SHADES OF DARK TOURISM
Alcatraz and Robben Island

Carolyn Strange
University of Toronto, Canada

Michael Kempa
Australian National University, Australia

Abstract: Former sites of punishment and incarceration have become a popular tourist experience as defunct prisons are converted into museums or heritage sites. Among the most prominent are Alcatraz in the United States, and Robben Island in South Africa. While some theorists might categorize such practices as “dark tourism,” this paper argues for an analysis that accounts for the multiple shades of penal history marketing and interpretation. Drawing on policy documents, onsite observations, tourist surveys, and interviews with museum staff, the paper explores how multi-hued forms of interpretation have been produced, not only through shifting priorities of memory managers, but also the expectations of tourists and the agendas of external interest groups. Keywords: prison, dark tourism, heritage, Alcatraz, Robben Island.

INTRODUCTION
In a recent in-flight magazine, the kind that publishes glossy pictures of exotic and intriguing places on an airline’s route, passengers are tempted with a feature on “the joy of prison museums.” The article opens by reassuring readers that a taste for touring former places of suffering and death is nothing to be ashamed of. After all, sites such
as the Roman catacombs have been respectable tourism spots for centuries. Defunct penal institutions "give us a thrill," according to the author, but these sites also provide matchless opportunities for spiritual and political reflection: "once we can imagine this deprivation, we learn to cherish freedom" (Dobbs 1999:36). In sum, touring old places of punishment may be "gruesome" but is also "good" (Dobbs 1999:35).

While tourism literature focuses on the marketing and consumption of pleasant diversions in pleasant places, scholars who have begun to explore the phenomenon of "dark tourism" provide a starting point for the study of prison history tourism (Lennon and Foley 2000). During the 90s other terms ("thanatourism," "black spot" tourism and "atrocity heritage") were coined to make sense of the packaging and consumption of death or distress as a tourist experience of both the distant and recent past (Rojek 1993; Seaton 1996; Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). The most studied places in these works are battle sites and death camps (Seaton 1999; Young 1993), which have literally and figuratively fixed the memory of collective violence to the places where suffering occurred. The death sites of famous individuals (such as Mother Teresa or President Kennedy) have also become religious or secular tourism shrines (Foley and Lennon 1996; Rojek 1993). While extraordinary disasters (such as the PanAm plane crash at Lockerbie or the destruction of the World Trade Center) draw the curious from around the world, everyday crime scenes and traffic accident locations can also become impromptu attractions, where people pay their respects or simply gather to gawk at tragedy's aftermath (Foote 1997).

The curious connection between the sad and the bad and their touristic representations has generated academic and ethical debate about the ways in which leisure and pleasure are mixed with tragedy (Rojek 1993:170; Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996:112). Some heritage industry commentators, concerned generally about the inauthenticity of popularized "theme park" history, have denounced tourism as an inappropriate and even immoral vehicle for the presentation of human suffering and troubling events (Hewison 1987; MacCannell 1992; Urry 1995; Walsh 1992). More recently scholars have questioned these critics' distinction between "bogus" and "authentic" history by calling for more attention to the authorial intentions and authenticating devices at work in heritage sites (Macdonald 1997:156–157). The commodification of history for mass consumption frequently leads to trivialization (in spooky dungeon tours of castles, for instance) but it does not preclude the presentation of counter-hegemonic stories or tales of injustice. As Seaton's work stresses consumption of the disturbing past is driven by tourists' tastes and marketing ploys but it is also subject to changes in political and cultural climates (1999:155). The thanatouristic gaze shifts as events (such as wars or the fall of regimes) transpire, and as new "files of representation" (memoirs, films, novels, etc.) lend moral meanings to sites of violence and death (Rojek and Urry 1997:53).

If the presentation and public commemoration of the painful past has a long history, its growth as a commercialized attraction in recent decades is notable. According to key theorists of the phenomenon, sites of "death, disaster, and depravity" have become increasingly fre-
quent stops on the international tourism itinerary (Lennon and Foley 2000:3; Seaton 1996; Urry 1990). Former sites of incarceration—places where the intentional state-sanctioned infliction of punishment, pain and privation took place—are among the most popular. Curiosity about the hidden features of punishment is not new but opportunities for prison history tourism have recently mushroomed. As the late-20th century prison industry has rendered obsolete prisons erected during the 19th century penal building boom, decommissioned buildings have been turned to new uses, including hotels and condominiums (Watson 1997). Many of the most famous abandoned prisons (Pentridge in Melbourne, Pudu in Kuala Lumpur, Port Blair on the Andamans, and the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia) have been converted into museums and tourism sites only in the last two decades.

Alcatraz and Robben Island, two of the most famous historic penal sites, provide the focus for the comparative analysis reported here. Together they exemplify the multiple ways in which dark tourism is represented, marketed, and consumed. The presentation of Robben Island’s and Alcatraz’s penal histories has altered over time; in addition the intervention of external stakeholders and storytellers and the pressures of audience expectations have shaped and reshaped distinctive interpretive moulds. Although both sites are operated by state heritage agencies (the National Park Service and the South African Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, respectively) official heritage managers and tourism marketers do not control interpretation; rather, the presentation of the penal past is the product of site-specific and historically contingent convergences in the heritage context.

