behind or ignored by neoliberal mainstream structures of governance and the "violence of the market" (2014, 2).

For this research, I am only interested in sites that have some form of officiation (e.g. a tour or experience that runs to the site – whether government or private interest, or a product that has been produced for sale in relation to the site – which, for me, is also a form of tourism). Whilst I fully acknowledge and include unofficial tourism sites, experiences or products in my definition (e.g. an individual visiting the grave of a loved one), it is the structures that have been built to facilitate the experience that interests me, in terms of their relation to issues of racialisation, whiteness neoliberal capitalisation.

### **1.2.3 Authenticity**

Many writers over the years have identified authenticity as a key motivation in the tourism industry, one which has long informed marketing techniques and compelled visitation (see Wang, 1999 for overview of this history). In this section I would like to address two major routes to authenticity that scholars have shown are particularly relevant to dark tourism: authenticity as accessed via the institution of the museum, and authenticity as accessed via the foreign.

The museum, like the library, holds a certain privileged cultural status as an objective body. Despite the private interests that may run it, and the potential paywall that limits access, it presents itself in the social imaginary as a public service of archival safeguarding. Resultingly, museums do not simply function as a preserver of valuable objects, but rather they “make objects valuable by gathering them” (Casey, 2005, 2). The inferred authentic aura of the museum is tacitly transferred onto the artefacts and information it collects (Urry, qtd in Carrabine, 2017, 20). As a subsection of museum culture, dark tourism confers a similar sense of ‘truth-telling’. Indeed, the seriousness of the events memorialised at dark sites, Lennon and Foley note, tends to result in ‘sacred cow status’ (1996, “JFK”, 200), becoming untouchable to criticism or disbelief, deepening the public’s subconscious trust. As the ‘Other’ of the tourism industry (Laws, 2013, 103), it could be argued that telling dark histories provides the sense of unveiling the untold, pulling back the curtain of the manicured and sanitised record to reveal the gritty, messy, grim and ‘real’ underbelly. The desire to access this exclusive ‘truth’ can be so compelling that tourists are willing to suspend disbelief or overlook evidence that would mar its veracity. Catherine Roberts recounts a discussion with a student who had recently returned from visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau, and expressed disappointment in having been told by a guide that the gallows at the site was reconstructed, not the original. Rather than being disappointed in the reconstruction itself, she wished that the guide had not told her: she would rather it was concealed, so as to “enable stronger feelings of sadness and shock, despite the lack of veracity that in part allowed them” (2018, 620). This demonstrates the way in which the status of the museum as institution, in addition to tourists’ appetite for the *effect* of authenticity, can replace or surpass the need for genuine legitimacy.

This performative authenticity, what MacCannell terms “staged authenticity” (1973, 589) also applies all too well to the second route to ‘the real’ in dark tourism: Otherness. The search for the ‘real’ has long been a tried and true marketing technique for international travel. Bruner describes tourists’ desire for self-transformation through encounters with ‘authentic’ cultures across the globe, whose relative connection to the natural world is valorised in contrast to the routines and commercialised individualism of the Western world (2011). Heitmann concurs, writing that “authenticity is thought to be found in other times or other places [...] the more alienated from modern society and a shallow existence, the greater the desire that drives the search for authenticity” (2011, 47). Like Roberts’ student who would have been more satisfied by sustaining the *aura* of authenticity bestowed on the museum as a space than knowing the less-satisfying truth, the authenticity that tourists travel to access in foreign places has been pre-imagined in the tourist’s head by media scripts reinforcing particular symbolic aspects of that place, and in many cases pre-choreographed by tourist attractions seeking to satisfy customers through a maintenance of those scripts. Boorstin claims that tourists therefore do not experience reality, but thrive on “pseudo-events” and stereotypes: “the tourist in Japan looks less for what is Japanese than for what is Japanesey” (qtd in Heitmann, 2011, 46). For dark tourism sites, there is a representational risk that specific atrocity or disaster events, if not handled with proper care and consideration, and if not examined with a mind to broadening the scope and perspective of visitors, will come to be tied into these repeated signs and symbols that story and stereotype a particular culture at large.

Thus far I have been painting with the broadest of strokes in my discussion of authenticity in relation to the dark tourism industry as a whole, but it is important to note that of course different claims to and versions of authenticity occur at each individual site. One important distinction that has been addressed at length in the growing body of dark tourism literature is locational authenticity: *in situ* or “primary” sites vs. created or “secondary” sites (Lennon and Foley, 2000; Wight, 2006; Wight and Lennon, 2007). Miles describes this delineation as dark sites *of* death, disaster and depravity, and sites *associated with* death, disaster and depravity (qtd in Dale and Robinson, 2011, 206). On Stone’s dark tourism spectrum, sites *of* death are placed at the darker end of the scale (2006, 151), which exposes again the importance of the *aura* of place in effecting authenticity – standing where victims stood, touching crumbled walls or hearing the wind blowing through abandoned buildings, for example. These emplaced sensorial engagements make a visitor feel present and connected, affects that produce what Wang (1999) calls “existential authenticity” – “providing the tourist with an authentic sense of Being”, or what Selwyn (1996) terms “‘hot’ authenticity” – “an emotional ‘alienation-smashing’ experience”, as opposed to “‘cold’ authenticity” – cognitive knowledge about objects or experiences (qtd in Cohen, 2018, 195). Examining these kinds of authenticity that generate more affect for the tourist are, I believe, a key way in to examining the performative dimensions of a site as produced by the site/visitor interaction, and taking the experiential approach to dark tourism research suggested by Biran and Poria. They are also an essential facet of how I will conceptualise the ‘phantom’ at dark tourism sites (see section 1.3). The *aura of authenticity* that has been discussed in this section will be one of the key lenses through which I investigate the forms of racialisation produced in my case study experiences – how an Othering of sites and



their representational subjects operates in part via calculated affect and choreographies of space, reinforcing an idea of authenticity that has been prewritten for the tourist, and authorised by the assumed trustworthiness of the museum-style attraction.

This also takes us back to the argument that dark tourism is an intimation of a postmodern world. While I have shown that authenticity is important to understanding the appeal of tourism at large, and dark tourism in particular, the question remains what *version* of authenticity is desired. Are tourists in fact happier with an authenticity that satisfies by reinforcing their presupposed ideas (offering 'kodak moments' of key symbols of place or event to share with family and friends), rather than an authenticity that refuses to reassure? Jamal and Lelo argue that the tools employed by the tourism industry to interpret, frame and symbolise the past generally "serve up a socially constructed 'Distory' - Disney history" (2011, 33), and Dale and Robinson add that even dark tourism attractions (symbolically the hidden, sequestered, unsanitised histories) replicate aspects of "McDonaldization (Ritzer, 1998) in their approach to presenting death" (2011, 207). Whilst MacCannell attacks such methods of presentation for "obscur[ing] the real real" (qtd in Willis, 2014, 113), many in the field have offered alternative perspectives. Heitmann exposes how limiting the idea of the "real real" is when applied to the tourism industry; no matter how an attraction may try to remain objective and uncommercialised, tourists will "always be outsiders and only able to get a superficial view", making true authenticity completely unattainable (2011, 56). She points to Cohen's (1998) concept of "emergent authenticity" – that which is inauthentic can become authentic over time (for example, Disneyland, often considered as inauthenticity incarnate, can be

perceived as an 'authentic' American cultural experience); everything is authentic in its own interpretation (ibid). Similarly, Willis suggests that the "disjunctive meeting of fiction and history" can create "its own kind of truth, one whose reality is just as, if not more honest as the unembellished account" (2014, 113). Exposing the way in which all histories are biased, this view makes space for interpretation as a necessary and unavoidable part of representation. What interests me is reading between the lines of the representations crafted and realities produced at various sites, to reveal what meanings emerge in the tourist-toured / visitor-site relationship at places of racialised suffering. I am less interested in what these sites and their versions of authenticity mean for our relationship to (post/)modernity, and more interested in what they mean for our relationship to race and power, and the extent of a phenomenology of whiteness in reframing narratives.

#### **1.2.4 Visitor motivations**

As previously mentioned, recent dark tourism scholarship has spent much energy puzzling over the question of why people are drawn to dark sites. Given the nebulous and often inexplicable nature of human emotion and desire, pinning down a final list of concrete reasons is a task that can never be fully completed. The touristic experience is unequivocally subjective in nature, meaning "some visitors at some sites some of the time may be engaging in so-called 'dark tourism' while others are not" (Morten et al, 2018, 227-8), further blurring the lines around macabre motivations. Podoshen regrets that the "positivist-dominated world of tourism studies" is ill equipped to account for this range of idiosyncrasies (2018, 174), and whilst most scholars concur about the necessity of viewing travel impulses as fluid, the tide of papers and

books trying to pinpoint them is plentiful. Stone contends that there are in fact no such thing as “dark tourists” (2006, 146), referencing again the impossibility of lumping dark motivations together to form one cohesive intentionality, but despite this still argues that it is “crucial” to “extract and interrogate the motives” that drive people to sites. Much like the mission to define dark tourism, the studying of visitor motivations provides ways in to a number of interesting questions about the role of preserving dark heritage in society. Getting comfortable with the fact of there being no one, or set of, clear answer(s), allows for productive experimentation and a broader range of possibilities for research.

### *Remembrance*

Perhaps the most obvious, and culturally acceptable, reason to tour a site that represents mass death is to engage in remembrance. Biran and Buda note that visiting such tourist attractions as Auschwitz and Gallipoli or places of genocide in Rwanda or Cambodia is “encouraged, socially rewarded, and even considered obligatory” in some cases (2018, 525). There is a sense of duty that comes with holidaying to a place that has experienced mass tragic and impactful events, to respect that history by making efforts (whether token or genuine) to participate in their memorialisation. Dunkley’s interviews with four individuals who had recently visited sites of “warfare, genocide, grief and horror” reveal this impulse was, for them, a key motivator (2016, 111). One participant described it as “paying tribute to those who died [...] letting those people live” from the perspective that “if it was one of your loved ones that was killed, you want them remembered” (2016, 113-4). There is a note of reluctance that could be read into these accounts, less a personal desire than a want to do ‘the right thing’, or

perhaps just ‘the done thing’. Dann and Potter (2001) argue that historic events are endowed with a moral simplicity in contemporary thought, a good/evil dichotomy which is further reinforced by representational methods of dark sites that often rely on a victim/perpetrator storyline (qtd in Roberts, 2018, 612). Any pleasure that is being derived is, in this case, the satisfaction of being a responsible tourist, having something of a moral high ground, being on the right side of history. In the kindest of lights it can be seen as genuine interest in and willingness to pay respects to the losses of a local culture, and in the harshest can be seen as travel box-ticking – something to be gotten out of the way so that the rest of the holiday can be enjoyed guilt-free. It is entirely possible for these seemingly opposing ways of engagement to coexist in the same visiting party, or even the same individual – starting as obligatory and being moved to genuine emotion and understanding by the experience of touring. Thus is the difficulty of asking people to specify their motivations or experiences at a site.

I have thus far been referring to visitors as those who are in some way ‘foreign’ to the heritage on display – whether from another country, culture, religion, etc. than the representational subjects of the site. But out of all the motivations discussed in the literature that I will recount, remembrance and memorialisation is the one that could best apply too to local visitors who have a personal connection to the event. This can create a clash of intentions: for survivors of the event or their relatives, the site is a place they come to remember, whereas for tourist outsiders it is a place to learn or engage with these histories for the first time (though something has of course led them there in the first place - could it be the intrigue of ‘darkness’ itself?) (Hoenhaus, 2013, 152). How can site managers accommodate these two modes of

engagement at once? If a site is set up for the purpose of generating revenue, it is bound to lean towards supporting the tourist experience, and for this reason, memory and memorialisation of locals are often performed at alternative sites “quietly [and] traditionally” (Carrabine, 2017, 31).

For the white Western tourist I will be imagining as visitor in order to examine the racial dimensions of the tourist experience, while they might be comfortable seeking out “distant and foreign tragedy”, confronting histories of violence and death ‘that are closer to home’ is often much more difficult (Willis, 2014, 3), particularly that where the perpetrator(s) are more familiar than the victim(s). An examination of how sites work to contain perpetrator-tourist parallels where their race aligns them with histories of violent and genocidal white supremacy will be key to my case study analysis.

