

LEGACY OF THE LORRAINE MOTEL AND THE ASSASSINATION OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

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On April 4, 1968, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated by James Earl Ray in Memphis, Tennessee, while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. This tragic event cast a bright light globally on the civil rights movement in the United States. The Lorraine Motel was later transformed into the National Civil Rights Museum (NCRM). This case study examines the NCRM as a dark tourism site and its impact on visitors. Content analysis was conducted on 70 web postings about visits to the NCRM obtained from TripAdvisor. Four key themes were identified based on the analysis of the data: remembering the assassination of Dr. King; immersion into the "aura" of death at the Lorraine Motel site; the conveyance of history related to the civil rights movement in the U.S.; and the transformative power of the NCRM and its related exhibits. Key findings included: (a) The exhibits featured at the NCRM play an important role in conveying the history of civil rights movement to U.S. born and international visitors; (b) visitors experience the "aura of death" when visiting the more graphic exhibits displayed by the NCRM; and (c) for both U.S. and international tourists, a visit to the NCRM, and the assassination site of Dr. King specifically, is both transformative and commemorative. The NCRM has evolved into an attractive destination for African American families, as well as regional and foreign tourists.

Henry David Thoreau (1854) once wrote, "For every thousand hacking at the leaves of evil, there is one striking at the root" (p. 72). Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one who struck blows at the root of evil. During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, King's America was a bastion of racial and social inequality that prompted protests across the nation. On April 4, 1968, at 6:01 p.m., a nation and the world became paralyzed for a brief moment in time. A single shot rang out that extinguished the life of one of the world's greatest peacemakers as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Within seconds, the once vibrant proclaimer of peace and social justice lay sprawled on the balcony's floor with a gaping wound covering a large portion of his jaw and neck. One of the eye witnesses to the assassination was Reverend Jesse Jackson, a close associate of King's and stalwart in the civil rights movement. Jackson reportedly observed "He had just bent over. I reckon if he had been standing up he would not have been hit in the face" (British Broadcasting Company, n.d.).

History is comprised of significant events, places, and leaders that influenced and shaped our future. The legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination and the Lorraine Motel are events and places that remain earmarked in U.S. and world history. Two important tourism-related questions surface in relation to the conversion of the Lorraine Motel into the National Civil Rights Museum (NCRM): (a) How does visiting the site of Dr. King's assassination impact tourists; and (b) Do the exhibits and assassination site help to educate visitors about the civil rights movement in the United States?

This case study examines the NCRM as a dark tourism site and the impact it has on visitors. The present case study is important because there is little scholarship that examines historical sites associated with the civil rights movement as dark tourism attractions. This paper also contributes to the growing corpus of dark tourism literature by highlighting the experiences of visitors after encountering one of the most significant death-related sites of the civil rights movement in the United States. Equally important is the

global appeal of the NCRM as a "site of conscience." Moreover, the NCRM is seldom discussed in tourism-related journals like other assassination sites such as The Ford Theatre or Dallas Book Repository. Each of these sites (including the NCRM) involved the assassination of important public figures and changed the culture, history, and politics of the United States. As such, it is essential to explore the NCRM and the Lorraine Motel as dark tourism sites.

DEATH-RELATED SITES AS A TOURISM DRIVER

Death, grief, and suffering are all potential drivers of tourism. The death and suffering that dark tourism sites record are not occurrences that stem from diseases such as cancer, but in many instances, surround extraordinary events (Walter, 2009, p. 52). Our natural curiosity about death, destruction, and the locations of these occurrences frequently catalyze the desire to travel (Vowell, 2005). The balcony outside of room 306 at the Lorraine Motel is one such site (Figure 1). Traveling to and experiencing places associated with death is not a new phenomenon. People have long been drawn towards sites, attractions, or events linked in one way or another with death, suffering, violence, or disaster (Stone, 2005). Furthermore, Stone and Sharpley (2008) suggested that death-related tourism has become more widespread, with sites such as the Dallas School Book Repository becoming destination attractions.