THE MULTIPLE SHADES OF PRISON TOURISM

At first glance, Alcatraz and Robben Island appear to have little in common, other than their historical functions: they served distinct penal regimes and philosophies; their captive populations differed; their transitions to tourism sites occurred in starkly contrasting circumstances and times; and they are interpreted within a framework of two nations’ distinct histories and contemporary political landscapes. Yet viewed together, they illustrate that many shades of dark tourism develop and co-exist at penal tourism sites. At Alcatraz, rangers’ efforts to educate tourists into informed “visitors,” and to represent the island’s non-penal history are constantly undermined by Hollywood-tutored tourists, whose expectations are primed by commercialized images of “the Rock.” In the “new” South Africa, the successful fight against apartheid gave the Robben Island Museum a sacred mission at its outset, largely crowding out oppositional stories and eclipsing the island’s broader history. In spite of official interpretation guidelines set at both places, onsite heritage interpreters and external pressure groups have lobbied to introduce alternative and in some cases discordant strains into site interpretation. As a result, Alcatraz’s 1969–1972 Indian occupation has been officially recognized, while at Robben, efforts to stretch interpretation beyond the stories of famous apartheid
opponents have been implemented, so that more nuanced (and sometimes less optimistic) appraisals of the struggle for democracy are beginning to challenge triumphalist accounts.

**Study Methods**

Fieldwork entailing site visits, archival research, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews of heritage personnel and policymakers was undertaken at both locales between 1999 and 2001. Participant observation entailed walking through the various exhibits and tours offered at each respective site. Over 30 employees were interviewed in a semi-structured fashion, and were recruited through a snowball sampling method. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed and analyzed for their content. These data were used to supplement and extend the existing archival record of documents.

In addition, a tourist survey was undertaken at Robben Island in December 1999 and January 2000 (the National Park Service provided surveys of Alcatraz). A questionnaire consisting of multiple choice questions and open-ended written short answers that enquired into people’s subjective impressions and emotions experienced after attending the Robben Island Museum was distributed to a non-random sample of 1,008 tourists, who completed the survey after their tours on the 30 minute ferry ride back to the mainland. Respondents were limited to those who were able to complete the forms in English. These data were analyzed for their empirical and qualitative content and subsequently compiled into a market research report by KPMG South Africa (a major international accounting and business consulting firm) and shared with the Management of the museum.

**“Hellcatraz” versus “The University of Robben Island”**

Heritage site is only the latest of identities for Robben Island and Alcatraz. Although the islands served a variety of carceral purposes over several centuries (including the confinement of military prisoners, lepers, and the mentally ill), their preservation and reconfiguration as historic sites owes most to their penal pasts. Consequently, their chief draw is a highly emotional and politically charged heritage product—easy to market but tricky to interpret (Shackley 2001:361; Strange 2000b). Heritage theorists note that “dark” places are especially marketable if they were notorious, if the perpetrators of death or pain were especially cruel, if the historic regime was manifestly unjust, or if those who suffered were famous or especially sympathetic victims (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996:104–105). In contrasting measures, both former prisons supply these marketable qualities, yet their unique penal pasts account only partially for the contrasts in their subsequent representations. Once they shed their penal functions for new touristic identities, their historic relevance was interpreted within nationally distinct and dynamic cultures of memorialization.

The fame of Alcatraz’s and Robben Island’s prisoners provides a
recognizable tourism product at both sites, albeit for different reasons. The former’s were ordinary criminals, men who had violated state penal codes and federal laws, whereas the latter acquired its infamous reputation as a prison for apartheid’s enemies. At Alcatraz’s founding, FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover boasted that “the Rock” would punish the “worst of the worst.” A handful of famous gangsters boosted Alcatraz’s notoriety and helped it earn its nickname, “Hellcatraz.” Aside from Al Capone, the famous racketeer, rum runner, and money launderer, Hoover’s G-men helped to put away Doc Barker, Machine Gun Kelly, and Alvin “Creepy” Carpis. By labeling such men “public enemies” the FBI helped to turn them into public figures (Ruth 1996). Still, Hoover’s publicity machine on its own could not have elevated Alcatraz above all other US prisons: a symbiotic relationship evolved between Alcatraz’s mythic status and its unique population long before the island became a tourism site.

In contrast to Alcatraz’s captives, their crimes, and the penal philosophy that determined their punishment, Robben Island’s most famous prisoners were self-declared and officially-branded political opponents. The state portrayed the men incarcerated as the most dangerous and misguided of terrorists who subscribed either to anarchist or communist doctrine. At the same time, these men’s status in their own communities was typically influential and in some celebrated cases massive (Buntman and Juang 2000). Among the earliest arrivals at the politically focused prison were the leadership of the African National Congress, the so-called “Rivonia Trialists” of 1964, who included such illustrious names as Nelson Mandela, Ahmed Kathrada, Walter Sisulu, and Govan Mbeki.