### *Education*

Similar to the motivation of remembrance in its social acceptability, the idea of touring to educate oneself promotes learning from past mistakes as the ostensible reason for interest in the macabre. Moscardo suggests that the inclusion of an educational dimension to dark sites may help distinguish them from “recreational” and therefore “voyeuristic” ones, due to the opportunity for tourists to be more mindful and come away changed (qtd in Cohen, 2011, 196). However, as Dunkley points out, whether this attempt to impart lasting values and moral lessons is successful is seldom critiqued or investigated (2016, 111). The promise of

self-transformation has long appealed to tourists, and as already discussed, the concept of authenticity – facilitated by accessing ‘real’ dark sites and hearing ‘real’ people’s accounts of events – is often valorised as a golden ticket to get there. Taking a particularly germane example, Gada Mahrouse conducted a study investigating tourist motivations and experiences participating in travel packages referred to as “Reality Tours” provided by the company Global Exchange (2011). Self-described as “socially conscious tourism”, Reality Tours take US citizens on fully-inclusive package trips to impoverished communities in countries such as Venezuela, Afghanistan, Syria, Cuba, Libya and Palestine, in order to be able to come home and “explain to their friends and neighbours that these Cubans [for example] are not our enemies” (ibid., 374). Built upon the spirit of learning and understanding in order to bring about a more peaceful world, these tours aim to “show, rather than conceal, the harsh realities of poverty and oppression that many of the local and Indigenous communities in the global South face”, an experience which the program’s director describes as “transformative” for the individual tourist (ibid). What strikes me in this description is the extent to which the company’s focus remains on the experience of the tourist and *their* transformation – into a more ‘ethical’, ‘knowledgeable’, ‘globally conscious’ individual – rather than any resulting transformation in circumstance for the local community that could be brought about by this cultural learning and understanding. It is telling that even in the idealised marketing description for the result of the tours, the local population is a footnote, a means of facilitation to the Western (in this case specifically US) visitor’s journey to self-improvement. This echoes how Sara Ahmed sees the “phantasy of becoming” as putting Others “at the service of a white [...] story of self discovery” (2007, 60). From in-depth interviews with participants, Mahrouse points to the frequency with which the

discourse that 'we' Westerners have so much to learn from 'them' (locals), with their non-material wealth and 'simple life', proves to be a core motivation for this kind of travel. This is a dangerous road into truly believing, despite having paid substantial amounts for the experience, that one has "transcended the realities of commodification, consumption and commercialisation" usually associated with tourism (Harrison, 2003, 23). This, in turn, provides a feeling of moral superiority as compared to the 'traditional' tourist, which is not only damaging in its self-congratulatory narcissism, but also stunts the possibility for any actual reflection or engagement after the experience is over. If one has already attained the feeling of successful personhood just by choosing to travel this way, where is the need to actually act on what one has seen? Sara Ahmed explains how the very proclamation of one examining one's own privilege (in this case, 'I am travelling to a third world country rather than a poolside resort in order to be a more conscious citizen') can have the effect of reaffirming power imbalances: "the declarative mode involves a fantasy of transcendence", she writes, which valorises and further empowers the self that expresses them (qtd in Mahrouse, 2011, 382). Indeed, Mahrouse concludes that so-called "socially responsible" tourism engaged in by white tourists is often driven more by "a desire for moral comfort and [to] reinforce positions of innocence" than it is to take any meaningful action to address the extreme power imbalances the tourist supposedly confronts. In Dunkley's study investigating whether visiting dark tourism sites enables critical reflection on everyday life, the majority of participants expressed difficulty knowing what to do with the knowledge they had gained (2016, 116). It is easy to see how even those people with the most noble of intentions for learning and changing end up stopping short of taking action when they have already attained a feeling of accomplishment or pride from

having visited in the first place, and their short-lived visit does not provide the means for ongoing engagement. Of course, even the concept of individual tourists experiencing a change in perspective, or being propelled into action after witnessing Others' suffering, is premised on the idea of the Western liberal subject. Changing one person's perception of a particular racialised group does little to deal with longstanding and embedded constructions that exist within the structures of society at large.

Roberts proposes two site management-side failings that could be seen as contributing to this lack of material change brought about by the learning missions of dark tourists. First, I refer again to the moral simplicity presented at sites that allows visitors to place themselves firmly on the 'good' side, and is unlikely to address the complexities of how tourists themselves may be implicated in the disaster/atrocity/poor quality of life experienced by the site's representational subjects, or that there may be similar events or experiences that are occurring closer to home (Roberts, 2018, 627). Second, very few sites provide adequate reflective space to process, evaluate or discuss the learning that has just taken place – visitors finish the tour and are immediately spat back out into the 'ordinary' world, back onto the tour bus, back to the hotel, back to their regular lives free from any ongoing obligation to consider what they have seen (ibid, 626). Willis argues, however, that aside from any *information* that one may sit and intellectually reflect upon, the more pertinent learning experience is "the affect of 'being there'" (2014, 204), which does not require specific reflective space to generate. She describes this affect as "a kind of non-intellectual knowing that settles into your bones" as a result of the overwhelming, shocking and sickening feeling of seeing visceral traces of violence and suffering



(ibid.) This goes some way towards characterising what I conceptualise as the ‘phantom’ of place, discussed in more detail in section 1.3. It is also descriptive of how empathic participation is supposed to occur in dark tourism, to which I now turn.

### *Empathic being-with*

Tang argues that dark tourism occurs in the spirit of compassion for fellow human beings, and of camaraderie in suffering (2018, 430). Dale and Robinson concur, writing that exposure to sites of tragedy results in a heightened understanding of the personal pain and suffering experienced by those who lived it (qtd in McKenzie, 2018, 670). In wider society, from board rooms to group therapy sessions, empathy is framed as a tool with which to resolve differences and prevent conflict. In the same spirit as the desire to memorialise and learn, then, the desire to empathise with victims of dark events, leading to the visitation of the dark sites that represent them, appears to be motivated by the intention to ‘build bridges’ of understanding, respect and sensitivity to the experiences of others, and potentially even to prevent future suffering. We have already seen that this desire in the case of education is not necessarily what is ultimately achieved. Similarly, discussions on the problem of empathy as a motivation are abound in dark tourism literature. Kerr raises the point that the more one is exposed to horrible events, one may become desensitised to the affect of “being there” proposed by Willis, or require an “ever-increasing level of horror, gore, or realism” in order to experience the earlier levels of empathy (ibid.). Moreover, these bodily intuitive affects that occur – sadness, horror, shock – cannot be experienced in the first place, Roberts contends,

unless we are already familiar with such feelings in the extreme: “we can only feel for what we know” (2018, 608). This sentiment is of course particularly relevant to the kind of tourist encounter this thesis is concerned with: that of the white Western tourist with a space of racialised Otherness; reaching to imagine what, for them, is unimaginable.

Throwing doubt upon even the fundamental concept of empathy as a motivation for understanding-inspired change, Willis quotes Levinas’ description of sorrow for others as a “useless pain” (2014, 211). Contemplating the experience of gazing upon the dead bodies on display at Murambi Genocide Memorial in Rwanda, Willis argues that the more profound and ethical evocation that emerges, rather than sorrow, is a sense of failed responsibility (ibid.). This implicates the tourist as witness, and is therefore more likely to have a lasting impact and potentially inspire action. Through all of this, though, Willis cautions that there is a fine balance to strike between taking *on* or taking *over* the experience (ibid., 209, my emphasis). Chernobyl survivors who were interviewed in Hannam and Yankovska’s 2018 study were keen to distinguish their experience of walking around the site from that of visitors, and emphasise that even those with the best of intentions will “never understand the pain and heartache of residents of the Zone”, or even be able to “comprehend [their] experience” (327). Any suffering one may feel when touring such sites, therefore, inevitably tips over from being that of the victims to being that of our own; it is “the suffering of our seeing” (Willis, 2014, 213). Critical race scholar Saidiya Hartman has deepened this argument in terms of the gaze of the white subject upon the suffering Black subject. With specific reference to trans-Atlantic slavery, she argues that white people’s attempts to envision and empathise with that experience here result

in replacing 'their' body with 'ours'. In imagining so vividly 'what if this happened to me', we *feel for* and *empathise with* ourselves, and the Black body is silenced, thrown out, erased (Hartman, 1997, 18). In support of Hartman, Razack analyses the 'good feeling' generated for white Canadian audiences watching documentaries about the Rwandan genocide, showing that people "left the cinema warmed by [their] own capacity to care" (2007, 382). Making the decision to learn about, or attempt to empathise with, racialised Others - in our *leisure time*, no less - allows us to applaud ourselves for our humanity. It will be of interest to my case study analysis to see how sites might encourage the self-congratulation of tourists, in order to produce the warming feeling of having done *good* in their gaze upon suffering.

### *Confronting mortality*

Using the death of others as a way to consider one's own is, I believe, the exact kind of ontological sleight of hand that Willis references in the above quote about tourists "taking over the experience" or quasi-adopting the suffering that is represented at sites. Nevertheless, this idea of facing one's mortality as a motivation is one of the more prolific theories about the popularity of dark tourism in the scholarship. One of the main proponents of this perspective is Philip Stone, who has written about it at length across multiple publications. Stone's primary argument is that death has been sequestered in Western secular societies, removed from the "public community gaze" to the "private medical gaze" (2012, 1570), resulting in an increased sense of mystique and, ultimately, dread around dying, which dark tourist encounters can help to address or confront. Sharing this viewpoint, Cohen posits that thanotouristic engagements offer the opportunity to contemplate one's own death without striving to 'overcome it' via an

act of faith or belief (2018, 158). Going one step further, Dale and Robinson suggest that such an encounter “comes a close second to experiencing the afterlife itself” (2011, 207).

Representing a counter position to the idea that the tourist draws direct parallels between the death of victims represented at dark sites and their own, however, Stone highlights the discrepancy between ‘normal’ or every day kinds of death and the “Significant Other Death” that is memorialised en masse (2012, 1565). He contends that the spectacular nature of the death on display allows tourists to “view their own death as distant, unrelated” to the kind that they consume on site, and find reassurance in the hope that “their own death will be a good Romantic death and their lives will be meaningful and ontologically secure” (ibid., 1573). Both positions agree that tourism helps to address ontological anxieties about human mortality, but the disparity raises the question of whether dark tourists seek to temporarily borrow or co-opt the specific deathly experience of the representational subjects of the site, or distance themselves from it. This matter of bringing close and/or distancing will be a recurrent theme throughout my analysis, as site management and tourists employ multiple tactics of consuming the exotic pleasures of the racialised Other, whilst remaining at arm’s length.

Speaking to the latter position – that of distancing – some research has suggested that the psychological pleasure of *Schadenfreude* is a significant motivator for gazing upon the trauma and anguish at dark tourism sites. Hodgkinson and Urquart write that the allure of witnessing the “suffering, and even death, of others” is “arguably as old as history itself”, once again calling back to the roots of thanatourism that Seaton identifies in centuries past (2016, 40). Dunkely’s aforementioned interviews with recent visitors to dark sites demonstrate that they were more

likely to express a “sense of gratitude for not having had to endure the suffering” than to express “a desire to create change within the world, to help those who are suffering in similar conflicts and tragedies”, despite having reported original intentions of memorialising and learning from the experience (2016, 115). The very first line of one participant’s reflection on his visit was: “Thank god it wasn’t me” (ibid, 112). Hodgkinson and Urquart contend that so-called educational tours and exhibits are more often attempting to “capitalise on the potentially voyeuristic nature of the visitor” by showcasing the more gruesome, sensually affecting elements of the story (2016, 40), thus leading the tourist to leave with a sense of euphoria or renewed life appreciation at their comparatively charmed circumstances. This once again provides some insight into *who* these tourist attractions are attempting to attract: less likely the actual survivors or relatives of survivors of the event in question, and more likely middle-class adults with the cash to spend on leisure activities, and the desire for the cultural capital they provide. A particularly illustrative example of this is Butler et al’s research into the racial profile of visitors to ex-plantation sites, where it was discovered that only 3.5% of the 1266 surveyed visitors self-identified as Black or African-American compared to 85% who identified as white or Caucasian (qtd in Jamal and Lelo, 2011, 39). The history being written by these sites, suggest Jamal and Lelo, showcases the darker, more gruesome images of slavery that excite and appal the white tourist from their position of somatic detachment (ibid). Accessing dark tourist sites out of a desire to reaffirm the distance between the Self and the Other can also be seen in the potential motivation to visit dark sites out of longing for a break from familiarity and one’s everyday world.

Tourism writ large has always allowed for a temporary suspension of one's regular, ordered life (Biran and Poria, 2012, 67-8). One could argue that whether that pleasure is being derived by lying on a beach, exploring a new city, or visiting the site of a mass genocide, it is still the same pleasure. If anything, dark tourism offers this in the extreme: as close as one can safely get to the most abject and unusual events and circumstances, offering a "challenge to the inherent order, rationality and progress of modernity" (Lennon and Foley, qtd in Stone, 2006, 149). Tang suggests that visitors to earthquake-prone regions, or other sites threatened by potential hazards, may be motivated to "experience a sense of risk, danger, or thrill" as a tonic to the boredom of the everyday (2018, 432). But whilst this desire is rooted within the very knowledge of one's difference from those local to the place visited, does the act of visiting truly reaffirm this distance, or temporarily collapse it in the imagination of the tourist? After all, where's the fun if one does not fully immerse oneself in this temporary circumstance?

Podoshen maintains that this desire for the unusual will lead tourists to seek out ever more unique experiences, as what was once unique becomes more attainable (2018, 175). He argues that engaging in dark tourism in the age of the 'selfie' denotes a form of signalling behaviour, attempting to display the exclusivity of their leisure activities (ibid., 174). The conspicuous consumption of macabre and upsetting tourism sites transforms Others' trauma into a badge of honour or status symbol for the tourist, who promotes their involvement and engagement whilst simultaneously holding it at arm's length in the need to maintain its alterity (lest it lose its appeal).

For the young white liberal subject in the 21st century, publicly expressing racist views or behaviours is tantamount to social suicide, or 'cancellation'.<sup>3</sup> Exhibiting 'wokeness', therefore, is a new form of cultural currency, one which some may attempt to obtain by expressing desire to engage (in various ways) with non-white Others. bell hooks writes about young white men whose overt sexual desire for Blackness represents what they believe to be "a progressive change" (hooks, 1992, 369). To them, she writes, "the most potent indication of that change is the frank expression of longing, the open declaration of desire" (ibid.) In the same way, tourists may see their visitation of racialised dark tourism sites as a way of signalling that they are not racist, on the contrary, they are *attracted* to learning more about the Others the site represents. Here, erotic desires for the transgressive *foreign* can be dressed up as a commendable and 'modern' willingness to cross boundaries... boundaries that are further enforced by the white tourist's fleeting occupation of Otherness, that is relinquished as soon as the visit ends.

Though many other motivations have been proposed in the literature, the above discussions are both those that most frequently recur, and those that I feel are most relevant to a white gaze on racialised spaces and bodies.

### 1.2.5 Moral questions

I have already touched upon some of the ways debates around the morality and ethics of mixing leisure with tragedy arise in the literature. Suffice to say this is a recurrent theme, as

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<sup>3</sup> This is in the broadest of terms. Fascism is alive and well in the Western world and there are of course many white supremacist youths who boldly and proudly espouse racism. I am talking here specifically about mass culture, where online practices of public shaming and calling-out police the boundaries of acceptability.

authors variously weigh up the potential positives of promoting “peace, commemoration, reconciliation, conservation, learning, remembrance, and cultural understanding” (Bird et al., 2018), against the commercialisation of trauma that dark sites inevitably engage in. Put another way: can dark tourism be used as a means toward social justice? (Mahrouse, 2011, 375).