Foley and Lennon (1996) defined dark tourism as "the presentation and consumption of real and commodified death and disaster sites" (p. 198). The authors further claimed that the boundaries between the message (educational and/or political) and its commercialization as tourist products have become increasingly blurred (Foley & Lennon, 1996). Later, Lennon and Foley (2000) further posited that "dark tourism is a chronologically modern (twentieth century onwards), primarily Western phenomenon based upon purposeful visits due to 'serendipity, the itinerary of tour companies or the merely curious who happen to be in the vicinity'" (p. 23). Moreover, Reader (2003) suggested that the general lack of attention paid in academic research to understanding the motivations of tourists

FIGURE 1. Site of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Assassination



who venture to dark tourism destinations is a significant oversight.

Stone (2006) found that some dark tourism sites now offer a *darker* product, and subsequently a darker experience. As such, researchers are now better able to refine the conceptual framework in which to locate various types of dark suppliers. Viewing these dark suppliers across a spectrum implies that there are “shades of darkness,” which reflect the perceived levels of macabreness in this type of tourism (Stone, 2006, p. 149). The degree of darkness at a tourism site is measured by several factors. One factor is whether the location has an educational or commercial appeal. For example, in the case of the NCRM, the museum has an educational mission but also markets itself as a tourism enterprise in that the civil rights-related exhibits and amenities are consumed for a fee. Another factor is the degree to which the location has political influence (Stone, 2006, p. 149). In light of the fact that NCRM was born in part out of the civil rights movement and an urban redevelopment initiative designed to revitalize the Southside of Memphis, the museum and its location remain politically charged. See Armada (1998) for a discussion of the historical, emotional, and symbolic meanings of the NCRM.

METHODS

Case study methodology is used to examine the NCRM as a dark tourism site.

Case studies provide an opportunity for the examination of a single social phenomenon and allow researchers to develop in-depth descriptions of organizations (Babbie, 2007; Riddick & Russell, 2008; Yin, 2003). To illustrate the impact of visiting the NCRM as a dark tourism site, information was gathered from TripAdvisor, a travel website that allows consumers to rate and comment on tourist destinations, hotels, restaurants, and the like. Comments about the NCRM were posted predominately by non-local visitors, particularly by visitors from outside of the state of Tennessee. Unfortunately, there are not enough data on the website to present an accurate demographic profile of the people who posted comments about the NCRM.

Content analysis was used to study the comments because of its “appropriateness for case studies and usefulness in analyzing small samples of text” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 42). The researchers extracted 70 posts about visits to the NCRM and analyzed them using QDA Miner-WordStat qualitative analysis software. The constant comparison method was employed to determine similarities and differences among the postings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2003). Subsequent to examination, similar comments were grouped together into four emergent themes: remembering the assassination of Dr. King; immersion into the “aura of death” at the Lorraine Motel; conveyance of history

related to the civil rights movement in the U.S.; and the transformative power of the NCRM and its related exhibits.

FINDINGS

REMEMBERING THE ASSASSINATION OF DR. KING

One common theme that emerged when examining NCRM visitor comments was that visiting the NCRM forced the visitor to recall the assassination of Dr. King. The assassination date and location were prominent in the visitors’ memories. A visitor from California expressed this sentiment (Walker, 2008):

I’m of an age to be part of the civil rights movement graduating from high school in ‘63. And it broke my heart to hear Dr. King had been murdered, what a loss. I guess we are like other animals in being curious [about] where it happened. This tribute will be a lasting reminder that it happened at a motel.

Comments suggested that visiting the NCRM, experiencing the exhibits, and physically seeing the site of the Lorraine Motel helps visitors recall the impact and horror of Dr. King’s assassination.

IMMERSION INTO THE AURA OF DEATH AT THE LORRAINE MOTEL

It is not uncommon for visitors to experience the atmosphere of death when visiting the more graphic exhibits displayed by the NCRM and then viewing the balcony in front of room 306 at the Lorraine Motel. The presence of the blood stain on the balcony directly in front of the room, and the photographs of a mortally wounded Martin Luther King, Jr. surrounded by friends and aides create a sense of awe. In concert, the photographs of King’s lifeless body, the stained concrete on the balcony, the commemorative wreath placed on the railing of the balcony, and the backdrop of Mulberry Street create a powerful sense of death for the visitor. A regional tourist from Georgia provided insight into the personal emotional response one might experience by visiting the assassination site with the following comment (suscrowe, 2009):

In the tour, you can actually see up close the real hotel room where MLK and his friends were staying. You can also see the exact spot where he was shot; it felt like you were standing right on the balcony where he died. It brought tears to my eyes. The tour also includes the building across the street which was the boarding house where James Earl Ray shot MLK from.