While the apartheid government intended to isolate the dissident political leadership, and to turn the captives into forgotten men, the strategy backfired (Committee Chair Kathrada interview 1998). At what became known as “the University of Robben Island”, political education continued and spread among prisoners, whose influence and status thereby expanded, both in their own communities as well as internationally (Buntman 1997; Hutton 1994). Although Mandela and the other central members of the Governing Council of the African National Congress (ANC)—South Africa’s largest anti-apartheid and pro-democracy political party—were transferred to mainland institutions in 1982, Robben Island continued to stand as a symbol of the persecution of freedom fighters within South Africa and beyond (Bologna 1999; Buntman 1997, 1996a, 1996b; Deacon 1996; Rioufol 1999, 2000). Thus, the international notoriety of the apartheid regime, coupled with the status of prisoners as martyrs-cum-victors, provided prime ingredients for dark tourism.

Shot through the dark histories of Robben Island’s and Alcatraz’s penal pasts is evidence of cruelty and suffering. The apartheid regime clearly involved the imposition of racist injustice, while the harsh deterrent philosophy of Hellcatraz became an embarrassment to liberal penal reformers by the 60s. Yet representations of both places have never been unrelievedly dark. Indeed lighter and even light-hearted interpretations of the penal past have circulated from their earliest
days as attractions. How those darker and lighter elements have been represented and consumed at these icons was the outcome of their histories as shaped and reshaped by political, cultural, and economic forces. To imagine site interpretation as a palimpsest, a metaphor often used to describe the temporal layering of meanings, inadequately accounts for the complexity of the two islands’ representations. At any given moment, multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations of the penal past have coexisted. Although the state agencies that maintain these heritage sites play a critical role in interpretation, unofficial storytellers and consumer expectations criss-cross the transmission and reception of site representations.

**Political Imperatives and Heritage Policy Initiatives**

Heritage practices distinguish the past from the present, but the ways in which those distinctions are drawn inevitably express contemporary preoccupations (Bennett 1995:109). The “frames of remembrance” in which former prison sites are interpreted are dynamic and culturally contingent (Foote 1997:27; Irwin-Zarecka 1994:7). In the cases of Robben Island and Alcatraz, political imperatives and heritage policy initiatives that emerged in the aftermath of their transition to heritage places deliberately steered these former punishment sites away from their earlier associations with pain and suffering.

When Alcatraz was closed in the mid-60s, the idea of turning it over to tourists as a “prison museum” was one of the least favored schemes for its reuse. Much more viable were commercial or recreational developments that would have erased its history as a place of punishment or merely featured it as a colorful setting for shops and amusements (Loo and Strange 2000:35–36). Policymakers argued that allowing people to inspect the former prison would be ghoulish and vaguely disrespectful. In 1969, Indian activists occupied the island and demanded a reparative future for Alcatraz, as an Indian cultural and educational centre (Smith and Warrior 1996). But giving in to the agenda of a counter-cultural group of protestors was not what President Nixon had in mind. Turning the former prison site over to the National Park Service in 1972, after the government removed the last remaining protestors, was a compromise on “the establishment’s” terms.

The challenge for the park service was to drain the site of its sensationalistic and shameful associations and to fill visitors’ (rangers’ preferred term) minds with its multi-layered history, including its unique natural history, its significance as the west coast’s first lighthouse location, and its importance as a military fort (Loo and Strange 2000). The Director of the National Park Service during Alcatraz’s transition felt it necessary to downplay punishment as an attraction: As he declared in 1973, the park service “certainly will not preserve this island solely as a memorial to a century of military and civil confinement” (Champion 1973). Accounts of Alcatraz’s bird life, the bureaucrats hoped, were to eclipse “the Birdman’s” story.

Evasion was the first interpretive tack, but it proved to be no match
for the strong currents of popular interest in Hellcatraz. Park rangers, who felt that they had become little more than prison tour guides, pressed for opportunities to weave more strands into their story-telling (ranger Martini interview 1999). Once the audio taped cellblock tour was implemented in 1987 (Figure 1), rangers had more time to establish specialized tours that could tap Alcatraz’s history for alternative storylines that had nothing to do with the Rock’s penal past. The most controversial of these was the account of the Indian occupation, first delivered on a ranger tour in 1988 (ranger Glassner interview 1999a). Prior to that point tourists could easily have spent a day on the island without hearing a word about its significance as a protest site. The provocatively entitled tour, “Alcatraz is Indian land,” recounted the occupation of 1969–1972, and linked that moment to the longer his-

Figure 1. Tourists Following Stations Narrated in the Taped Cellblock Tour
tory of native resistance to American colonization and land dispossession (ranger Glassner interview 1999a). People on this tour are introduced to the island’s rubble piles and tumbledown buildings (damaged in the last days of the occupation) not as evidence of mindless destruction, but as an event that went to the heart of the American experience, in spite of being quite controversial...It was the one event on the island that changed the course of history...everything else pales in comparison (ranger Glassner interview 1999b).