Discussion of this question culminates in considering whether lessons are ultimately drawn from the visitor/site interaction that could result in action to positively benefit the community related to the disaster. Lennon writes that “death and tragedy are the constants that reaffirm how little is learned from atrocity” (2018, 592), representing the sceptical side of this debate. Korstanje and Baker, on the other hand, argue that dark tourism can help a community to overcome the loss and pain in the aftermath of a disaster through telling their story (2018, 540), placing the agency for healing and positive change on the side of the representational subjects of a site, as opposed to the visitors.

For me, this question will be studied through the lens of whether racialised relations of power are more often disrupted or reinforced at dark sites. How is the site scripted, both in its attempts to generate visitors (marketing) and the experience once one site? Given the fact that many popular leisure and tourist attractions are “based on idealized roles and stereotypical situations which are calculated to give the feeling of reassurance”, so that the experience can be neatly tied off and send the visitor seamlessly back to their normal life, how can dark tourism at once claim to teach moral lessons based on *real stories* about suffering, and simultaneously reinforce the message that “everything is fundamentally all right?” (Rojek, 1993, 205). I will examine whether my case study sites find ways to support and reinforce the idea that in the



very act of visiting we become “complicit”, shedding our neutrality as we become both “spectators and witnesses” (Skinner, 2018, 145), or whether these sites, situated as they are within a neoliberal structure of profitability, are more concerned with providing tourists a fun, thrilling and ultimately un-challenging experience.

### 1.3 Defining the phantom

In order to address the ways in which tour companies, site managers, and tourists engage with or dismiss the phantom in the case studies I will present, I must first establish my own working definition.

Perhaps the most well-known and oft-referenced writing on ghostliness in the social sciences is Avery Gordon's 1997 *Ghostly Matters*. In this book, Gordon suggests the notion of haunting, whilst usually thought to refer to the disappeared, the "over and done with", can also call our attention to that which lingers (xvi). To Gordon, it is the channel through which past unresolved traumas, wrongdoings, or exploitations make themselves known in the present, urging our attention, imploring us to address them. It is the outline of something, a nagging present absence, that may have been pushed away or buried, but refuses to lay dormant.

This haunting can be of individuals, a personal relationship with one's own ghosts, or at a societal level – a social violence done in the past, the effects of which are still felt in the present. Gordon clarifies that although these ghosts may indicate the presence of an unresolved trauma, haunting is different to trauma itself in that it calls for something to be done: it is the sign that demands a response (ibid., 8). It is our reminder that the past is "anything but dead and over", and action must be taken that cannot be satisfied by simple reflectionism (ibid., 12-13).

My own understanding of the phantom is informed by the above, but where it differs slightly from Gordon's haunting is in its fundamental relationship to place. Following Riaño-Alcalá, I

contend that place holds memory (2006, 65). This is not the same as saying that place can *trigger* the memories of those who have been there before, but rather suggesting that place itself has its own memory that is stored in the soil, in the cracks between bricks, in between layers of concrete and paint that have built up over time. Memory of human interaction, emotion and experience, yes, but also other-than-human interventions: weather's affect, the growth and decay of plant matter, and the perennial comings and goings of all of Earth's animals.

The phantom, for me, is the presence of that place-memory making itself known to any who might cross its path. It can be covered over, ignored, or pushed back with ever new layers of meaning and memory, but it is always potentially *there*, always at the edge of perceptibility.

Like Gordon's haunting, the phantom too is a "different way of coming to know, against empirical knowledge and traditional ways of conceptualizing and studying the social world" (1997, 10), though it doesn't demand to be known or understood; it simply is. It is a sensory affect, some excess or surplus lingering emotion that swirls and bursts at the seams of time itself, refusing fixity. Contrary to the written archive, it cannot be articulated, only *sensed*. It may be felt in the creak of floorboards beneath feet, in soft echoes or that loud kind of silence, in the dizzying height of trees and the textures of gnarled bark, in the squelch of upturned mud, in stains, dinks and scratches on the surface of the walls and furniture, in the must, or fresh breeze, or some quality of the air itself.

Edensor contends that such spectres of space and place can be more keenly felt at sites that are in some stage of dilapidation. In “The ghosts of industrial ruins”, he bemoans the “fixed, classified and commodified memories” that heritage sites and museums produce, praising instead the “marginal”, “undercoded” and “mundane” spaces that can be found in the backsides and forgotten underbellies of the city, for their potential to connect us to the past, to be haunted (2005, 833-4). Edensor sees the affective potential of the ruin in its liminality, the state between “rejection and obliteration”, which in resisting categorisation, public or state-sponsored narrative, retains its interpretive power (ibid, 836). Lacking the polish of traditional memorial spaces, ruins reveal physical traces of the lives that have passed through at different times, providing the tourist a closer encounter with a barrier-less history. Much like my conception of the phantom above, Edensor sees this human-to-spectre interaction facilitated by the sensory: “powerful smells, profuse and intrusive textures, peculiar and delicate soundscapes” (ibid., 837). Whilst I agree that ruined buildings undeniably have a more immediate and visible relationship with the passing of time, perhaps making their ghosts more easily accessible, I also think that pedestalsing ruins as ‘pure history’ in this way comes with its own risks.

The risk of romanticising ruins has been realised in the recent and ongoing phenomenon of ‘ruin porn’ - what I describe as the aesthetic fetishization of sites of urban dilapidation. Focusing not on the ancient ruins of cultures long since passed, ruin porn instead centres on the contemporary cityscape, showcasing the failures of modernity, and revelling in the witness of industrial decline. Primarily taking the form of glossy coffee table books, Pinterest boards and

physical guided tours of ruined buildings, ruin porn takes what are, in many cases, the brick and mortar skeletons of tragic circumstances – financial ruin, job loss, eviction from homes – and transforms them into art or leisure for the privileged. To enjoy the fallout of abandonment for its aesthetic beauty, it stands to reason that one must be detached from the circumstances that brought it about, and that the sight of semi-ruined buildings must be unusual, something one is not used to seeing in ones' own surroundings. Thus the very existence of the aesthetic pursuit of ruin porn relies on class and racial difference, and the gaze of the bourgeoisie on the proletariat.

The buildings that make up ruin tours, and the pictures that circulate on ruin porn forums and feature in photography books like *Detroit Disassembled* by Andrew Moore, are mandatorily devoid of bodies. The fantasy of beauty in the abandoned, and with it the haunting sensibility, is only enjoyable if its consequences for the living are kept out of sight. Romanticising and *eroticising* the modern ruin capitalises on the economic struggles of the lower classes - including the destruction of Black geographies such as the city of Detroit, and has no interest in a mindful examination of its root causes (other than to celebrate a generalised idea of industrial collapse, as though this in itself heralds the end of capitalism and the triumph of nature in 'reclaiming' space). The absence of bodies, and the absence of any historical or sociocultural information that comes along with the stylised ruin porn images that circulate the internet, detaches them from place, time and meaning, reducing them to an abstract aesthetic: a blank canvas which the viewer can populate with the ghosts of their imaginings.

Edensor's suggestion that the ruin is the most unfiltered or perhaps even *authentic* way to access place history, therefore, gives me pause. As with heritage spaces and museums that have a narrative dictated by the owners/proprietors, there will always be subjectivities and narratives that are written by tourists themselves. One could say that if these subjectivities are truly sensed by being in place, connecting to the phantoms that make themselves known, tourists may be closer to living histories than if they were to swallow whole the letter of the archive on carefully labelled artefacts, or to follow pre-choreographed routes of movement through the space of the museum. I do think that is true. I also think, however, that it is an extremely uncommon practice, in the Western world at least, to enter a space entirely open to listening to and learning from its textures and resonances, with no pre-learned histories or expectations to colour that experience.

Moreover, an additional danger of romanticising the visible passage of time that we see in ruins is that it sidelines the phantom of places that have been restored, revamped or colonised. Lila Abu-Lughod writes powerfully about how her father, on returning to Israeli-occupied Palestine, was able to see "beyond, between and behind" the newly built settlements and highways, to "the familiar landscapes of his youth" (2011, 127). I was once fortunate enough to learn from xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Elder and teacher Ti' te-in (Shane Pointe) that despite the layers of concrete covering the ancestral lands of his people, his relationship to the land is Sovereign and will always remain: it lives in his body, in his relationships with people, and in Musqueam language. This makes the important point that phantoms - although fundamentally *of* place, are

not necessarily *bound to* place, and have a network of channels and repositories that are fluid and mobile.

The idea that if a building is not actively decaying it is not storied, or that if Indigenous place has been paved over it does not hold ancestral memory, is too much invested in the idea that the material effect of phantoms must be *seen* to be felt or connected with. Place-memories throughout time cannot be deleted or erased, though they can be covered over, and place itself reframed. Whilst deeper layers of place memory may indeed be harder to sense in commercialised place, I want to make clear my belief that the places I will examine in my case studies have phantoms despite their reframing and reconstruction as ordered tourist sites: place is palimpsestic, and deeper layers will always leave traces.

I contend that it is a key element of dark tourism that people are drawn to: temporary access to heterotopic spaces of resonant trauma - phantoms - that constitute an alternative leisure experience.

Enhancing, or even falsifying the traces of emplaced memory is therefore a route into satisfying tourist expectations for dark place, thereby selling tickets. Further than this though, it provides site managers with an opportunity to rewrite the narratives the site produces to better fit their particular aims. Whether the vestiges of phantomic resonances that the tourist feels are raw and unmediated, or constructed and reformed to welcome and affirm the white body, is

perhaps a matter of the tourist's own ability to navigate touristic space in a manner that is alert to the ways in which it can be manipulated - by both external and internal biases.



## Chapter 2: Narrative Becoming in the Prison Escape Game

### 2.1 Becoming prisoner: Selling criminality as ‘escape’ to dark tourists

In order to best illustrate what it looks like when site management put the phantom to work (or play) in their marketing for the tour or experience, the first case study I draw upon is Prison Escape: a product of Real Life Gaming, a company specialising in thriller / horror interactive games and events. Prison Escape is their largest-scale escape room, set in a real former prison, located in the city of Breda in the southern Netherlands.

In this interactive leisure experience, up to 420 tourist-players at a time are given the role of ‘inmates’ in the prison, while a large cast of actors play their fellow inmates, wardens and prison guards. Over the course of three hours, participants must work together following clues, decoding messages and bribing / misleading / sneaking past guards to reach the end of the story and ‘escape’ from the prison.

As a New York Times article about the entrepreneurial opportunity posed by escape room games states, the settings for escape room games are “usually the stuff of nightmares”, but there is a rapidly growing market of customers willing to pay to escape such situations “for fun” (McConnon, 2018). The impulse to feel in-danger, whilst knowing a safe return to normality awaits on the other side, is a lynchpin of the dark tourism experience. Whilst many escape rooms rely on the appeal of *fantasy*, allowing participants to experience a world that doesn’t

otherwise exist and is therefore largely<sup>4</sup> outside of sociopolitical implications – a spaceship, enchanted forest, zombie apocalypse – others lean on iconographic historical settings or real-world scenarios, providing the opportunity to put oneself in the shoes of real people throughout time and geographical space. One such pair of shoes that seems to generate excitement and intrigue to thrill-seeking-puzzle-solvers are those of a prison inmate.

The ‘prisoner’ is a shadowy, threatening and ultimately doomed figure. Shadowy, first in that their incarceration keeps them literally out of sight and detached from the functioning of the everyday world. They are socially, politically, culturally and *materially* isolated from the ‘outside’, denied that which is contradictorily valorised as both the most fundamental human right, and capitalism’s ultimate tenet of successful personhood: freedom. As well as being literally removed from the public eye, convicts are made further tenebrous by the removal of their individuality. Convicted criminals are not often described or thought of in three dimensions: they do not have passions or hobbies (though they can be obsessive), they were never children (unless some trauma ‘explains’ their deviance/immorality), they cannot be generous, kind, creative, playful, loving. The term ‘prisoner’ is so forceful in its connotative power that it sucks up and consumes all other identities.

The capital ‘L’ Law is, for many, synonymous with safety, moral correctness, and even reason or fact (as though devoid of human subjectivity, it is how things ‘are’). To break The Law is

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<sup>4</sup> I say largely because, of course, allegorical representations of the real world are frequently found in fantasy. The key difference is that historical fictions put direct comparisons at the very surface of perceptibility. There is intentionally no question over what or who is being gestured to, and so participants agree to a clear and open contract of representation.

therefore characterised as an act against society itself, a threat to the *structural* safety of our world as well as the *bodily* safety of its inhabitants. Prisoners are written as dangerous, first and foremost; they are removed from society for ‘the greater good’. As with anything forbidden, though, this pariah status, the risk they pose, and their sequestration behind locked doors can serve to make them all the more attractive and intriguing. The level of security around prisons - high brick walls, barbed wire fences - whilst punishing and isolating those trapped on the inside, also has the effect of denying access to those on the outside. Prisons are spaces we are forbidden from entering, that we will never see for ourselves other than in movies and on TV. Tourism opportunities to enter the prison are therefore of high cultural value, they maintain tourism’s origins as leisure activities driven fundamentally by curiosity (Tang, 2018, 430).

## **2.2 Situating Prison Escape: carcerality and race between local (Netherlands) and global**

Despite the largely ethnically white makeup of the location of this particular prison, I argue that the site of the penitentiary writ large is ideologically and representationally racialised, due to a long *global* history of carceral injustice that continues to write societal expectations of the appearance of a ‘criminal’ as dark-skinned. This is compounded by media representations, both fictional and non-fictional. There is a large body of research that exposes the overrepresentation of Black men as perpetrators of crime in news media - particularly on television (which has a more global reach than print news, and impresses a longer-lasting image due to the sense of liveness conveyed by the moving image), when compared to both real-world crime statistics, and the representation of white perpetrators (Dixon & Linz, 2000;

Campbell, 1995; Entman, 1992). Cinematic and televisual representations frequently lean on the stereotype of the Black criminal, drug user or sexual predator to simultaneously fulfil and reinforce audience expectations. Dennis Rome's book *Black Demons* argues that, just as the myth of the "Black rapist" was invented to justify lynchings, a public image of the Black male as criminal is being consistently used on our screens today 'to perpetuate dominant society's continued fear and subjugation of African Americans' (2004, 2). Although Rome is speaking out of the US context, these patterns of representation can be found wherever a system of white supremacy reigns.

