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Anthropology Book Forum

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Haunting Tourism

Review by Anne-Marie d’Hautesserre

Haunted Heritage: The Cultural Politics of Ghost Tourism, Populism and the Past

by Michele Hanks

Left Coast Press, 2015

This book offers a fascinating encounter with a practice that could render certain tourist destinations even more attractive by revealing their hidden historic secrets attributable not just to official heritage sites: heritagization or pseudo-history fit in well with tourism’s ability to stage fantastic simulacra. Michele Hanks’ text, however, dwells more profoundly with how “the ghost has a special role to play in making history” (p. 20). She demonstrates how it allows those who have felt neglected by official history and historical narratives to reconfigure and reinterpret power and knowledge. She articulates a reclaiming of public-space for the non-elite as “a class-based critique of the representations of the past.” As she underlines, visiting haunted sites and searching for ghostly presence raises important questions not just about history and heritage but also about, for example, what happens after death. The absence of proof positive does render the production of knowledge difficult for those who want to “reposition themselves as experts” and “challenge the orthodox production of historical knowledge” (p. 117), but it also opens ontological and epistemological spaces for spectrality and its believers, ignored until now. One feels drawn into and sympathetic to the cultural politics of ghost enthusiasts and their nationalist and populist roots and consequences.

The book contains five chapters together with an introduction and a conclusion. It is richly filled with first person accounts by the author and by the participants. The introduction familiarizes the reader with many of the terms used as well as the practices examined in the following chapters. The author announces her aims, such as unveiling how ghosts do play a special role in making history or in refashioning the past for their own aims; how ghost tourism provides an embodied means of evidencing

ghosts; what types of nationalism and modes of populism ghost hunters (etc.) engage for their politico-social goals, even if they are only implicit. These are intertwined with discussions of ‘scholarly expertise’ of traditional historical accounts and amateur expertise performance in search of a different meaning and social acceptance. These threads run through the text, to the conclusion that the past, like other tourist destinations, “can be experientially known.”

This is an excellent anthropological study of ghostly paranormal attractions but it seems its relationship to tourism as a widely shared practice is rather minute. Tourism studies have taken on different epistemological turns within recent years to generate new meanings and anthropology has participated in the broadening of our understanding of the experiences and practices of tourists and of those who cater to them (Xiao, Jafari, Cloke and Tribe, 2013). The well-depicted practices of ghost tourists are of great interest to scholars of tourism but they do not qualify them as tourists. The author launches her discussion of ghost tourism with no working definition of the term, though we later learn that it is characterized by pleasure seeking (p. 64), an essentialist limited definition. Leisurely travel is but one aspect of tourism. We do discover that each ghost tour “seems particularly bound to its city and country of origin” (p. 16): for a practice to qualify as touristic, it must be done sufficiently far away from one’s own area that one has to remain overnight. Ghost tourism is also emerging as sustained and regular (p.45); tourism is not characterized by constancy but rather by volatility. Tourism, for example, tends to be seasonal and to fluctuate according to global as well as local events.

The author also claims that her work engages several significant areas of tourism and tourism research when it only superficially touches them. The study concentrates on English ghost tourism, mostly in central England, between Manchester in the south and Middleborough in the North. The guide books about ghosts and ghost tourism assume, according to the author, that travel is necessary to access haunted places, although there is no indication of distance travelled. There is mention of rare international travellers (and they all come from ex colonies of Great Britain) but most are ‘domestic’ tourists. Would they not be rather ‘domestic visitors’ since “there will always be somewhere worthy of a visit” (p. 43)? It is translated by the author as an invitation to travel, but such an invitation (p.45) does not automatically translate into a tourist practice. It can also mean that one can find haunted places right around one’s own town or region.

A visit to sites, haunted, ghostly or otherwise, within one’s own town or region is not considered tourism by most scholars of that topic. The traditional definition of tourism is that it involves the discretionary travel and temporary stay of persons away from their usual place of residence for one or more nights. The overnight stay distinguishes tourists from day-trippers (visitors) who exist in much larger numbers and underlines a different psychological orientation for tourists (Leiper 1979). The

touristic bears the relation to a 'different' place and to otherness as its central proposition (Darbellay and Stock 2015); so tourists inhabit and interpret places differently to local residents. It does involve a playful decoding of local practices, as in ghost tourism, so long as the haunted visits are far from home. Tourists use discretionary time and money, another reason for the volatility of tourism but they (international or domestic) are net consumers within the areas visited, if they correspond to the definition above. Tourists are welcome because they bring new money to a region, which is why tourism is considered an economic growth engine. Local residents spend local money: they do not increase the amount circulating.

The author does indicate that ghost walks and commercial ghost hunts are two forms of recreation, which would be the correct way of identifying the activity of most of their practitioners, as she describes it. The author then discusses how the particular kind of engagement by ghost tourists "disrupts the usual profile of tourists" (p. 122), certainly that of the 1970s (much of the tourism literature referred to dates back to the 1970s). Tourists might have been passive voyeurs, concentrating their gaze as John Urry (1990) had underlined, but embodied participation has been researched by many tourist scholars over the past 25 years (Buda, d'Hauterres and Johnston, 2014). Some tourists engage in recreation while touring but not all. Tourism is much more complex than a simple pleasure-seeking activity, demonstrated by large participation in dark tourism, which the author sometimes mentions.

Much of this text does contribute to enriching our knowledge of one category, ghost tourists, as well as of more democratic forms of nostalgia. It is a great read whether you believe in ghosts and the paranormal, or not, and would be useful to scholars of heritage to broaden its present political ordering. Even though it has not enriched the scholarly landscape of tourism, the text raises many issues of interest to students of anthropology. The author arouses sympathy for how a particular group of citizens seeks to manifest their presence on a national stage from which they feel marginalized, to "constitute an occult resistance to the erasure they experience" through the application of scientism (p. 168). The author enthusiastically concludes (even though she did admit just a few pages before that such critique might have limits) that heritage scholars and officials should collaborate with these 'dangerous' subversives of established canons. It could also engage researchers and students in tourism in a moral awakening to social change and transformation.

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