Incorporating the Indian history of Alcatraz in official story telling conformed to the National Park Service’s emerging commitment to interpret the nation’s “ethnic heritage,” but determining how to understand the history of imprisonment remained a challenge (Strange and Loo 2001:67). Every ranger interviewed stresses that their mission is to “interpret: not to take sides” (ranger Martini interview 1999). But in the late 80s, the park service seemed to favor a left wing, prisoners’ advocacy perspective. For instance, the 1988 installation, “Artists on the Rock” pleased rangers, who felt it prompted tourists to ponder “psychological and emotional freedom and ... international issues like political prisoners and human rights” (Solnit 1988). Bureaucrats in the Bureau of Prisons charged that the display was inaccurate and unduly critical. One exhibit featured barbed wire and electric chairs while another interactive exhibit allowed tourists to listen to former captives talk about corruption and brutality in contemporary prisons. This was an instance when one state agency (National Park Service) had invited outside players to participate in site interpretation, to the dismay of another government department (Bureau of Prisons) driven by its own image management objectives. The resultant interagency compromise, a permanent bureau-approved display called “Alcatraz and the American Prison Experience,” framed Alcatraz as a chilling detour on a broader American journey toward increasingly civilized modes of penal reform. The closure of Alcatraz, according to this anodyne reading, put the United States back on the road to penal progressivism.

By the mid-90s, the history of imprisonment at Alcatraz was molded anew within the “freedom-seeking framework.” Whether it was accounts of inmates risking it all to swim to freedom, or videotapes of native activists boldly repossessing “Indianland,” the National Park Service and its employees cast Alcatraz in a brighter light by the late-90s. In contrast to its initial decades of dark sensationalism, for example, a 1994 parks service curriculum guide for teachers provided a positive interpretive framework: “as an island, as a prison and as a center for Native American activism, Alcatraz has witnessed the ongoing struggle to define freedom” (n.a. 1994:ii). Like liberty-loving Americans who had suffered on famous battlefields, a less likely cast of crooks and Indians became star players in this civic-minded reimagining of the Rock.

Unlike the genesis and development of Alcatraz’s representations over the past forty years, the transition of Robben Island from prison
to museum was conducted rapidly in a national context of nearly calamitous political circumstances (Shackley 2001:356). Following the democratic transition in 1994 in South Africa, the new government was hard pressed to establish initiatives designed to promote reconciliation, nation-building, and civil peace. Since Robben Island had played a central role in the legacy and ultimate collapse of apartheid, there was little question in government circles that Robben Island was an apt symbol of hope and reconciliation. Alternative proposals made through public submissions to the Future of Robben Island Committee (established in 1995) included establishing an adult leisure retreat filled with casinos and hotels. These were dismissed in favor of establishing a museum that would serve as a monument to the defeat of apartheid and to the broader resilience and power of the human spirit (Director Odendaal interview 1999; Committee Chair Kathrada interview 1998).

Once this approach was confirmed, the transition to museum was swift: the property was transferred from the Department of Corrections to the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology in December 1996 and the museum opened to the public the next January. The rapidity and scope of the Island’s reinvention signaled the sea change to the newly democratized South Africa. But the transition also underlined the pressures of implementing the new institutions and practices of the fledgling democratic state. This pressured context of reinvention operated at several levels. Cultural policymakers agreed that apartheid’s mentalities and institutional arrangements had to be undone. Political parties of the resistance era that had been underground for many years were suddenly thrust in the position of leading the nation, and thus were faced with the challenge of implementing their democratic ideologies into workable policies (Committee Chair Kathrada interview 1998). To maintain political stability, the institutions required to support the rise and spread of such mentalities and values had to be built immediately (Deegan 2001). Two initiatives stand out in this regard: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the commemoration of Robben Island as a museum (Tutu 1999; Rioufol 1999:7–9, 2000). These complementary projects bore the burden of official designation as cathartic mechanisms designed to pave the way for political and cultural transformation.

Like the reconciliation commission, the commemoration of Robben Island deployed the “healing” logic of “restorative justice,” acknowledging the past but oriented to future possibilities (Tutu 1999:33-36). The Museum was designed to communicate and promote the master narrative of reconciliation and the capacity of the oppressed to survive and overcome, qualities necessary to contribute to South Africa’s nation-building enterprise. In the words of Ahmed Kathrada, chair of the Future of Robben Island Committee, former political prisoner, long-time friend and adviser to President Nelson Mandela:

...we will not want Robben Island to be a monument to our hardship and suffering. We would want it to be a monument reflecting the triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil, a triumph of freedom and human dignity over repression and humiliation; a tri-
umph of wisdom and largeness of spirit against small minds and pettiness; triumph of courage and determination over human frailty and weakness; a triumph of non-racialism over bigotry and intolerance; a triumph of the new South Africa over the old (Kathrada 1997:10-11).