For example, there are histories and practices local to The Netherlands that align with broader Western patterns of race-based oppression via the justice system, and other technologies of confinement. In "White Order: Racialization of Public Space in the Netherlands", Marina and Schor outline how the Dutch government continues to safeguard the whiteness of metropolitan space by scripting the Dutch Caribbean population, and by extension, the broader Black population, as "useless" and "anti-social" (2015, 12; 18). This, in turn, authorises their surveillance and spatial confinement. Marina and Schor argue that the colonial genealogy of containing Blackness is hidden from view in public discourse, and that its vestiges in the present day – such as racialised architecture and discriminatory justice systems - are concealed behind a "post-political" narrative of whiteness that espouses safety, pragmatism and planning (ibid, 20).

A similar treatment is given to Muslims, who often serve as the exemplary 'Other' from which white Europe distances itself. Fatima El-Tayeb details how, in the Netherlands, an image of

Dutch egalitarianism is crafted by disguising racialized and anti-Muslim biases as concern for the LGBTQ+ community. Islamophobia is presented as “the logical, in fact necessary, response to Islam’s homophobia” (2012, 87), thus entirely erasing both queer Muslims and homophobic Christians from the narrative. Additionally, in this framing, Muslims are victims “not of Dutch racism but of an oppressive, archaic culture” from which they must be saved (ibid.). Moral panics, particularly around homophobia, the rights of women, and illegality, are stirred up to justify the perpetuation of white supremacy in the face of the increasing migration and asylum-seeking in Europe of those from majority Muslim countries, which simultaneously serves to divert attention from those same issues in white society. The Dutch identity is held at arm’s length from migrants and refugees, who are written in the news media as *illegal*, regardless of their actual immigration status or reasons for fleeing (De Genova, 2013, 54). The prison I will be discussing in this case study, the setting for the escape game, once served as temporary housing for incoming refugees to The Netherlands (van Vilet, 2020). In the choice to utilize a prison for this purpose, out of all the out-of-use buildings that must exist in an industrial metropole, one cannot help but sense a deliberate conflation of Muslim migrancy and illegality, intended to consolidate such associations in the mind of the Dutch public.

The ideological project of Europe and Europeanness continues to strive toward an intrinsically white identity, while Blackness serves as an “indelible biological trace of an outside otherness”, persisting from the 19<sup>th</sup> century imperial imaginary (Linke, 2011, 125), and being Muslim is tantamount to violent prejudice, and/or illegality. This insidious Othering works to justify the economic exploitation, imperial domination and social exclusion of the Black and Muslim

population in the Netherlands and throughout Europe, leading to much higher rates of incarceration proportionally than White counterparts (Junger-Tas, 1997, 257).

It is clear, therefore, that the Koepelgevangenis prison (more widely known as the Boschpoort) in Breda which is the setting for Prison Escape, is racialised space *a priori*. Like all places, it cannot exist outside of the local and global scripts that prewrite its meanings. Sherene Razack contends that in racialised space, “violence may occur with impunity”, which refers specifically to the lawlessness with which white bodies can inflict pain and even death on Black people in the slums and poorer areas of the city (such as in the murder of Pamela George, 2014, 116), but can also be applicable to the symbolic violence enacted by white lenses of representation. What is of most interest to me in this chapter is how scripts of Blackness are taken up, operationalised, and over-written by Prison Escape’s current owner/operators. The sources I will use for my analysis are the company’s website, their social media pages, and promotional videos for the experience that I have found on YouTube. It’s important to mention that, except for the YouTube video which is narrated in English, all copy I will be quoting from has been translated from Dutch to English by the website’s own inbuilt translation software. There may, therefore, be slight variations in the exact wording of the copy from the original version, but the general meanings no doubt remain the same.

### 2.3 Navigating the prison game: Producing location and experience as markers of authenticity

Perhaps the main unique selling point of Prison Escape is its setting in a genuine out-of-use prison. The website for the experience repeats this information in several different places so that it cannot be missed. We are told it is an “enormous”, “impressive” and “stunning” location, all admirational ways of viewing the prison that one who has not been incarcerated there has the privilege of seeing. We are told several times when it was built (1886, or the 19th century), emphasising a long history that will appeal to antiquarians and those enchanted by the past, without explicitly delving into any details, leaving it instead to the tourist imagination to populate. The date of its closure (2016) is also repeatedly mentioned, perhaps to provide a sense of how recently it held real inmates (see figures 1-3). There are two ways in which this setting generates more appeal for the potential tourist: authenticity, and uniqueness, or rarity.

In dark tourist literature, differentiation between sites *of* and sites *associated with* death, disaster and depravity is a key mode through which the relative darkness of a site is assessed, the thinking being that the “auratic power” of places that have witnessed and borne terrible acts and tragic happenings lends them more gravitas as tourist locations, and facilitates a (stronger) affectual connection for the tourist (Seaton, 2009, 85). The notion of auratic power refers to a sense of the sacred or profane, and the idea that reverberations of what has happened *in* and *through* a place can be felt: what I describe as the phantom.

Pressing the locational authenticity upon potential tourists thus heightens the sense of darkness and suggests that phantoms of place can be more keenly felt. Knowing that real criminals have been held prisoner in the space - despite any details of such inmates being conspicuously absent - provides a deeper immersive potential for the tourist-players of the escape game, allowing them to sink deeper into their roles as 'inmates', and raising the stakes of the fantasy escape itself. What is striking about how the phantom of the 'prisoner' is put to work by Prison Escape's website, though, in its methods of selling us this experience, is just how much the building itself is used to gesture to the real previous prisoners, without having to confront them face on.

For example, Prison Escape's website highlights the "stunning dome" that comprises the Boschpoort's main building, housing the "enormous panoptic" that would make "prisoners feel watched all the time". We are told that over the course of the experience we will "get to know the entire building", as though this is a main selling point of participation. We see it photographed in dramatic fish-eye perspective (see Figure 1), with actor-prisoners and actor-guards posing in prison life vignettes - cowering in their cell; passing a note through a fence; peering round a corner to check for guards - as though to illustrate the space, invoking the phantoms of its previous life whilst replacing them with new ones that more closely relate to the concept of escape (see figures 2-4). We are told, via descriptions on the website, this prison is known as a "dark and nasty place", but also that it we will come to know its "magic", signalling an appeal to the way these two usually juxtapositional descriptors are conflated in the desires of dark tourists: there is excitement and a magnetism to the macabre. The gap in what



the various descriptors of the prison also reveals something about the distance between the prison as a material object, as a building that situates the body of the tourist, and the prison as an imaginary, as an abstracted space that situates the mind of the tourist. The physical building of the prison is praised and celebrated for its “stunning” architecture, but the representational space of incarceration is written as “nasty”. The tourist is the link that holds these two spaces together, through which these various ways of reading and being in space pass back and forth.



Figure 1 - Prison Escape marketing image: fisheye lens on prison (*Homepage, n.d.*).



Figure 2 - Prison Escape marketing image - inmates exchanging money (*Homepage, n.d.*)



Figure 3 - Prison Escape marketing image: inmate peers round corner (*The experience, n.d.*)



Figure 4 - Prison Escape marketing image: inmate in cell (*The experience, n.d.*)

In praising and emphasising the architecture of the building, Real Life Gaming aligns with a common theme Jacqueline Wilson has noted in prison tourism more generally – that fascination with the building itself trumps interest in the lives of its previous inhabitants (qtd in Hodgkinson and Urquhart, 2016, 44). I would suggest that there is a sense of safety for Real Life Gaming in calling attention to the aesthetic features of the building of the prison, rather than detailing the history of its inmates. Keeping bodies out of sight, like the simultaneous designation of “magical” and “nasty”, abstracts the prison space, avoiding directly addressing the social imbalances created and sustained by the penal system, and the violences of incarceration, and allowing the site to serve as a blank canvas to be painted with the tourists’ own,

easier-to-stomach, imaginary version of a stereotypical criminal prisoner such as those we see in the trailer for Prison Escape (more on that to come). The former inhabitants of the Boschpoort prison exist, through this marketing move, only as phantoms that the architecture of the building reflects: the cells call up images of prisoners pacing, sleeping, staring at the wall; the iron bars on doors and windows call to mind hands rattling them and reaching through; the panopticon structure at the centre allows us to picture inmates through the eyes of guards in continuous observation. However, even what could have been imagined in these spaces has been filled in for us with staged shots of actors, so that any phantoms that may make themselves known and felt are disregarded, covered over. The actors become a technology of framing and writing the prison, both representing and replacing the phantoms of the space. They do so first, in the marketing shots used on the website, which are fixed representations directed and edited by Real Life Gaming, and second, in a more fluid and active way throughout the process of the game. Although there will be specific pre-planned routes to guide tourists into, and dialogue they must follow, the immersive ‘choose-your-own-adventure’ nature of the game will also foster opportunities for improvisation, providing some level of agency for the actors. Emma Willis contends that theatricality in tourism can successfully evoke the “always arriving and yet never present” bodies of the past (2014, 7). Could these actors, therefore, whether knowingly or unknowingly, bring phantoms to bear on the present through their agentic performance?

Save for this possibility, the way in which the prison is framed for the escape room tourists is a practice of narrative reduction that serves to hide the place’s otherwise long, complicated

history. This history can be read elsewhere: according to van Vliet, the prison was the site of the incarceration (and successful escape!) of Nazi prisoners after World War II<sup>5</sup> and also served as a women's prison for a long period, and then afterwards was a temporary shelter for asylum seekers - as mentioned earlier (van Vliet, 2020). These histories and the people that lived them are kept just out of reach, unbecoming as they are of the narrative Prison Escape wants to sell to its customers. Phantoming is thus a selective practice: only certain ideas about the incarcerated - those that fulfill prewritten expectations of the threatening dark-skinned male prisoner - align with the capitalist goals of the prison as tourist enterprise. Not raising the phantoms of the site, or speaking to the complex and contested histories of racialized incarceration in The Netherlands, facilitates a guilt-free engagement with the site that is still thrilling in its proximity to the "dangerous criminal Other" that the site managers craft out of thin air (Huey and Broll, 2017, 519).

## **2.4 Becoming other as a temporary break from the ordered world and the white self**

Real Life Gaming positions Prison Escape on the thin line between the modern and *postmodern* tourism experience. Tourists are invited into authenticity, providing them the experience of accessing a space that is *real* and *tangible* that holds the potential to bring about a form of self-transformation or self-actualisation, and an empathic engagement with what it feels like to be treated like a criminal. But it stops short of offering *realism* itself - after all,

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<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the reason for this omission is to avoid parallels that could be drawn between Nazi war criminals and the escape game's customer-players. A completely reasonable marketing decision that nonetheless dismisses phantoms of place.

guests are not actually locked into their cells, and the whole experience is based around the fantastical concept of escaping. Instead, tourists enter into a kind of “hyperreality” organised around spectacle and sensation - the cornerstones of the postmodern experience (Heitmann, 2011, 53). They pay to play on a caricatured landscape of good and evil characters (the good being fellow inmates who help them find freedom, the evil being guards who try to thwart their escape), where the time limit adds the thrill of haste, and donning the costume of ‘prisoner’ provides them a temporary identity with which to experiment. Rojek argues that “post-tourists” are aware of the commodification of the tourist experience, and are concerned much more with participating in something unique and sensually exciting than experiencing any growth or change as a result of their leisure pursuits (1993, 117). Postmodern tourist experiences offer a break from the Enlightenment-influenced ordered and structured world, contrasting the quotidian and mundane of tourists’ everyday lives with a fantasy of difference (Urry, 1995, 132). *Darker* postmodern tourist experiences add an additional layer to this feeling of breaking through. As the “other” of the tourism industry (Laws, 2013, 103), dark tourism allows its participants to confront and consume death, suffering and the uncanny at closer quarters than is common in their day to day lives. We see this explicitly advertised in Prison Escape’s offer to “leave your real life behind” and step into “the shoes of a prisoner”, enticing prospective customers to cross a border into the unreal (*The experience*, n.d.).

Still another layer of thrilling distance from normality, another route to border-cross offered in Prison Escape, is the “spice” of racialisation that bell hooks describes as “livening up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (1992, 366). By casting men of colour as the inmates



both in the trailer for the live experience<sup>6</sup> and the marketing images for the online version of the game (see Figure 5), Prison Escape confirms and reinforces prewritten scripts of Black criminality. The white tourist is invited to cross the border into racialised space, be in proximity to and try on a stereotype of Black identity, providing them with a novel and sensually thrilling experience of becoming Other.

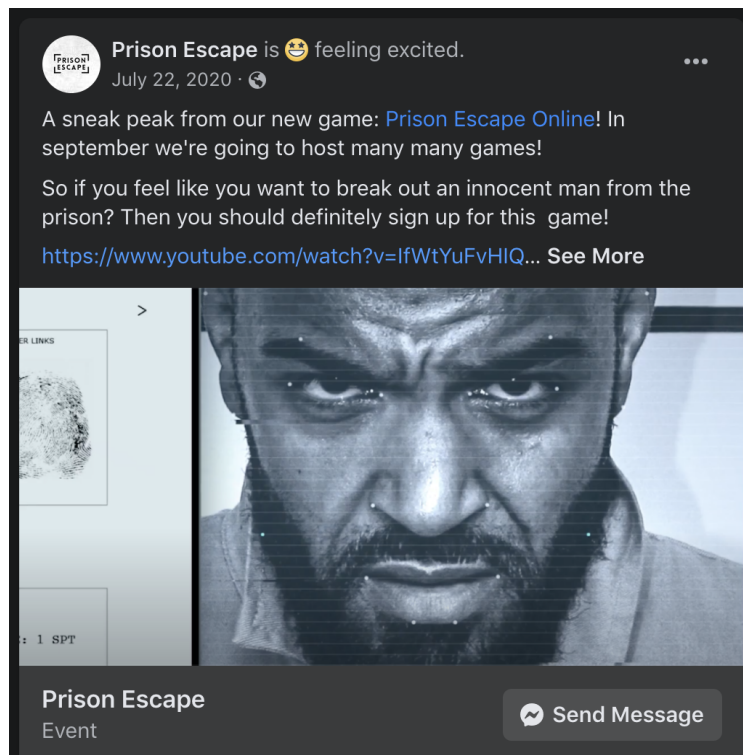


Figure 5 - Prison Escape Facebook page: marketing image of Black inmate (*Facebook, n.d.*).