FIGURE 2. Room 306 at the Lorraine Hotel



The atmosphere created by the maintenance of the room where Dr. King lodged contributes to the dark aspect of the Lorraine Motel (Figure 2). This section of the Museum stirs the emotions and evokes empathetic responses from visitors.

CONVEYANCE OF HISTORY RELATED TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The exhibits featured at the NCRM play an important role in conveying the history of the civil rights movement to all visitors regardless of their race, ethnicity, or nationality. For some who encounter this history through the museum's media presentations, the information is new and alarming, but for others it serves as a staunch reminder of the racial divide the United States experienced during the decades of the 1950s and 60s. A visitor from the St. Louis area conveyed this message (Illinoisview, 2009):

Too many people do not understand their country's history, and this museum will edify anyone on the civil rights movement not [sic] matter how knowledgeable they think they are on the topic. Plan on spending at least two hours reading the copious documents and studying the telling photos. Then move across the street to the second part of the museum, which is devoted to the assassination and subsequent investigation.

A comment from a Canadian visitor illustrates how the NCRM enlightens

international visitors about the civil rights struggle in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s (ELMG, 2009):

The copy of the "Montgomery bus" was powerful and not tasteless in my opinion. It helped me to try and wrap my head a little bit around the experience in the segregated south. My thanks for the efforts to preserve this historic site. It's fantastic that you can walk up to it and it looks the same (I'm assuming) as it did in the 1960's. Once I swallowed all the lumps in my throat I could walk through the front door.

This theme was reiterated by another international visitor from the United Kingdom (traumatizer, 2007):

I am a british [sic] male and visited the Civil Rights museum in apr 2007. I'd like to think I had an idea of how black people were treated in the southern USA, but this museum still shocks and surprises, and reminds you just how unfair things were just when you think you are becoming desensitised to it all. The story of Emmett Till from Chicago did that for me, more than anything else in the museum. I would echo that having the museum at the site of MLK's slaying makes it all the more potent.

Visitors, from both the United States and abroad, found the exhibits both provocative and educational. Many exited the NCRM experience with a heightened awareness of the civil rights movement as

a dark period in U.S. history.

TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF THE NCRM

The NCRM, with its exhibits and the Lorraine Motel, is a powerful tool for transformation. Through the experience of the NCRM, visitors' awareness of the civil rights movement and the struggle of African Americans during the 1950s and 1960s are heightened. Additionally, many visitors are moved by the great influence of Dr. King in helping to heal a nation's race relations wounds and the penultimate sacrifice he made on behalf of civil and human rights. For example, a native Californian attests to the transformative power of the exhibits and the Lorraine Motel site by stating (jrileymail, 2009):

Take time to read the displays in order to get a true sense of black Americans' struggle. At the end, you are inside the Lorraine Motel room where King spent his last night, standing feet from the spot where he died, seeing what was his last sight on earth. You will not leave unaffected by your visit.

A Canadian patron's comments also confirm how the experience serves to transform individuals. The 27-year old woman stated (ShanMcG, 2006):

Like I said, I never expected much from my visit to the National Civil Rights museum but I emerged a different person. I was slightly stunned and quite mournful for several days and I still think about the museum often. Everyone should visit this museum, or at least visit the memorial outside. Visiting places like Graceland and Beale Street are exciting but this museum will have a meaningful impact on you forever.

Finally, a visitor from Wisconsin indicated that the property's realism contributed to the NCRM's transformative power (DAR1234, 2006): "After viewing both buildings and then walking outside and seeing the hotel, the cars as they were and the wreath marking the spot where it happened, you can't help but being moved." For both U.S. and international tourists, a visit to the NCRM, and the assassination site of Dr. King specifically, is both transformative and commemorative.

DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the National Civil Rights Museum (NCRM) at the Lorraine Motel, a dark tourism site, on visitors. The Lorraine Motel in many ways was very ordinary until the tragic death of Dr. King. The motel's practice of accommodating

African American travelers when the majority of hotels and motels in Memphis and the south would not lodge persons of color, positions the location as a relevant piece of civil rights history. However, the event at 6:01 p.m. on April 4, 1968, solidified the motel's place in U.S. history. This event also created a dark tourism site.

