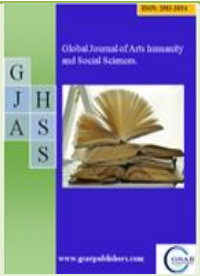


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Critical Digital Humanities and Dark Tourism: Reimagining Materialities of Memory at the Aljube Museum

By

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Abstract

This article examines how Critical Digital Humanities can contribute to the creation of new materialities of memory within the field of Dark Tourism. Drawing on empirical research conducted at the Aljube Museum in Lisbon (Portugal), the study highlights a recurring tension between narrative and evidence. Focus groups revealed that some secondary school students expressed skepticism about the violence of the Estado Novo regime, while several citizens lamented the absence of tangible traces of repression. These reactions underscore a broader challenge in memory politics: when physical evidence is scarce or absent, museums risk failing to foster empathy, identification, and critical reflection among visitors. The article argues that this absence should be understood not only as a museological limitation but also as an opportunity for intervention through Critical Digital Humanities. By employing digital archives, immersive reconstructions, and critical visualizations, DH can generate new forms of materiality that make silenced histories visible and amplify marginalized voices. Framed through postcolonial perspectives the discussion emphasizes the need to resist erasure and to integrate colonial and subaltern experiences into memory work. Ultimately, the article demonstrates how Critical Digital Humanities can enrich Dark Tourism sites by bridging gaps between contested pasts and contemporary publics, offering new pathways for education, empathy, and social responsibility in post-authoritarian and postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Critical Digital Humanities; Dark Tourism; Memory Politics; Estado Novo

Introduction

Dark Tourism has increasingly been recognized as a field where memory, heritage, and politics intersect. While much of the scholarship has focused on theoretical debates about death, suffering, and commemoration (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Seaton, 1996; Stone et al., 2018), less attention has been paid to how visitors themselves negotiate the absence or presence of material evidence in sites of repression. This article addresses that gap by drawing on empirical research conducted at the Aljube Museum in Lisbon (Portugal), a site dedicated to remembering the resistance to the Estado Novo dictatorship and to its political police, called PIDE (Polícia Internacional de Defesa do Estado, in English International State Defense Police).

The study is based on focus groups with diverse participants, including women of the resistance, secondary school students, young activists, and citizens without prior activist involvement. Across these groups, a recurring tension emerged between narrative and materiality. Some younger students expressed skepticism about whether the Estado Novo regime had truly exercised violence, while several citizens lamented the lack of tangible traces of repression. These reactions reveal a broader challenge in memory politics: when physical evidence is scarce or absent, museums risk failing to foster empathy, identification, and critical reflection among visitors.

While this absence of materiality is indeed a museological limitation, we believe it also presents an opportunity for intervention through Critical Digital Humanities (DH). By situating



the Portuguese case within these debates, this article argues that Critical DH can help create new materialities of memory that respond to visitors' desire for tangible evidence. Digital archives, immersive reconstructions, and critical visualizations can make silenced histories visible and amplify marginalized voices. At the same time, these interventions must be critically designed to avoid reproducing hegemonic narratives and to integrate colonial and subaltern experiences into memory work.

As scholars like Riande & Fiormonte (2022) have noted, Digital Humanities (DH) "incorporates as central elements in the construction of its epistemology not only the development of a theoretical-methodological framework, but also the use of digital tools, languages, and resources that are often interpreted in terms of standards" (p.8) which were largely produced and imposed by the Global North (Berry, 2014). In accordance, Isasi & Flores (2023) believe that digital humanities projects often reproduce national or monolingual frameworks and reflect Eurocentric technological infrastructures. Such limitations risk perpetuating silences and exclusions in the digital cultural record. Postcolonial digital humanities, as articulated by Risam (2018), calls for designing new archives, tools, and workflows that actively resist reinscriptions of colonialism and neocolonialism.

The aim of the article is therefore twofold: first, to present empirical findings that highlight the challenges of absence in a Dark Tourism site; and second, to reflect on how Critical Digital Humanities, informed by postcolonial perspectives, can offer new pathways for education, empathy, and social responsibility in post-authoritarian and postcolonial contexts.

Literature review

Scholarship on Dark Tourism has long emphasized its connection to death, suffering, and commemoration. Seaton (1996) defined thanatourism as travel motivated by encounters with death, while Lennon and Foley (2000) framed Dark Tourism as a modern phenomenon tied to twentieth-century atrocities. Subsequent work has expanded these definitions, highlighting the universal yet culturally specific ways in which societies remember and represent mortality (Cohen, 2018; Stone, 2018).