This broader reconciliatory and nation-building purpose is referenced in all manner of Robben Island internal policy documents, intra-staff publications and communications, and press statements. The vision is articulated perhaps most clearly in the Museum’s successful application to UNESCO for World Heritage Site status. The application emphasized Robben Island’s educative potential and the site’s related symbolic power to inspire political and social reinvention not only in South Africa but also across the globe. It declared that Robben Island offers the world, “struggling under social injustices and intolerance, the example of the indomitable nature of the human spirit” (Robben Island Museum 1999:4). This conception of “heritage,” one which museum management argued is founded upon an “African” conception of the significance of the meaning of a space and its history, explicitly challenged Eurocentric notions of “architectural” and/or “natural” significance. Ascendance to World Heritage status, along with the international exposure that this brings, reinforced Robben Island management’s strategic cultivation of the image of the museum as a space which signals the triumph of the human spirit. The image of Nelson Mandela lighting an eternal flame in his former prison cell, televised globally at a Millennium New Years’ celebration event, dramatically confirmed the power of light over darkness.

Both the guided tours and the physical set-up of the Museum convey the message that brutality can be resisted and overcome. At the levels of both representation and consumption the resistance movement’s victory over apartheid is crystallized in Nelson Mandela’s story, which by all accounts remains the touring public’s primary fixation (Figure 2). Large crowds congregate around Mandela’s tiny cell to see where the new Democratic South Africa’s first President spent 18 of his 27 years of incarceration. Accordingly, while much of the island is open to the public (with varying degrees of supervision), the prison and the political leadership’s experience have become the focal point of the museum structure. Within tours and exhibits, Mandela and colleagues occupy center stage, as evinced in a large famous 1966 photograph of Mandela appearing with Walter Sisulu, which adorns the central courtyard. Further, the Robben Island Museum management’s decision at the museum’s inception to preserve and present Cell Block B (the “political leadership” wing) in the condition it was in upon the arrival of the Rivonia Trialists in 1964 (Heritage Manager Pastor-Makhurane interview 1999) freezes this period at the site.

But this message of struggle and hope has recently become less unified in voice and purpose. By 1999, initiatives within the museum began to tone down the maximally optimistic reading of the Robben Island story as well as enhance the narrative beyond particular political leaders’ achievements (Deacon 2000). A variety of prison and broader island exhibits has been implemented to communicate the struggles of the many people who have at various points experienced isolation
and oppression on Robben Island. In particular, in late 1999 the museum added a “Women’s Exhibit,” which uses digital recordings of collected personal stories to point out that women on the mainland, in addition to being in many cases the wives of the political prisoners and heads of families, remained behind as community leaders, who suffered great injustices in the broader “prison” of apartheid South Africa. A wider-ranging Island “Bus Tour” also takes tourists past the Kramat erected by the imprisoned Muslim resistance to British Colonialism in the Far East, the site of the Leper Colony, and the inter-war Naval Town.

A notable exhibit in this regard is the popular “Cell Stories” exhibition opened to the public in December 1999. At this time, artifacts and personal effects that former prisoners deemed significant were displayed starkly in otherwise unrefined prison cells. On the walls of each cell are single placards that contain their brief written descriptions (some recorded) of the importance and significance of each artifact. While the meanings assigned to personal items reveal the austerity of the prison experience, each narrative was selected to convey a more universal message of resistance through the expression of creativity under conditions of privation (Exhibit Co-Designer Adriaan interview 1999). As the latter source explains, he countered the “master narrative” by “creating space for the multiple voices of Robben Island.” The cell exhibit was also meant to inform people, conversant with the heroic anti-apartheid narrative, that “there are a lot of contradictions and opposing views within the stories that [ex] prisoners are telling”.

Figure 2. Tour Members Jostle for the Best Camera Angle on Mandela’s Cell
Compared to Alcatraz, however, Robben Island Museum has had a very short period in which to introduce new story lines that diverge from the triumph narrative. Responses to the onsite survey indicate that new exhibits have made a minor impact upon tourists’ impressions of the Island. Nevertheless, the museum staff interviewed remain optimistic that this will change with time. Similarly, Alcatraz’s official site interpreters stretch the island’s history beyond its foundational images; yet, Alcatraz remains for most tourists the hellhole that contained America’s worst. Consequently, government policymakers and museum managers contribute to, rather than dictate, the representations of Robben Island and Alcatraz.

**National Frames of Remembrance**

State heritage agencies are rarely the prime shapers of dark tourism, a field most governments prefer to avoid (Strange 2000a; Young 1993). Tourism theorists agree that the state’s investment in commemoration tends to mark places and moments of heroism and achievement (Glassberg 1996; Lowenthal, 1985). Where suffering is commemorated, it is usually in the form of battles won over enemies, or of deified fallen heroes’ last stands (Foote 1997). Because of their dark pasts, both Alcatraz and Robben Island could conveniently have been forgotten, crumbling into ruin and obscurity. Or the prison buildings could have been bulldozed and replaced by luxury hotels and shopping complexes, as entrepreneurs had hoped. That they were not indicates that heritage planners were hard at work; that they have remained historic sites suggests that the cultural and political conditions that contribute to their preservation and historic interpretation remain operative.