The findings suggest that visiting the NCRM compels tourists to not only remember the tragic death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but to also think about the struggles of African Americans during the civil rights movement. Regardless of age, NCRM visitors appear to experience a deep sense of loss and grief when confronted with the physical remnants of the assassination. Visitor comments also suggest that tourists are fascinated by the opportunity to actually see where this civil rights hero was slain. Perhaps even more insightful is the notion that the NCRM exhibits and the Lorraine Motel seem to encourage these tourists to assume the role of eye witnesses. Many of the comments indicate that the visitors' deep emotional responses to the NCRM were tied to their sense of feeling like they had actually been there when Dr. King was shot.

The second purpose of this study was to determine whether the NCRM helps educate visitors about the civil rights movement in the United States. Based upon the data available at the time this study was conducted, the answer is a resounding yes. Visitor comments suggest that visitors to the NCRM will increase their knowledge of the civil rights movement. International tourists, in particular, noted how much they learned or deepened their knowledge of the plight of African Americans during the civil rights era.

It is clear that the NCRM is a dark tourism site because it presents and allows the consumption of the site where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. Perhaps even more importantly, the NCRM took on political significance when it was accredited in 2009 as a Site of Conscience by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. In order to be a Site of Conscience a museum must "interpret history through historic sites; engage in programs that stimulate dialog on pressing social issues; promote humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function; and share opportunities for public involvement in issues raised at the site" (International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, 2010). Finally, preservation of the evidence of the assassination (e.g. the actual blood stain) and the layout of the NCRM (e.g. the physical and visual

proximity to the specific assassination location) indicate that this is a site that both targets and markets to humans' curiosity about death (Vowel, 2005).

Foley and Lennon (1996) suggested that the boundary between delivering an educational message and commercializing death has become blurred. This phenomenon is evident in the NCRM visitor comments. Some tourists viewed the NCRM as a museum filled with exhibits and artifacts that served to educate visitors on the evolution of civil rights in the United States. Others, however, viewed the NCRM as a place to witness the death of an important figure in American history. Regardless of one's background, it is apparent from the visitor comments that one becomes more fascinated with and drawn to the artifacts associated with Dr. King's assassination as one moves through the museum.

This lure to explore Dr. King's assassination more in-depth illustrates Stone's (2006) assertion that dark tourism sites are now offering an even darker product. Eight years after its opening in 1991, the NCRM purchased the properties facing the Lorraine Motel (National Civil Rights Museum, n.d.). These properties include the rooming house where James Earl Ray, the convicted assassin, lived in 1968. Now visitors not only have a view of the exact location where Dr. King was assassinated, but they can also experience Ray's perspective.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

While this exploratory study provides new insight into how a dark tourism site impacts visitors, it still has limitations. One of the limitations of this research effort was the lack of data about the NCRM as a destination attraction. The lack of economic impact, visitor demographics, and visitor motivation data forced the use of a more inductive approach. In order to gain some insight into the NCRM's impact on visitors, the researchers had to rely on written narrative accounts of visitors to the Lorraine Motel, the evolution of the NCRM, and Internet-based information to tell a powerful story. While these sources allow a diverse group of visitors to share their experiences, a more structured research design is ideal.

A more comprehensive study is needed in order to more fully appreciate how the NCRM operates as a dark tourism site. First, it is important to explore visitor motivations for choosing the NCRM as a destination attraction, as well as to document tourists' demographics,

including who visits the NCRM and why. Second, understanding employee motivations for choosing to work at the NCRM could help develop recruitment practices for dark tourism sites. Finally, a major contribution of a more comprehensive study would be to explore the influence of the NCRM on the public memory of Dr. King's assassination and the civil rights movement.

CONCLUSION

Dark tourism sites are not just locations where visitors can experience death; they also educate. In the case of the NCRM, visitors not only relive a tragic moment in U.S. history, but they also feel the deep emotional angst of having lost a civil rights hero. This case study illustrates the impact a dark tourism site can have on visitors and what role these sites can play in encouraging citizens to become more involved in social justice issues.

NOTE

Photographs used with permission from the National Civil Rights Museum for the sole purpose of publication in a scholarly journal.

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