In this move, Black bodies are made alternative playgrounds where members of “dominating races” assert their power over them, able to freely come and go on the symbolic frontier between the borders of universality and Otherness (*ibid.*, 367), whilst the subject of their emulation remains fixed in place. bell hooks points out that “difference can seduce precisely

<sup>6</sup> Found here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kziN4ubSF\\_4&ab\\_channel=PrisonEscape](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kziN4ubSF_4&ab_channel=PrisonEscape)

because the mainstream imposition of sameness is a provocation that terrorizes” (ibid.) White culture is bored of itself. Although the exact ways of partaking in this thrilling transgression has changed shape time and again, it has genealogies in the first European ‘explorers’ plundering foreign shores. Africa and the Americas were a “porno-tropics for the European imagination”, a canvas of possibilities “onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears” (McClintock, 1995, 22). The exotic Other became the subject of both disgust - its ‘primitive’ and ‘anachronistic’ ways derided by proponents of European reason, and of desire - its very *difference* compelling and attractive (ibid., 35). Imperial exhibitions of exotic artefacts - extremely popular in Victorian England - were arguably the first vestiges of what we now term “cultural appropriation” - where symbols of a racialised identity are tried on and cast aside like clothes. In our current politics, where undisguised public racism is a ‘cancelable’ offence, this more subtle form of power play is rife. Unlike the examples that are usually called upon in discussions about appropriation - hairstyles, music taste, or slang, for example, which are expressions of Black cultural creativity and diasporic connection, what Prison Escape offers is an association with Black punishment, trauma and death. This kind of border crossing is therefore a more unique encounter that will appeal to “post-tourists” who like to feel they are on the frontier of experience.

Podoshen suggests that engaging in dark tourism for some may be a form of signalling behaviour, a way to impress others with their unusual interests or their bravery for visiting somewhere risky or frightening (2018, 174). To get a look inside a real prison (even devoid of real inmates) is a rare opportunity; it is somewhere the general public are usually denied access.



The website for Prison Escape proclaims it to be a “bucketlist experience” – further appealing to a sense of exclusivity and uniqueness, and also perhaps tapping into the fear of our own mortality that Stone argues drives dark tourism, reminding us to grasp opportunities before it's too late. Attaining this access therefore lends a certain cultural capital, even if only in the form of a good anecdote or conversation starter. This is in stark contrast to the cultural stigma of having been in prison for real.

This contrast becomes all the more apparent when looking at the merchandise and branding of souvenirs for the Prison Escape experience, which consists of take-home “mugshots” and items of clothing emblazoned with the word “Jailbird” (in Dutch, “Bajesklant” - Figure 6).

### **T-SHIRT**

This awesome, perfectly fitted shirt will be a true conversation starter. The shirt is unisex and can be worn by any jailbird.



Figure 6 - Prison Escape merchandise: “Jailbird” (*Merchandise, n.d.*).

Every participant also has a mugshot-style photograph taken at the experience, which then get uploaded to the Prison Escape Facebook page, captionless, where people are invited to vote for their favourites. The website advertises the opportunity to win a poster-sized version of your mugshot by gaining the most “likes”, thus becoming the “Most Wanted” inmate (see Figure 7).



Figure 7 - Prison Escape copy: “‘Most wanted’ criminals” (*The experience, n.d.*).

The play on the idea of “Most Wanted” to mean a popularity contest further demonstrates the ways in which the language of criminality, and therein criminality itself, is subverted and disarmed to facilitate a fun leisure experience. Allan Sekula has pointed to the “fundamental tension” between photography used to “fulfill a bourgeois conception of the self” and uses that “seek to establish and delimit the terrain of the other” (1981, 16). According to Sekula, the photographed subject is contained and objectified in the mugshot image: it is a photograph used not to capture a moment, or reify a sense of self, but to catalogue and classify criminal faces. I would argue, therefore, that the Prison Escape “mugshots” should not be described as such, but rather, following Sekula, as “portraits”. Their function is not to objectify the

participants, or keep a record of the people who have visited, but to affirm the very raced and classed self-making of the tourist. Looking through the photos exhibits the various ways tourists choose to engage with their 'part'. Some are smiling as they would in a photograph with friends, others are stony-faced, presumably taking more seriously the role of hardened criminal, a few are even grinning in a threatening kind of way that I read as playing psychopath. Whether tourists see the mugshots as an opportunity to win the popularity competition, or an opportunity to sink into their character before the game starts in earnest, the social media element provides a further opportunity for tourists to signal their unique experience to their friends by sharing the picture on their own profile. This, in turn, generates free advertising for Prison Escape, contributing to the increasing commodification of punishment noted by Huey and Broll (2017, 520) and better slotting into an increasingly popular postmodern tourism landscape.

This method of playfully employing social signifiers that otherwise have very negative connotations serves the dual purpose of evoking the phantom of the prison – again serving as a reminder of the actual prisoners who were contained in the same space, the very real memories of pain and the lives were lived and lost over decades, whilst simultaneously holding them at arm's length – erasing them and replacing them with grinning or scowling tourists posing in their orange overalls. This concurrent bringing close and pushing away of the realities and histories of the prison and prisoners is consistent throughout the marketing and overall tone of the Prison Escape brand: phantoms are invoked in the same move that they are covered over.

## 2.5 Narrating the idealized tourist subject of Prison Escape on social media

Perhaps the richest site for demonstrating this marketing move is the trailer for the experience, which can be found on YouTube. We follow a young white male protagonist arriving at the prison amongst a group of other white players as the voiceover asserts: “this is you”. We are immediately told in no uncertain terms who are the imagined audience, who should have access to this experience. Over establishing shots of the Boschpoort, followed by the white warden shouting aggressively in players’ faces, the voiceover continues: “in this rotten place, they will control you, they will rule you, and you will obey.” The “they” referred to is presumably the ‘powers that be’ of the prison landscape that are represented by the on-screen warden and guards. The positioning of these roles as all white could be read as acknowledgement of the structures of supremacy throughout the prison industrial complex, though more likely it is simply reflecting, without critique, the common demographic of these roles in European prisons for reasons of ‘believability’ or ‘realism’. The designation of the prison as “rotten” reinforces the thrilling and desirable darkness of the environment, and fortifies pre-scripted ideas of racialised space as “degenerate” and “sullied” (Razack, 2014, 95; 98). Sentiments of forceful control are sold as an amenity for the tourist experience, rather than being offered as an analysis of the “afterlife of slavery”, which Che Gosset, using Saidiya Hartman’s words, identifies in the prison industrial system (2014, 33). That is, rather than intentionally pointing to the saturated racism of this system, these words are intended to excite potential thrill-seeking consumers looking to purchase a fantasy of classed and raced punishment that they have not and will not experience as a reality. Indeed, as the voiceover reassures and reminds viewers: “But this is not your life, you have the power to be free”. The trailer sets a clear boundary between the imagined ‘you’

watching – represented by the white male protagonist and other white players around him, those who will escape – and the ‘them’ of the actor-inmates, who are shown to be majority muscular tattooed men of colour, and who are forever bound to the prison, playing endless cycles of prison escape games but never themselves escaping. The choice to cast these actors betrays the clear racial stereotyping that both fuels potential white tourists’ expectations of what being inside a prison “looks” like, and may also arouse white fears of the aggressive, potentially savage Other that is desirable to the white player in its opportunity for transgression (hooks, 1992, 367). Hodgkinson and Urquhart write:

The penal gaze, rendered accessible through modern tourism practices, further serves to accentuate the social distance between ‘us’ (i.e. the interested tourist) and ‘them’ (the prisoner, past or present) (2016, 50).

Despite positioning the tourist *as* an inmate themselves, Real Life Gaming sets them apart and away from the actors playing ‘real’ inmates who provide immersion in the game’s storyline, firstly through racialisation, and secondly through the voiceover’s assurance that this is not where *you’re* supposed to be, *you* have the right to be free. Reinforcing this distinction curbs any possibilities for radical empathic engagement that could be facilitated by engagement with phantoms of racialised place and space. By consistently centring the tourist with repetition of the pronoun “you”, the trailer’s narration demonstrates how a trip into Otherness, or the ‘narrative becoming’ offered by the experience, is fundamentally at the service of the white journey of self-discovery, while the subject being emulated remains static. Within the central narrative of escape in the live game, a distinction emerges between those marked for freedom and those marked for imprisonment, or those deserving and undeserving of release. Within the

world of the game's trailer, the white tourists are the deserving, who will ultimately flee, while the men of colour will remain incarcerated.

This discrimination is further compounded by the narrative of the digital version of Prison Escape that was released during the COVID-19 pandemic as an alternative to in-person play. The mission for participants in the online game is to help free a character named Yuri Koblenko, who we are told has been wrongly imprisoned in the Boschpoort. On a website set up exclusively for the escape game, a petition for his release has over 1000 signatures to date (see Figure 8). Here we get to know Yuri - a middle-aged white man who is pictured smiling warmly, and who we are told is an entrepreneur with a wife and a child, who volunteers for numerous charities and coaches the local soccer team in his spare time (see Figure 9).

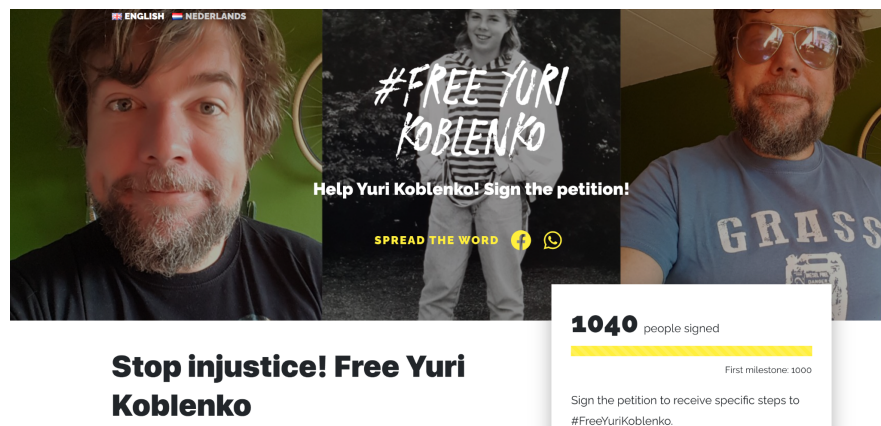


Figure 8 - Prison Escape petition: Free Yuri Koblenko (*#FreeYuriKoblenko*, n.d.).

### Who is Yuri Koblenko?

Yuri Koblenko is an entrepreneur from Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Born in 1989, married with his childhood sweetheart Genia and father young Anna.

Yuri is known by friends and neighbours as a kind man. He used to be there for everyone who needed help. Yuri organised local neighbourhood gatherings, coached the local soccer team 'De Vrije Trap' (translated: The Free Kick), gave voluntary art lessons to homeless people and used to be involved in flyering for social causes.



Figure 9 - Prison Escape copy describing Yuri Koblenko (*#FreeYuriKoblenko, n.d.*)

The construction of this character as sympathetic is painfully deliberate, and has the effect of setting up unattainable boundaries around who is deserving of their freedom: those who are upstanding and unselfish members of their community, have a loving family, business owners who contribute to the economy - i.e., subjects who adhere to essentialised capitalist, legalistic and heteronormative ideas of proper citizenship. These are all aspects of an identity (or citizen) that imply fundamental moral goodness. We, the audience, are supposed to infer that it's impossible for this man to have committed a crime. This, as well as the scripting of his

whiteness, allows him to be free from racialized connotations of criminality. The only other character image we see in the marketing for the online Prison Escape is a nameless Black man, who is pictured in black and white, wearing prison overalls, next to what looks like a series of finger prints - indicating this is perhaps his on-file mugshot (see fig 11). He is scowling at the camera, immediately indicating to the viewer we are supposed to read him as 'bad', or threatening. Whereas the pictures we see of Yuri are all taken from his life on the 'outside' - holding a beer, wearing sunglasses, even him as a teenager, displaying the fullness of his life and framing him as *already* free, this man is framed *only* as a prisoner. In the trailer for the online game, we see Yuri responding to questions from the online players, calmly telling them that there's a window in his cell but it's closed. The very next scene shows the Black man from the image, pacing around his cell and shouting furiously what has been translated as "Go crazy in the cell? Look at my cell!". Towards the end of the trailer we see a flash of him again, this time throwing something to the ground with force. The stereotype of the angry Black man is here employed as a shortcut to tension and drama in the narrative of the trailer, and to provide a foil to Yuri's whiteness, pleasantness, innocence.