A recurring theme in this literature is the tension between mortality as universal and materiality as local. While death is shared by all humans, the ways in which it is commemorated vary across cultures and contexts. Scholars such as Maddrell and Sidaway (2010), Stone (2013), and Young & Light (2016) have examined "deathscapes" and heterotopias where memory is spatially inscribed, while Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) developed the notion of "dissonant heritage," emphasizing how contested pasts are selectively remembered or erased. These debates underscore that Dark Tourism sites are not neutral spaces but politically charged arenas where memory is negotiated, silenced, or commodified.

In the Portuguese case, the Aljube Museum, located in a former political prison, exemplifies these tensions. Dedicated to remembering the resistance to the oppression of the Estado Novo

dictatorship and its political police, it faces the challenge of representing repression in the absence of abundant physical evidence. As our empirical findings show, visitors - especially younger students - sometimes doubt the reality of past violence, while others lament the lack of tangible traces. This reflects broader concerns in Dark Tourism scholarship about the role of materiality in fostering empathy and identification (Friedrich et al., 2018; Roberts, 2018).

Digital Humanities (DH) offers tools and frameworks that can address the problem of absence. However, as we have previously stated, many DH projects remain confined to national or monolingual frameworks, reflecting Eurocentric infrastructures and failing to integrate subaltern perspectives. As Risam (2018) puts it, "digital humanities practitioners do so in the context of a politics of knowledge that has not been hospitable to those outside the dominant cultures of the Global North" (p.5).

Critical Digital Humanities, as articulated by Berry (2014) and Liu (2013), insists on the need for cultural critique and reflexivity in digital practice. Drucker (2011, 2014) emphasizes that visualization and interface design are not neutral but interpretive acts, shaping how knowledge is perceived. These insights highlight the importance of designing digital interventions that do not merely reproduce hegemonic narratives, but instead "engage with the structures and foundations of the digital. These need to be explored both in their materiality and in their ideological affordances, not only to offer critique, but also to develop new concepts and ways of thinking" (Berry, 2014, p. 12).

Postcolonial Digital Humanities, as proposed by Risam (2018), extends this critique by foregrounding the silences and exclusions in the digital cultural record. Risam (2018) argues that colonial and neocolonial dynamics are often reinscribed in digital archives and tools, perpetuating epistemic violence against marginalized communities. Thus, she posits Postcolonial DH as "an approach to uncovering and intervening in the disruptions within the digital cultural record produced by colonialism and neocolonialism" (Risam, 2018, p. 3). For Risam (2018), the promise of DH lies in its capacity to create new archives, workflows, and digital objects that resist erasure and amplify underrepresented voices.

This perspective resonates strongly with the Portuguese context. The memory of the Estado Novo is not only authoritarian but also colonial, and the absence of material evidence in museums like Aljube risks reinforcing silences around colonial violence.

The absence of material traces of oppression is a common scenario in post-authoritarian contexts (Forest & Johnson, 2001). This may be due to a number of reasons. Buildings and records that could serve as evidence of violence and oppression may be destroyed preventively to avoid their identification, but they may also be subject to obliteration and/or defacement by new governments or influential groups as a way of breaking with the past (Macdonald, 2009; Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). In Portugal, it was a combination of both factors that led to the current scarcity of physical traces of violence and oppression during the Estado Novo (Pinto, 2010; Rosas, 2007).



We mustn't forget that the repressive apparatus of the Estado Novo also included a system of detention centers, prisons, and internment camps - called "penal colonies" - that extended throughout the former Portuguese Colonial Empire (Caldeira et al., 2011; Madeira et al., 2007). Existing testimonies report extreme levels of torture practiced by PIDE agents in these places, where the death of prisoners was considered a common occurrence (Madeira et al., 2007; Rosas, 2018). However, most records were hidden, lost, or destroyed, the existence of the camps was largely erased from memory, and the massacres and war crimes in the colonies were silenced and removed from public discourse (Rosas, 2018). Critical and postcolonial DH provide a framework for reimagining materiality in ways that integrate these dimensions, creating digital heterotopias that can expand the scope of memory work beyond the limitations of physical artifacts.

Bringing these strands together, the literature suggests that Dark Tourism sites are contested spaces where memory is negotiated, and that Critical DH can intervene to create new materialities of memory. By combining insights from heritage studies (Logan & Reeves, 2009; Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996), Dark Tourism scholarship (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Seaton, 1996; Stone et al., 2018), and postcolonial DH (Riande & Fiormonte, 2022; Risam, 2018), this article positions the Aljube Museum as a possible case study for exploring how digital interventions can respond to visitors' desire for tangible evidence, while critically addressing silences and exclusions in the politics of memory.