In the early days of the Indian occupation at Alcatraz, Native activist Richard Oakes declared: Alcatraz is not an Island (Bluecloud 1972). His comment was insightful at two levels. First, it is no mere block of land surrounded by water, and nor has imprisonment constituted its only use. Second, its water barrier and its mythical escape-proof status divert attention from the Rock’s historic and enduring links to the mainland. Prisoners were rendered peripheral but Alcatraz lay at the center of debates about penal policy, Indian protest and redress, as well as heritage workers’ debates about marketing and commerce. The extraordinary circulation of Alcatraz’s images has proven, unlike the prisoners, to be unconfineable. Thus, orienting Alcatraz’s interpretation has always been and remains well beyond the powers of the National Park Service to control.

Although the last Indian activists were removed from the island in 1972, they never really left. Picking up on Richard Oakes’ reading of Alcatraz, American Indians kept the spirit of activism alive in the 70s and 80s without formal approval from the park service. In 1978, Alcatraz was chosen as the starting point for a cross-nation protest march designed to draw attention to the problems confronting aboriginals both on and off reserves. This “Long March” confirmed the status of the 1969–1972 occupation as a symbolic birthplace for cultural and spiritual renewal (Johnson, Nagel and Champagne 1997). As Cherokee
Chief Wilma Mankiller reflected, “ironically the occupation of Alcatraz—a former prison—was extremely liberating for me. As a result, I consciously took a path...to work for the revitalization of tribal communities” (Mankiller and Wallis 1993: 192). After the 25th anniversary of the occupation, its veterans began to work with academics and the park service representatives to press their demands that Alcatraz’s enduring Indian identity be preserved and promoted. We Hold the Rock, a 28-minute documentary was the product of that collaboration in 1998. A year later, the 30th anniversary of the occupation was marked with a full day of ceremonies, celebrations, and defiant speeches. The former “lawless trespassers” were greeted by National Park Service personnel as dignitaries and Alcatraz was anointed as a site of secular and spiritual pilgrimage (Strange and Loo 2001).

But Hollywood beat both the park service and native activists to the forefront of interpretation, presenting Alcatraz in a lurid and curiously patriotic fashion. Although the FBI used melodramatic newsreels to promote the Hellcatraz image in the 30s and 40s, Hollywood producers capitalized on Alcatraz’s notoriety in their own commercial story-telling ventures. The place has inspired scores of films; however, four blockbusters, The Birdman of Alcatraz, Escape from Alcatraz, Murder in the First, and The Rock stand out. Through their stature in American popular culture (they lead the hits for “Alcatraz” in internet searches) and thanks to the US’s global cultural dominance over the past half century, most tourists, both foreigners and Americans, visit Alcatraz virtually long before they set foot on the Rock (Loo 1998). Unlike some national parks, which struggle to attract people, Alcatraz faces waves of tourists, who pour onto the landing dock every 15 minutes. Rangers concede that “they’re here because of Hollywood” (ranger Glassner interview 1999) and some staff wish they could “burn every negative of a Hollywood film” (ranger Martini interview 1999). The theme of feature films on Alcatraz is, in characteristic American idiom, the struggle of the individual against tyranny and demeaning rules. Even the most fanciful, such as the 1996 release, The Rock, follow this theme, albeit with implausible plots. While prison films in general emphasize the oppression of the prison regime, Alcatraz films play off the foundational image of Hellcatraz to augment the drama of punishment and the heroic struggle for freedom.

Cinematic portrayals of Alcatraz are far from the only medium capable of reaching beyond the already large pool of onsite tourists. Popular books, and increasingly internet websites, also feed the evidently endless appetite for information and stories about tough prisoners and desperate escapees. A reader’s posting on the Amazon.com website book review board described Riddle of the Rock: The Only Successful Escape from Alcatraz (DeNevi 1991) with a degree of enthusiasm that called for three exclamation marks:

This book gave you the facts, the story, the whole nine yards on this very successful escape from Alcatraz. I went to my cousin’s wedding in San Francisco and as a surprise we went to Alcatraz the day I finished the book! So this book also influenced me to travel!!
Against these cultural files of sound, images, and stirring plots, rangers struggle to set the record straight. Most greet tourists by pricking illusionary bubbles: Murder in the First, Birdman, anything they’ve heard about Al Capone—all such popular “files” are misleading. To counter these portrayals, rangers fight fancy with facts (for instance, on their “Great Escapes!” and “US Penitentiary: Alcatraz—learn the TRUTH about the Rock” tours). If anything, the rangers take the gloss off popular representations of Alcatraz, particularly at the landing zone: there were no successful escapes; the Birdman was nasty; Henry Young was not a young innocent when he came to Alcatraz. No matter which images park interpreters present, however, interest in the prison, from its opening to the present, continues to be anchored in the stock framework of the individual versus the state: not a freedom fighter or a revolutionary, but a flawed “everyman.”