## 2.6 Conclusion

From the copy on the website inviting us to "step into the shoes of a prisoner" and "leave [our] real life behind", to the trailer positioning a white protagonist entering a world of dark-skinned inmates, to the take-home souvenirs that allow one to wear the identity of "Jailbird", Prison Escape offers white tourists the opportunity to experience a simulacrum of



racialised, criminalised Otherness with the assurance of a return to normalcy and whiteness, coded as freedom. Whilst the narrative of escape from jail has the potential to offer a radical abolitionist commentary - rejecting the punitive institution of the prison system and rebelling against the neoliberal powers that control it, instead Prison Escape representationally offers freedom from the system only to those who already possess it, and makes no attempt to dismantle our faith in the institution itself. On the contrary, the prison building as an aesthetic icon is praised and celebrated. Phantoms of the prison's history are gestured to with a reinforcement of the building's authenticity, then erased in favour of falsified, stereotyped versions that align with white expectations of the 'criminal'. Prison Escape offers the opportunity for tourists to truly occupy the space and, representationally, the *body* of the subjects of the site they are touring, via a mimetic action and theatricality. As Emma Willis writes, copying produces its own reality, one "not equivalent with its object", but can "uncannily unseat its hegemonic claim" (2014, 127-8). Prison Escape therein runs the risk of consuming the Other whole (hooks, 1992, 380), erasing and rewriting the phantoms of place (via longings to *become* them – temporarily, and with the guarantee of a safe return to normality on the other side) until they are forgotten. Tourist-players' sense of moral security remains unchallenged, and they are left with the sense that they have achieved what countless others could not: escape from the prison, and so too escape from a fleeting racialised positionality.

### Chapter 3: Narrative Containment in The Myrtles Plantation

The previous chapter examined Prison Escape game as a stark example of how dark tourism facilitates the ‘narrative becoming’ of dark tourists through the act of trying on and being in proximity to the racialized subject position of ‘prisoner’, specifically a version of ‘prisoner’ crafted by the calculated phantoming of the prison space in the game’s marketing. Becoming will never lead to *being*, it is fundamentally a temporary state, and this is essential to its pleasure (and indeed, the pleasure of all tourism). In this chapter, I focus on another mode of whiteness enabled by dark tourism: ‘narrative containment’. Narrative containment refers to the methods by which histories of Black suffering and Black resistance are managed and/or silenced so as to curb their interruption on a pleasurable embodiment of whiteness in place. I use a case study of the Myrtles Plantation to highlight how narrative containment deals with the phantom of enslaved subjects by taming them.

The concept of white racial superiority that justified the practice of slavery continues to underpin the infrastructures of modern US society, long after the abolition of the trans-atlantic slave trade as it functioned up to the 19th century. The racial inequality in healthcare is one example that has been rendered more visible over the past two years under the COVID-19 pandemic, where the rate of both infection and death has been much higher in Black US populations, as well as other ethnic minorities, compared to that of the white US population (Anyane-Yeboah et al., 2020). As I argued in the previous chapter, the institution of the prison is another stark reminder of present-day racial disparities. Fed by a racist justice system, and with its unpaid workforce, the prison is “the logical extension of the plantation” (McKittrick, 2011,

955). It is important to keep in mind this afterlife of slavery in order to speak back to rhetorics of slavery as over and done with.

West Feliciana Historical Society made the local news in 2020 for the permanent cancellation of its annual Audubon Pilgrimage. Unlike most large scale events that were cancelled that year, the global pandemic was not to blame. Instead, accusations that the spectres of slavery were tacitly celebrated by the festival's traditions - including giving *wooden paddles* and *whips* to local children to play with - gained traction in concert with the Black Lives Matter movement's public resurgence following the police murder of George Floyd (Jackson, 2020, my emphasis). This marked a small step in Louisianan acknowledgement of its instrumental role in the dark history of US slavery, and the ways in which the actions of its tourist industry today continue to perpetuate the denigration of its Black citizens in favour of a system of patriarchal white supremacy. The multitude of plantations that pepper the area stand as spatial reminders of the countless lives lost to the back-breaking labour and horrifying human brutality that was suffered by enslaved Africans between the 16th and 19th centuries. But rather than facilitating any aims of memorialisation, reconciliation or learning related to the slave trade and the history of African Americans in the South, these sites are carefully crafted to conjure a fantasy of homely and charming Southern hospitality. Plantation homes thus serve both the fiscal needs and the ideological imperative of local government, via a whitewashing of history that ensures difficult confrontations are avoided. It is in this 'narrative containment' that my interest lies.

I argue, in this chapter, that the owners of the Myrtles put carefully crafted phantoms to work in service of a manicured narrative of the plantation's history, one which allows the maintenance

of a wholesome portrait of plantation life, and the antebellum nostalgia that is bound up in a fantasy of wealth and luxury for the white subject. The stories told about the history of the plantation are managed through a cast of Black ghosts who allow site owners to address the history of slavery in a controlled manner - producing stereotypes of Black promiscuity and exoticism that soften the blow of white guilt around slavery - but in a way that appears 'natural', as though the site is speaking for itself. Despite espousing goals of preserving emplaced history, I argue that the methods of narrative containment employed by the plantation owners reveal the ultimate intention of profit gain, as facilitated by the maintenance of a phenomenology of whiteness.

### **3.1 Situating Myrtles Plantation and ghost tourisms**

The Myrtles Plantation is located in St Francisville, Louisiana. Like many plantations in the US South, The Myrtles was transformed from private property into a bed and breakfast in the early 1980s when its then owners took advantage of the fiscal opportunity antebellum nostalgia could hold (Vaughn, 2016, 166).

During their tenure, the current owners - the Moss family - have gone to great efforts to have the property declared "one of America's most haunted homes", and take a great deal of the credit for increasing its profitability (ibid.). This has been achieved by drumming up press interest with photos that have been independently verified as "authentic" (i.e. no camera trickery or editing), inviting paranormal investigative TV shows to the property (such as

*Unsolved Mysteries; Ghost Hunters; Most Terrifying Places in America*), and features in magazines both print and online (such as *Country Living; Atlanta Magazine; National Geographic*). Although the previous owner, Frances Kermeen, was also deeply and publicly engaged in the idea of the plantation as haunted, it has been the Moss family's approach to marketing the property that has afforded it the frenzied popularity it holds today. The iconography of the charming, homely South, with the 'romantic' French colonial cultural heritage and architecture of St Francisville, contrasted with the thrill of the paranormal, and the capitalist employ of its history of slavery, make for a multilayered and contentious tourist destination that offers excitement to a wide range of guests.

In dark tourism literature, ghost tourism is often seen at the "lighter" end of the scale – "frivolous", "fun" and "silly" (Sharpley, qtd in Miles, 2015, 10). It is generally assumed that the metanarrative of the experience is that of a game, like playing make-believe. There tends to be a strict social boundary, therefore, around what kinds of historical events and locations are off-limits to the ghost tour. As Miles points out, there is no ghost tour at the site of the September 11 attacks, for example, because the nature of such a tour would 'dishonour the lives that were lost there' (ibid, 11). However, the sheer number of ghost tours that have sprung up at plantation sites would suggest that African American lives, and histories of Black slavery particularly, are not given the same respectful treatment (ibid.). Contrasts like this reveal the extent to which the racial politics of grievability constructs who is deemed worthy of memorialisation (following Butler, 2009).

### **3.2 Containing ghosts: Managing spectres of racial violence in the plantation**

Jill Pascoe writes that there is a saying in Louisiana that “every respectable plantation has at least one good ghost” (2004, 7-8). When looking at this trend next to the research that has found a disturbing lack of information or engagement with slavery history at plantation sites throughout the South, finding that instead tours tend to focus on the lives of their wealthy white owners (Butler, 2001; Vaughan, 2016, 227), one cannot help but feel cynical about the likelihood of ghost tours to engage with haunting in terms of its radical potential to inspire action based on past social violence (Gordon, 2008). Instead, one fears that what is taking place is more akin to what Inglis and Holmes have termed a “spectral colonization”, where phantoms of place are called up in service of the financial gain of the site’s owners, reflecting the broader dark tourism trend of commercialising pain and suffering (2003, 53).

In this section, I analyse the site management and marketing of The Myrtles plantation, via its website; a critical ethnography written about the site in 2012; a book written by the former owner; and interviews with the current owners, in order to discover how the phantoms of place are being put to work at the site in service of a narrative containment of its difficult histories. At The Myrtles, phantomic presences go through modes of containment to defang their potential force as reminders of anti-Black violence: they are strategically managed via marketing practices focused primarily on aesthetics and narration. I discuss these below.

### **3.3 Aesthetic and narrative choices as containment tactics**

One of the great fallacies of the European philosophy of reason is that objectivity is attainable as a human output, or method of communicating knowledge. In all heritage preservation there will be experience-informed choices made about the framing of history: which elements or events to push forth and which to gloss over. Narrative containment is therefore a practice of all historical representations - the written archive; museums; preservational institutions; fictional retellings. A close reading of such institutions is therefore as revealing - if not more so - about the particular biases and desires of those who designed or wrote the scripts of a certain place, as it is about the history of that place itself. At The Myrtles plantation, a version of history is mobilised that erases the anti-Black violence of the site both past and present. As I will detail, this silencing process is undertaken both at the surface of the creation of the site as tourist location, and within its layers. The plantation as an aesthetic - an aesthetic that valorises romantic colonial architecture and white luxury - is prioritised over and above the sociopolitical meanings of the plantation as a cultural institution.

Having first heard about The Myrtles in the context of its position as a famous haunted house, when beginning my research on this site's marketing I found the lack of obvious ghostly iconography used on its website and social media surprising. The Myrtles website has a reserved, or one might say tasteful, colour palette: duck egg blue, black and white. All copy is written in an elegant serif font, and there are regency-style ornamental patterns bookending text and decorating corners (see Figure 10).



Figure 10 - The Myrtles plantation home page (*Homepage*, n.d.).

Sweeping drone shots of the plantation house and grounds on a sunny day greet you on the homepage, and below that we see a group of four older white people in antebellum-era dress laughing on a porch, next to an image of the site's expensive-looking restaurant dressed up for a wedding (see Figures 11 and 12) .





Figure 11 - The Myrtles marketing image: People in antebellum-era dress laughing on a porch (*Homepage, n.d.*).

These editorial choices craft an image of beautiful Southern whiteness. The ornamental designs and elegance of the colours denote wealth, tapping into the fantasy of luxury that plantation tourists seek to wrap themselves in. Evoking nostalgia for the past with costuming, and the explicit mention of the “antebellum splendour” of this “circa 1796 National Historic” home, provides a sense of safety for the white viewer. First, in that a sense of warm hospitality is associated with the fantasy of the Good Old South that is being evoked. Second, in that the distinct lack of Black people featured in the images, and the noticeable absence of the word “slavery” in the copy about the historical relevance of the plantation, reassures the white tourist that they will not be made to confront any such ugliness here at The Myrtles.



Figure 12 - The Myrtles marketing image: restaurant dressed for a wedding (*Homepage, n.d.*).

Interrupting this sense of safety, and seemingly at odds with the aesthetic of the branding, is a homepage banner that declares – in large capital letters, as the first text readable when navigating to the website – “Escape to the Myrtles Plantation, one of America’s most haunted homes” (see Figure 10). After coming to read and watch interviews with the current owners, John and Teeta Moss, this juxtaposition began to make a lot more sense.

John and Teeta bought the property from Frances Kermeen in 1992 (*Capital One, 2014*).

Although I am unable to find any marketing materials from Kermeen’s tenure as owner and proprietor, her 2005 book entitled *The Myrtles Plantation: The True Story of America's Most Haunted House* speaks volumes to the valley of difference between her methods of framing the property and the Mosses’. Kermeen’s book is a much more representative of what one would

expect of a dark tourist location – the front cover shows a negative image of the house, tinted red, with the title text in bold black and an orange glow on a black background (see Figure 13).

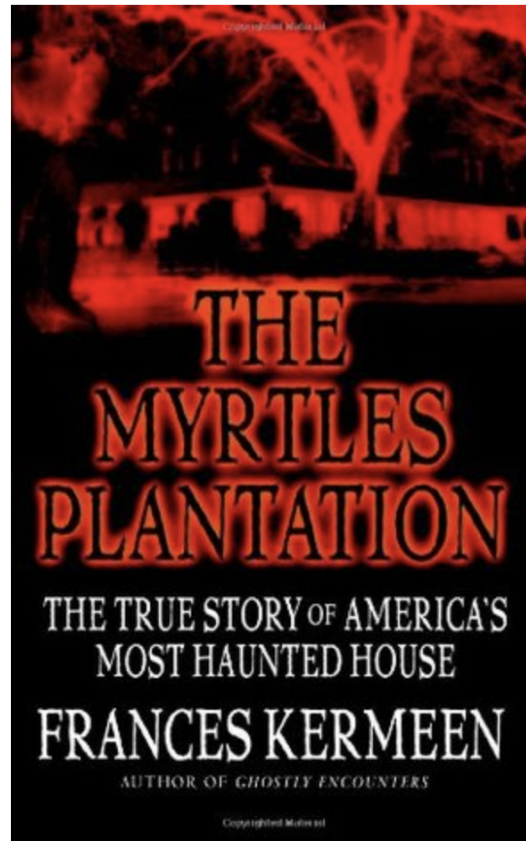


Figure 13 - Frances Kermeen's book. Screenshot from GoodReads.com (*The Myrtles Plantation*, n.d.)

It looks, at first glance, like a cheap horror novel, and based on the majority of reviews on GoodReads.com, it reads like one too: "It appears that Ms. Kermeen was profoundly influenced by *The Amityville Horror* as she recycled several events recounted in that book [...] Ms. Kermeen has made a mockery of the history and legends of The Myrtles and I sincerely hope that no one who reads this book will take it seriously." (Ms. J Johnson, 2008). A number of reviews mention, in various degrees of shock or mockery, that the book tells the story of a guest who is raped by the ghost of one of the former plantation owners, amongst other disturbing and directly

harmful occurrences. Although determining the extent of the ‘truth’ of her claims in the book is not my place, nor is it truly possible, what interests me is the way that the entire tone of the book aims at fear-mongering.