In spite of their best efforts, the rangers’ educational attempts are outshone by the glare of commerce. The National Park Service employees enrich the site’s meanings in tours and exhibits and cell-house tapes, but their words are buried in an avalanche of alternative images. Rangers struggle to sell a complex story, while the gift shops at Fisherman’s Wharf can profitably tout “Escape from Alcatraz” t-shirts; cineplexes can sell tickets to movies such as The Rock; and pornographers can offer memberships to websites that feature sex scenes set on Alcatraz. The Rock is less an island in these commercial streams than a highly marketable brand name.

In contrast, Robben Island’s history has thus far avoided the trivializing forces upon public consciousness that frustrate Alcatraz rangers. Responses to the onsite survey coupled with interviews with museum staff in 1998 and 1999 confirm that people come to Robben Island foremost to learn about Nelson Mandela and the political leadership of the resistance, and secondarily to explore their interest in (South) African history and culture. Further, almost half of the tourists surveyed in December 1999 mentioned that over the course of their visit to the Robben Island Museum they felt both sadness and admiration or respect for the prisoners’ courage and forgiveness. As the Director and one of the museum’s foundational planners put it, presenting the history of the prisoners’ past in a dignified manner serves not only “an academic notion of keeping this island sacred”, but also assures the long-term economic sustainability of the museum enterprise through maintaining its “historical integrity”, as a “commodity” for which there is considerable public demand (Director Odendaal interview 1999).

The internationally observed conditions of Robben Island stirred emotions and established the primacy of the prison epoch in the commemoration of the island’s past. To begin with, the South African media were saturated with coverage of the final remaining prisoners’ release and return to the mainland. Following this was the symbolic turning over of the “keys” to Robben Island from the Department of Corrections to the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Tech-
ology, the latter being represented in this ceremony by a large group of former political prisoners. This event also featured a speech by President Mandela, which was delivered before projected images of prominent people associated with the political resistance. Thus, the Island was ceremonially linked with the development of political leadership in its recent history as a prison, and the ability of formerly oppressed non-white populations generally to survive apartheid (Rioufol 1999).

Mandela’s stature as one of the most respected statesmen of the 20th century is an obvious reason for tourists’ preoccupation with his personal experience on Robben Island. Aside from his international best-selling autobiography, Long Walk to Freedom (Mandela 1994), other less heralded yet popular first-account books written by ex-prisoners have similarly contributed to the dominance of the political prison era in public imaginings of the history of the island (e.g., Dlamini 1984; Naidoo 1982). The Robben Island gift shop offers most of these works in keeping with the aforementioned marketing strategy of “dignified” commercialization of the Island’s traumatic past.

In addition to South Africa’s broader ideological context of political transition, the rapidity of the transition of the closure of the prison and its opening as a museum presented both ideological and practical limits on the types of exhibits and museum experiences that could be developed and presented. Stories of the ex-political prisoners moved to the foreground in no small part because they were the most immediately accessible and presentable of Robben Island’s many “histories.” As Museum management repeatedly stressed, with limited time and resources, tours given by ex-political prisoner guides served as both a poignant and practical option: they were meant to provide employment for a particularly marginalized segment of South African society as well as serve as a powerful draw for paying customers (Director Odendaal interview 1999; Fine and Haskell 1985).

Despite the factors that enabled the emergence and propagation of the Robben Island’s “master narrative”, this message is not universally supported. It is challenged not by commercially interested outsiders, as in the case of Alcatraz, but by the emerging voices of lesser-known former prisoners with alternative visions of the Island’s meanings. Harriet Deacon recalls that in the early days of the museum and at the time of its ascension to World Heritage Site status it was difficult to depart from the triumph narrative without appearing to betray the “new” South Africa (Deacon 2000). Further, many tour guides themselves point out that they alter interpretations according to their judgment of tourists’ receptivity and sophistication (tour guide Davis interview 1999). Taking these two points together, the passage of time may create interpretive space for less uplifting appreciations of apartheid’s horrors and engender greater interest in stories that digress from triumph narratives to detail the differences of opinion and conflicts between different groups of prisoners.

CONCLUSION

Heritage designers of dark tourism sites arrive on the scene after places of suffering have become famous. They inherit official accounts
and popular stories and they constantly catch up with and cater to tourists’ preconceived notions and expectations. South Africa’s anti-Apartheid movement and Hollywood’s myth factory largely set the stage for story telling once these closed prisons were opened up to tourists. In spite of rangers’ best efforts to encourage tourists to see Alcatraz in all its complexity, many continue to pose comically inside open cells. In contrast, Robben Island’s interpretation staff (many of them former prisoners under the apartheid regime) preserve an official message (reinforced through its recent designation as a World Heritage Site) of victory over adversity, even as many South Africans’ feelings of disillusionment and frustration in the “new” South Africa mount (Aitkenhead 2000; Baker 2001).