The book opens with a story about Kermeen and her boyfriend on holiday in Haiti, where, deep in the jungle, they come across “voodoo warriors” engaged in some kind of ritual, described as “chanting in a strange tongue” and dancing “scantily clad [...] their faces smeared with paint, making them look angry and scary” (Kermeen, 2005, 7). From the very beginning, Blackness is written as uncivilised and threatening; disparaging wording like “scantily” and “smeared” is operationalised to indicate her disapproval of the practice she witnesses. Instead of a language, they have a “strange tongue”, which distances them from a sense of humanity, as does the description of them becoming ever more “feverish” and “wild” as they shake their “primitive” rattles (ibid.). Descriptors like these craft a racial hierarchy with a clear imperial genealogy, denigrating Black Haitians as less-than: behind the modern, civilised and progressive whites. Despite the displeasure Kermeen clearly feels in witnessing this display of culture - telling us she wished she’d gone shopping or gotten tipsy at the bar instead, she cannot resist taking a photo to “show [her] friends” (ibid., 8). This exemplifies the way in which the bodies of the toured become objects. Their strangeness, though unpleasant to look upon, has value in its collectability, its rareness, and it becomes a badge that the tourist can add to their colourful tapestry of experience. In this instance, her thoughtless objectification has severe consequences. The flash of Kermeen’s camera draws the attention of the dancers, who “suddenly [...] lunge” towards her and then give chase as the guide pulls her away, “shouting

unfriendly, unrecognizable words” (ibid.). The guide later explains that the Haitian warriors have put a voodoo curse on Kermeen due to their belief that, in taking a picture, she was stealing their souls.

Opening the book with this story frames this moment, and specifically the curse, as the reason Kermeen ended up purchasing *The Myrtles* shortly after the holiday, and so too the reason for all the horrors and misfortunes that unfolded in her ten year tenure as its owner. Although she only suggests tentatively that the curse led her to *The Myrtles*, professing that such a thought is “absolutely absurd” (ibid., 118), she has chosen to introduce herself and *The Myrtles* hauntings via this anecdote, so that the reader is primed to associate the rest of what unfolds in the book with this singular instance of Black magic: Voodoo. In the latter half of the nineteenth century in the US South, casting the Voodoo religion as synonymous with evil was part of a series of tactics that sought to maintain white supremacy both during and after slavery (Gordon, 2012). By circulating public narratives in newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals condemning Voodoo as wicked and violent, presumptions of “Black savagery” were confirmed, and used as further justification for the social, political and spiritual denigration of the Black population (ibid., 768). The inclusion of this story serves the purpose of both tapping into pre-established local Louisianan superstition and lore about Black magic (which serves the overall aim of the book to generate fear and titillation around *The Myrtles* property), and displacing Kermeen’s culpability for, and agency in, the misfortunes and betrayals she experiences thereafter.

In keeping with its set up, Kermeen's book also marks the first time that Black ghosts had been introduced to lore and legend surrounding The Myrtles, which had previously consisted only of its white owners (Miles, 2015, 105). This marks yet more ways in which stereotyped and white-lensed Blackness is employed to facilitate an additional layer of fear and social discomfort around the hauntings. First, the Black Haitian voodoo warrior is set up as the originating villain of the tale, where tropes of wildness, primitivity and mysticism are relied on to drum up white fear. Second, the spectral presence of the enslaved Black body is engaged to provide shock and awe for readers, in ways that contain any potential guilt, and leave only the stimulation supplied by Black trauma and the taboo of slavery. Kermeen's book, therefore, despite the inclusion of white ghosts who are just as (if not more) threatening and troublesome than the Black ghosts (see, for example, the rape stories), engages in racist representational violence for the sake of shocking readers and increasing sales.

John and Teeta Moss have made concerted efforts to distance themselves from Kermeen and her version of The Myrtles. The same GoodReads review quoted above goes on to note:- "I would also like to mention that the current owner and employees of the Myrtles do not endorse this book. When asked about it, they will tell you quickly that it is not true (the ones that I talked to used much stronger language). This book is not even sold in the gift shop on the premises" (ibid.). This information is corroborated in the 2012 critical ethnography of The Myrtles written by Holley Ann Vaughn, who says she was expressly told to avoid it by a tour guide at the site (241), and then later told by an archivist at West Feliciana Historical Society Museum, with what sounds like some degree of disgust, that "'we do NOT sell *that woman's*

book here” (original emphasis, 249). The Mosses’ Myrtles, and the ghosts it contains, have (at first glance) undergone quite a rebrand away from Kermeen’s fear-mongering, cursed account of the property. The Mosses present as old, white, traditional, Christian kind of people – mild mannered, neatly-dressed, and interviewed sitting on their porch gently rocking back and forth on rocking chairs. They claim that when they bought the property, they had no idea that the haunting was “actual”, thinking that it was just a “marketing ploy” (*Capital One*, 2014) – again, this seems to indicate the less than subtle approach taken by Kermeen, and the Moss’s feelings on it. This precise choice of wording – “ploy”, with its negative connotations of self-serving or even untruthful behaviour - distances them from Kermeen’s actions, turning their noses up at the idea of using the hauntedness of the property to sell tickets.

The earnestness with which John, Teeta and their son Morgan (the proprietor of the business now that his parents have retired) discuss the ghosts of the property takes a tone of *‘I know, I can hardly believe it myself’*, which invites even sceptics in to suspend their disbelief. Two business-minded reasons to dial down the sensationalism in marketing a haunted property in this particular region of the US emerge from the literature on plantations and haunting. From a heritage perspective, the “fantastical, paranormal content of ghost stories makes them suspect” in a field that values the preservation of documented archival fact (Miles, 2015, 15). In a radio interview, Morgan Moss proclaims that “although there’s definitely spiritual encounters...” – note the choice to use the word “spiritual”, a more subtle and eclectic term than referring outright to “ghosts” – “...our job is to preserve history” (Blog Talk Radio, 2016). This marks an appeal to a vocal contingent of local historians and competing plantation owners who deride

The Myrtles' claim to hauntedness, deeming it "histrionic hogwash" that has marred the "authentic history" that the site represents (original emphasis, Hamilton, qtd in Vaughn, 2012). Here we see how history becomes socially constructed as objective 'truth', something worth preserving, where the spiritual or ghostly - that which European reason cannot explain - is designated false and unworthy of attention. The avoidance of the word haunted in The Myrtles branding language (everywhere but on the home page banner described above) comes down even to the naming of the tours at the site. Guests can choose either a "History Tour" or a "Mystery Tour" - the latter of which tells the stories of the plantation's ghosts, and provides guests with a chance to encounter them themselves, but suggests a stay of the sensationalism and kitsch that other haunted locations offer up (Vaughn, 2012, 166). It also makes a show of keeping the supposed 'authentic' history apart and away from the 'frivolity' of the ghosts, tacitly confirming the binary that critics of The Myrtles claim renders its ghosts non-existent fantasies.

### **3.4 The racialized production of authenticity: managing history in the narrative**

Avowing to protect the sacred authentic history of the site above all else would suggest that histories of the enslaved Black men and women, whose stolen labour kept the plantations running, would be a key part of the experience - or be, at the very least, mentioned. This is alarmingly far from the case, suggesting that the 'truth' status of the History - the official narration of the site - is produced through racial erasure, another afterlife of anti-Blackness.



This brings me to the second business-minded reason for the shift from the Kermeen era Myrtles branding (darker, promoting the eeriness of haunting) to the Moss era Myrtles branding (lighter, promoting heritage and romanticism). David Butler asserts that plantations' decision to exclude slavery from their meta-narrative - as is the rule rather than the exception for over 100 plantations examined in his study - reflects the unconscious assertion of its custodians that slavery "did not happen, especially at this location" (2008, 170). He suggests that this aligns with tourist desires, who are not there to have "too much of the ugly historical reality" exposed to them, and are instead looking for a fantasy of wealth and splendour to indulge in (ibid, 171). If this is true, the Mosses may have seen the darker, more frightening version of ghosts presented by Kermeen's Myrtles as potentially off-putting to the kinds of tourists who commonly visit plantations (i.e., those who want to daydream about the simple yet luxurious life afforded to wealthy plantation owners), in the same way that darker historical truths about the consequences of that luxurious life (i.e. the enslavement of Africans) would interrupt the daydream. Such omissions, though, must be carefully managed, as narratives of both ghosts and enslaved people are as attractive as they are troublesome. Despite outward efforts to downplay the density of haunting and slave histories present at the site, the Mosses also have a clear awareness of the fundamental pull that these darker narratives have on the tourism market. A blog post on The Myrtles website from June 2019 confirms as much: "...while gnarled live oaks and the giant front porch rockers of the pre-Civil War era mansion are certainly a draw for some of our 60,000 annual visitors, the main drawcard has, for years, been our haunted history [...] In short, people come here to meet our resident ghosts" (*Tales from the Plantation Blog*, 2019).

There is an equation to balance between those who see haunting as a frivolous distraction from the 'Real History', those who may be put off by the prospect of facing the spectres of slavery and/or ghosts in general, and those who are visiting the site first and foremost *for* the promise of a haunting encounter, or an encounter with Black history and violence. The Mosses appeal to all these potential audiences by presenting a friendly and mischievous bunch of spirits who a) tell the story of the history of the house, b) represent both white owners and Black enslaved people, and c) pose no threat of harm to tourists - in terms of both actual bodily harm, and the risk of having to confront their guilt around, or complicity in, the system of white supremacy that birthed slavery. Teeta Moss says "we don't like to use the word haunted, we feel that we have guardian angels" (*Capital One*, 2014), bringing in just the slightest flavour of Good Southern Christianity, and putting the ghosts at their service, within their control. In this formulation, hauntings are happening not *to* them, but *for* them. Even in death, they are still enslaved to the plantation's white owners.

Contrasting the description of the property's ghosts as angels with the one provided in Kermeen's book shows the extent to which phantoms of place can be manipulated to follow the narrative that befits the individual aims and desires of its owners. Despite what the Mosses may espouse, however, when it comes to actually being on site and experiencing the tours, the management of ghosts is quite different. According to Vaughn's ethnography, where she visited The Myrtles too many times to count over five years (2016, 98), the tour guides' delivery of the ghosts to an eager audience employs storytelling and theatricality to excite their desires for the bone-chilling paranormal. Although the guides do not depict the ghosts as evil, they certainly do

not characterize them as “harmless” and “peaceful” (ibid., 171). As well as telling the now well-worn stories of the most beloved and anticipated Myrtles ghosts (which I will come to), they tease overnight guests, asking if they are “gluttons for punishment”, and reference the frequency with which guests flee in the middle of the night to the “safer” Best Western hotel down the road (ibid., 171). To convince guests of the ghosts’ veracity, guides will tell tourists how many of their previous colleagues have quit after a short amount of time due to “scary incidents” (ibid., 188). The phantoms of place that the guides call up are given names, visible forms (in photographs of hauntings) and extensive, though fluid, backstories. They are called into being for the purpose of providing guests with the feeling that they are accessing something other-worldly, something hidden and secret made visible, which is the primary allure of the phantom (Hannam and Yankovska, 2018, 326).

It could be that this is a strategic choice from the Moss family: publicly promoting history, education and the fundamental goodness of The Myrtles’ “guardian angels”, whilst simultaneously working very hard behind the scenes to have the property declared as one of America’s most haunted homes (according to Vaughn, 2016, 166), and instructing tour guides to perform a darker narrative to tourists when on site. What seems more likely, though, is that tour guides themselves have the agency to produce the ghosts in ways that they feel best befits tourist expectations. Vaughn notes that although guides learn from each other, orally passing anecdotes to incorporate into their own performance, there are discrepancies that emerge in the details from guide to guide (ibid., 199). As a tourist, then, you will meet a different version of the ghosts depending on who is conducting the tour that day. Vaughn describes incidents of

guides even omitting certain information for what they deem to be ungrateful or rude tourist-audiences, and likewise giving their best, most detailed performance of the ghosts for enthusiastic and engaged groups (ibid., 186). Phantoms of place are therefore filtered through tour guides' bodies in their physical enactment - gesture, tone of voice, expression, and also through their personal experience - with The Myrtles, with the paranormal in general, and with audiences.

### **3.5 Ghost stories as containments of racial and gender violence: producing Chloe and Cleo**

Far from abstract spirits or vaguely human-like apparitions, the Myrtles ghosts are fully-formed, named and storied individuals who tourists buy into. By employing a cast of spectral characters, the Myrtles owners open up a world of storytelling possibility that better engages visitors and encourages return visits, including the potential for branding and merchandising the plantation as a unique, heterotopic and 'spooky' narrative experience. Further than this, though, they become a channel through which the plantation owners can contain the narrative of slavery and anti-Black violence that surrounds the site.

By a long way, the most famous and beloved of the Myrtles' spirits is Chloe. This is evidenced from the frequency with which her name comes up in articles about the plantation; from Vaughn's report of her receiving "top billing" in the press (ibid., 2); tourist anticipation and

excitement around her entering the tour (ibid., 195); and that she is the only named ghost on The Myrtles website (see Figure 14).



Figure 14 - The Myrtles copy: "The Legend of Chloe" (*Legend, n.d.*)

Slightly different versions of the story of Chloe's life, and how she came to her end, abound both online and on tours, but some details remain consistent: Chloe was an enslaved Black girl who was hanged on The Myrtles property (from one of the live oak trees the website's copy enthuses about), and whose lifeless body was weighed down with rocks and thrown into the Mississippi river, as a response to her having poisoned the wife and children of Clark Woodruff, the white plantation master who owned and raped her. Accounts online and in The Myrtles tour like to use the less ugly and affronting terms of "affair" and "mistress" to describe the relationship between Chloe and Woodruff (ibid., 36; *National Geographic*, 2008), which is a tool to purposefully erase the power differential inherent in their positions as master and slave. Using the language of mutual desire to narrate the rape of captive Black women has been described by Saidiya Hartman as a "discourse of seduction" (1997, 81). This discourse is premised first on the racist concept of "Black lasciviousness" - an "immoderate and

overabundant sexuality” possessed by Black women that presumes all sexual intercourse is “welcomed, if not pursued” (ibid., 86). It is second premised on the need to obfuscate the “extremity of violence in master-slave relations and in the construction of the slave as both property and person”, to facilitate a guiltless exploitation and *enjoyment* of the enslaved body (ibid., 81). Finally, crafting for the Black woman an ensnaring and seductive “criminal agency” displaces blame for adulterous wrongdoing away from the white slaveholder, which provides a legitimate and actionable target of rage for his wife (ibid., 87). The use of this particular narrative in The Myrtles lore and history hints at the quotidian nature of this type of ‘relationship’ during slavery, which was “fully within the purview of everyday sexual practices” under laws which saw Black people as the rightful property of their masters (ibid., 85). Instead of highlighting and condemning these tragic violences, The Myrtles version of events further buries them. Predictably, there are numerous other ways this tool of unabashed whitewashing of the sexual, physical and spiritual violence of slavery operates in and through the spectre of Chloe.

In some versions of the story, the alleged poisoning is the result of Chloe becoming jealous when Woodruff takes another so-called ‘mistress’, or sometimes a more general fear that he is losing interest in her. The poisoning is by turns accidental - Chloe intending only to make the children sick so that she is called to care for them, thus maintaining her position in the household, or purposeful - Chloe murdering the children out of spite for Woodruff’s lack of attention. It is never cast an act of radical resistance to her position as slave, or her rape. This directly contravenes research showing the frequency with which Black women rebelled against

their oppression with methods including *precisely* poisoning food (Davis, 1972, 91). Casting Chloe as passively submitting to, or even erotically *investing in*, her subjugation tactically reconfigures and opposes what Angela Davis has shown to be a common “consciousness and practice of resistance” undertaken by Black women under slavery (ibid., 84). Directly dismissing narratives of Black rebellion is part of a larger system of downplaying the horrors of slavery that The Myrtles plantation, and thousands others like it, are directly implicated in. This dismissal is doubled down upon in some versions of the story, which disturbingly claim it was at the hands of Chloe’s fellow slaves, in their fear of associative retribution resulting from Chloe’s actions, that she met her end. Given that Black enslaved people engaged in open rebellions with “such a frequency that they were as much a part of the texture of slavery as the conditions of servitude themselves” (ibid., 86), this version of events seems unlikely. It seems, in fact, like a tactic of casting African slaves as fundamentally loyal to their master above all else, of envisioning a monolithically and rightfully obedient group from which Chloe was the wayward exception. The story of Chloe framed by The Myrtles as a jealous femme-fatale desperate for the attention of her master is a method of romanticising and melodramaticising the life of a plantation slave purposefully designed to appeal to (and appease) present-day white audiences. The all-too-common fabrication of the Black enchantress cultivating a relationship with her oppressor is “a dastardly ideological weapon” designed to blunt any potential feelings of anger and devastation that could emerge from an honest depiction of plantation life, and to “impair our capacity for resistance today by foisting upon us the ideal of male supremacy” (ibid., 99).

The figure of Chloe becomes all the more interesting when one learns that the first reported sighting of her, indeed the first named mention of her throughout recorded history, was by Teeta Moss. The Myrtles website details how Moss was photographing the property for insurance purposes just after she and her husband had acquired it, and the figure of “a slave girl” appeared between two buildings (*The Legend of Chloe*). Over the intervening years, the legend of Chloe has evolved from this inadvertently captured and nameless ghostly figure, to a fleshy vessel, a fully developed icon, even, for the quelling of white America’s fear of its own past. Somewhere along the way, the spectral figure Teeta caught on camera has merged with a story told in Kermeen’s book about the ghost of a slave girl wearing a green turban (despite the fact no such headwear can be seen in the famous photograph, this imagery was too evocative to resist it seems). She has been coloured in with a salacious and adulterous story, and, in the words of Teeta Moss, the personality of a “meddlesome gossip” (Vaughn, 2016, 196), once more working to contain her into an all-too-easily believed caricature of the Black jezebel (Miles, 2015, 96). As many righteous online paranormal debunkers have discovered, when one checks the historical record for the plantation there is no mention of a slave named Chloe, and the cause of death of the Woodruff wife and children is registered not as poison, but yellow fever. “Chloe” is therefore a false phantom, named and storied by various white stakeholders at The Myrtles for the benefit of silencing horrifying truths that would demand reparative actions from its current owners and ticket-buying white-lensed tourists.

Despite the Mosses public derision of Kermeen’s “marketing ploy” ghosts, and their espoused commitment to preserving the plantation’s history, then, the lines of difference between the



two approaches to site management - that both benefit from the eminent draws of dark tourism's thrill - are blurrier than it may first appear. Where the Mosses have gotten away with it, so to speak, is in their skillful subtlety: darkness is laced, invisible but present, like a spectre itself, through and behind facades of good old-fashioned Southern hospitality, charming pre-Civil war architecture, and 'mischievous' ghosts.

Chloe is not the only famous Myrtles ghost. Her counterpart, Cleo, with a suspiciously similar name that is also suspiciously absent from historical record, and with a suspiciously similar story that also results in the death of white children and the hanging of its protagonist. In the lore, Cleo is called upon to *save* the child with her voodoo medicine, but she fails and is put to death all the same. Cleo thus fulfills another ever-popular Black southern US stereotype, that of the voodoo priestess (Miles, 2015, 93), and so recalls the association Frances Kermeeen put in place at the beginning of her book on the hauntings of The Myrtles.

To read Cleo's story with a critical race lens brings into focus a figure conjured out of white exoticising of the Black female subject-object, a figure whose faith and the practice thereof is rendered 'primitively African, culturally impenetrable, and spiritually dangerous' (ibid.), and must therefore be punished with death.

Both Chloe and Chleo's horrifying stories are simultaneously heightened and contained by their present-day spectral forms. Heightened in that they provide guests with the alluring fear-factor of potentially encountering a ghost, moreover a *Black slave* ghost who excites tourist desires for

the foreign and forbidden unknown. Contained, in that their affect in the physical world extends to brushing up against guests' legs, emitting faint sounds of tribal drumming, and stealing guests' earrings. They represent a gesture to the plantation's history of exploiting, torturing, raping and murdering Black people, neatly and palatably presented as folkloric anti-heroes who brought their fate upon themselves. In this move, the true phantoms of The Myrtles: the memories that occurred within its walls pulling at the edges of perceptibility, the traumas that were undergone, the hatred and fear, the joys too, all that life swelling and bursting and trying to make itself known, to make itself accounted for, is covered over and replaced with spectral figures that best serve - both at once - the capitalistic success and culpable denial of its proprietors.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have demonstrated the methods of narrative containment employed by The Myrtles plantation - from aesthetic and branding choices to the scripting of characters that tell a defanged history of slave life. I have argued that these choices are the result of desires to facilitate the continued ease and comfort of whiteness as a mode of being, even (or especially) in a location saturated with the phantoms of white supremacist violence against Black people. Whilst both the processes of narrative becoming and narrative containment entail border-crossing into racialised space, becoming is concerned with heightening and chariacaturing the racialised aspects of place in order to satisfy white fantasies of Otherness, while containment is more focused on a *de*-racialisation, or whitewashing, of the plantation site writ large, in order to avoid the handling and confrontation of white supremacist racial violence,

and retaliatory acts of Black resistance. The owners of The Myrtles, just like West Feliciana Historical Society, like their history “sweet and unblemished” (Vaughn, 2016, 117), save for the manufactured thrill of the ghosts they script. Both narratives of slavery and its afterlives are brushed under the rug woven by whiteness and its worldly hegemonic entitlement.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

Here at the end, I want to begin by reaffirming that whiteness is not a biological property of particular bodies, but a way of being in the world, a sensibility, a set of social meanings and a network of opportunities. It is a sociopolitical orientation, one which takes up space on the global stage and has the dictative power to reframe narratives to its benefit.

What I hope I have offered through the course of this thesis is an alternative way of reading dark touristic place, one which attends to the lines of power and racial dimensions of dark leisure as an experience and as a product of the neoliberal market. I have attempted to demonstrate the extent and reach of whiteness as a phenomenology, exposing the ways in which even (or *especially*) powerfully auratic space, space which represents the death and suffering of Black bodies, is not safe from a white reframing. The two methods of this reframing that have emerged through examination of my case studies are ‘narrative becoming’: the opportunity to border-cross into racialised space and return unchanged, and ‘narrative containment’: the technique of selective historical storytelling and whitewashing that facilitates guilt-free - even *fun* - engagement with traumatic resonance in-place.

Dark tourism, as a field of practice, is deeply invested in the politics of memorialisation. As Dunkley (amongst others) has argued, though, more than this there is a general sense that sites should be actively engaged in teaching “lessons of the past” in order to “influence societal progression in the future” (2016, 119). In taking on the representation and cultural mediation of histories of disaster and atrocity, the literature generally agrees that sites are duty bound to

offer dynamic learning opportunities that situate the tourist in relation to past wrongdoings, and influence them to instigate change in their present day (ibid.; Roberts, 2018, 628). This is in keeping with a Western neoliberal ideology that promotes individual action and actualised selfhood as the way to bring about societal change, as opposed to addressing systemic imbalances in the foundations of governance. Nevertheless, installing the imperative to notice and speak up against societal inequalities or discriminatory rhetorics is, I think, a reasonable expectation of sites that deal with histories of race-based oppression and/or genocide. From the perspective of the literature, this sentiment seems to relate most keenly to sites that provide focussed representation of one particular historical event, one which falls under the purview of a generalised 'lest we forget' didactic. Are the sites examined in this thesis part of this group?

Certainly Prison Escape is not attempting to represent any one particular emplaced event or moment in history. If anything, other than the locational authenticity of the site itself as a building, the prison space tourists enter is abstracted from time and geographical space in order to facilitate an openness of storytelling within the tourist's imagination. It is clear from the site's marketing and general brand image that they are attempting to capture the 'darkness' of incarceration - both in the conceptual image of the prison as a "nasty" or "rotten" place, and in the racialisation of its fictitious inmates. But rather than engage with this as a sociopolitical theme, or opportunity to encourage thinking through the broader landscape of carceral (in)justice, the fundamental social purpose of the site is leisure and profit. Does this place it at the "lighter" end of the dark tourism spectrum, as Stone suggests is the position of

“entertainment orient[ed]” sites (2006, 151), or does the transposal of the experience of incarceration into a commercialised vehicle of amusement itself amount to a ‘darker’ cultural property than if the site were to try to grapple head-on with its own emplaced histories of violence? My intention for this research has never been to engage in a practice of categorising or ‘scaling’ sites as compared to one another, as I believe the concept of dark tourism is at its most productive when space is left for fluidity and contradiction in its motivators and the meanings produced. Certainly, though, I would argue that the larger the gap between the morbidity and brutality of what a site represents, and its irreverent treatment as a tourist location, the more cause for moral concern over the intentions of site managers and the meanings being produced and consumed at the site.

The owners of the Myrtles plantation publicly espouse goals of education and the preservation of heritage, which shows a clear awareness of the societal imperative / expectation of their function as a tourist site. Since heritage as a concept is socially constructed, however, there is an almost infinite variety of ways to shape and story history for the requirements of particular social groups (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996, 8). Exposing the contours of touristic place, as I have done in this thesis, provides valuable insight into which of these groups are being attended to. Despite the *in-situ* element of the plantation’s ties to slavery, which would usually be a selling point due to the desire for locational authenticity in historical tourism, I have shown that the site privileges a white lens of ignorance and containment in the handling of its own history. Quite the contrary to a sentiment of ‘lest we forget’, The Myrtles employs methods of narrative erasure in order to craft an untarnished scene of Southern hospitality and comfort. The ghosts

provide an 'edge' that makes the site more dynamic, and appeal to a broader range of people, including those under the dark tourism umbrella.

Far from providing access to 'authenticity' as an alternative to commercialised package travel, dark tourist sites employ techniques of containment and re-narrativising that foreclose opportunities for meaningful engagement with the phantoms of suffering that linger.

Supposedly 'gritty' experiences that engage with suffering and death are, in this case, just as manufactured and carefully crafted to welcome the white body as the resort hotels offering comfort and relaxation.

Phantoming has been the key technique of this manufacture that I have identified. The concept of the phantom is how I have come to understand and conceptualise place-memory and the lingering sensations of lives lived within a space; *phantoming* is the practice of enhancing or falsifying these resonances in order to better immerse the tourist in 'dark' place, and satisfy expectations of an auratic experience at sites of death, suffering and tragedy. I remain convinced that being alert to the ways in which place speaks for itself opens up possibilities for a more ethical engagement with *in-situ* histories of violence. Although, as I have argued, it is impossible to detach ourselves from the prewritten biases, assumptions, sensitivities and ways of being in the world that we bring to bear on all space. It is a fallacy to believe we can attain unmediated access to worlds of the past whether through the traditional controlled museum space or the untouched ruin, just as it is a fallacy to think we can truly empathise with pains that we have not ourselves experienced. However, noticing, accepting and incorporating these

distances into our efforts to reach for emplaced learning and understanding of dark histories perhaps sets us up better for an ethical engagement. Attending to the ways in which place, and our experience of it, can be altered by what we bring in our bodies, as well as what has been done in its reframing for tourists, makes room for ghosts to speak and be heard.

In concluding this work, I want to resist offering an alternative set of best practices for running racialised dark tourist sites in general, or even the particular ones here examined. This is firstly for the obvious reason that there can be no 'one size fits all' way of doing memorialisation or preservation ethically. It is also because it would take an entirely different mode and methodology of research to discover the desires of the subjects (or descendants thereof) being represented/toured - who then of course would not themselves be unified. Finally, jumping straight into efforts to 'fix' the problem would recentre myself, a white subject, "as an agent, rather than as implicated in the critique" (Ahmed, 2007, 165). Although white people must 'do the work' of decolonialising our thinking, examining our complicities and ultimately moving to address the violence and ubiquity of white supremacist logics and systems, leaping into action is somewhat akin to 'shouting over': it signals a resistance to actually *hearing* our faults. As Ahmed argues, it is important to "let the critique sit", for "if we want to know how things can be different too quickly, then we might not hear anything at all" (ibid.) Let me finish, then, by offering the space for those reading this who are protected by the cloak of whiteness to consider the ways we move through the world, and who is ultimately served when we attempt to 'experience' racialised space or modes of being.



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