To describe prison history tourism as “good” is too good, and “dark” too stark. Alcatraz was never simply a maximum-security prison with nothing to offer site interpreters but a story of punishment. As a consuming place and a place consumed, Alcatraz is multi-hued (Urry 1995). From its splashy opening, to its controversial operation, to its ignominious closure and its unsanctioned occupation, its history was colorful. Even while it functioned as a prison, Alcatraz generated sensational stories, in testimony before public inquiries, in news coverage of daring breakouts, in the memoirs of former prisoners and prison personnel. But more than any other publicity generator, blockbuster films put Alcatraz on the mental map of Americans and international consumers of films made in the United States. A host of other lesser entrepreneurs, including former prisoners, warders, and residents on Alcatraz island, have profited by that cinematic success. Tourists may be misled, but misleading representations do lead them to the Rock, ready to consume the abandoned prison’s history.

Similarly, Robben Island’s interpretation is only partly the product of heritage managers’ museological concepts. While the “crucible of political transformation” and “triumph of the human spirit” interpretations currently dominate, the stories that register most powerfully are Nelson Mandela’s and his comrades’ particular struggles and achievements. Consequently some Robben Island Museum staff worry that the “silent majority’s” stories are marginalized and those of the less famous ordinary convicts sidelined, a set of concerns that echo recent critiques of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a mechanism that overstated the completeness of the reconciliation process (Leman-Langlois 1999; Rioufol 1999, 2000). To their credit, many initiatives undertaken by the museum have sought to broaden messages. Despite concerns, therefore, it does seem to perform an educational function that is part of a broader political effort to create a just multi-ethnic future for South Africa. Onsite surveys and participant observation suggest that Robben Island engenders a strong, and in most cases positive, emotive response among tourists, particularly respect and admiration for the prisoners who endured and overcame maltreatment.

The refashioning of punishment as a tourism product raises ethical questions about the commodification of suffering and its evident entertainment value, as some scholars have warned (Lennon and Foley 1999; Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Watson and Kopachevsky 1994).
Recreations of tragedy can easily pander to ghoulish voyeurism, especially when economic pressures and dwindling heritage budgets create pressure to boost ticket sales. Although Alcatraz’s interpretation is already overshadowed by commercialized representations, and while Robben Island may yet succumb to its “theme park” marketing potential (Shackley 2001) both sites have the capacity to “posit questions, or introduce anxiety and doubt about modernity and its consequences” (Lennon and Foley 2000:12). Moreover, the educative value of prison history tourism will grow as the West enters an era during which penal institutions operate increasingly beyond public view (Kempa 2003; Pratt 2003). As Pratt (2003) argues, the “disappearance” of prisons makes it possible for less civilized modes of punishment to flourish. Historic penal sites may be gloomy, but their interpretation provokes debate when frames of remembrance, forged by external political pressure and internal policies, illuminate disturbing practices and institutions. Preserved prisons are stony silent witnesses to the things former regimes were prepared to do to people who violated laws or who seemed threatening or suspicious. The murkiest project of all would be to close them to tourists rather than to confront the ongoing challenge of interpreting incarceration, punishment, and forced isolation.

Acknowledgements—The authors thank Clifford Shearing and Joy Angeles for their teamwork in carrying out the fieldwork towards this project. They are also grateful to KPMG South Africa for their work in compiling a market research report from the survey data collected as part of our fieldwork. Particular thanks are due to the rangers, tour guides, and other staff of Alcatraz and Robben Island Museum who accommodated this study over the course of very busy tourism seasons. The program of study of which this paper forms a part is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

REFERENCES

Bluecloud P., ed. 1972 Alcatraz is not an Island Berkeley: Wingbow.

Buntman, F., and T. Juang

Champion, D.
1975 Alcatraz Goes Public. San Francisco Chronicle (October 26).

Deacon, H.
2000 Memory and History at Robben Island, Paper presented at the Memory and History Conference, University of Cape Town.

Deegan, H.

DeNevi, D.

Dlamini, M.

Dobbs, K.

Fine, E., and J. Haskell

Foley, M., and J. Lennon

Foote, K.

Glassberg, D.

Hewison, R.

Hutton, B.

Irvin-Zarecka, I.

Johnson T., J. Nagel and D. Champagne, eds.
1997 American Indian Activism: Alcatraz to the Longest Walk Urbana IL: University Press.

Kathrada, A.

Kempe, M.

Leman-Langlois, S.

Lennon J., and M. Foley, eds.
2000 Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster London: Continuum.
Loo, T.

Loo, T., and C. Strange

Lowenthal, D.
1985 The Past is a Foreign Country. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MacCannell, D.

MacDonald, S.

Mandela, N.

Mankiller, W., and M. Wallis

Naidoo, I.

n.a.

Pratt, J.

Rioufol, V.


Robben Island Museum

Rojek, C.

Rojek C., and J. Urry, eds.

Ruth, D.

Seaton, A.


Shackley, M.

Smith, P., and R. Warrior

Solnit, R.
1988 Connecting with The Rock. Artweek (October 22).
Strange, C.
Strange, C., and T. Loo
Tunbridge, J., and G. Ashworth
Tutu, D.
Urry, J.
Walsh, J.
Watson, H., and J. Kopachevsky
Watson, P.
Young, J.