Empirical context and findings

The Aljube prison became a political prison during the Portuguese dictatorship around 1928. It was under the direct administration of the PIDE from 1934 to 1965, when it was finally closed (Caldeira et al., 2011). The prison's official records and files were destroyed, making it impossible to know the exact numbers and extent of the atrocities perpetrated there. However, during the period when it was a political prison, the Aljube Prison was a place where thousands of prisoners were subjected to extreme isolation, degrading and humiliating conditions, and physical and emotional torture (Caldeira et al., 2011).

In 2015, the Aljube Prison became the Aljube Museum: Resistance and Freedom. This museum was designed to serve the dual purpose of educating visitors about the period of dictatorship in Portugal and the actions of resistance, and preserving memories and testimonies of those times (EGEAC, 2020). To this end, in addition to the exhibition area, it has an Educational Service and a Documentation Center.

The empirical foundation of this article derives from focus groups conducted with four distinct constituencies: Women of the Resistance, Secondary School Students, Young Activists, and Citizens without prior activist involvement. Each group was interviewed after having visited the museum and provided unique insights into how the Aljube Museum communicates memory of repression under the Estado Novo regime, and how visitors respond to the absence of material evidence.

Women of the Resistance

Former female members of antifascist resistance movements emphasized the importance of testimony and personal memory. For them, the museum functions as a site of recognition and validation of lived experience.

Members of this group did not seem particularly disturbed by the materiality of the violence, suffering, and death perpetrated by the Estado Novo regime, as depicted in the Aljube Museum exhibition. They shared personal experiences and those of people close to them who were victims of Estado Novo repression. Persecution, torture, clandestinity, and even death were part of these subjects' experiences during the Estado Novo. Therefore, for these subjects, the immaterial aspects of oppression, violence, and suffering perpetrated by the Estado Novo conveyed through the exhibition content of the Aljube Museum are the most striking.

Secondary School Students

This group expressed a strong interest in material elements of the Museum that referred to or portrayed aspects of the oppression perpetrated by the Estado Novo - such as the reconstructions of the isolation cells and the auditory environment experienced by prisoners in Aljube during the Estado Novo. They also lamented the loss of other material traces of oppression during this period. The secondary school students in the group even expressed their disbelief that such oppression had actually occurred, since they had never seen material evidence to support it:

Was it really like they say? We have to take their word for it, or we can choose not to believe them. Now, with the instruments and other types of evidence, there is no reason not to believe it. (SujES7)

Among these students, skepticism was particularly pronounced. As the quote shows, some questioned whether the Estado Novo and its political police had truly exercised violence, expressing doubt in the absence of tangible evidence. This reaction underscores the challenge of transmitting historical trauma to audiences who lack direct generational memory.

Young Activists

This group tended to approach the museum with a critical awareness of contemporary struggles, drawing parallels between past repression and current social issues.

The subjects showed a propensity for the immaterial aspects of oppression and violence perpetrated by the Estado Novo regime, as conveyed in the narrative of the Aljube Museum. Nevertheless, at least one member also noted the difficulty of engaging with narratives that lacked material anchors. For them, the absence of physical traces risked reducing the museum experience to abstract storytelling rather than embodied history.

Unlike, for example, the Women of the Resistance group, where this characteristic was more pronounced, in this group there were subjects who showed a preference for representations of the materiality of death and suffering perpetrated by the Estado Novo

in the museum's exhibition content. As SujJA2 points out, this materiality was conveyed through:

(...) the visual elements, the photos, which are graphic, are immediate. The cells that are bodily experiences. That we can enter and feel the space, oppressive even. So, for me, the shock is very physical, it's the visual, it's the space, not so much the discourse.

Citizens without Activist Background

The subjects in this group were particularly moved by representations of the materiality of death and suffering perpetrated by the Estado Novo, both in photographs and reconstructions of the cells, and in the film simulating an interrogation by the PIDE. These subjects also lamented the loss of documents and other material evidence of death and suffering, believing that a focus on materiality would be an added value for the Aljube Museum:

The museum maybe lack living works, such as the statues that are there... not only speech, not only writing, which are (...) telling the truth about things, but for me it is still not enough. Because people read and forget. If we come here and see more images, for example, what has been put there on those screens, I believe it says more to people. (SujCC1)

This excerpt from SujCC4's speech eloquently summarizes the meaning of the speeches of the subjects in this group about the materiality of death and suffering present in the Aljube Museum:

It's one thing for me to see a prisoner there, the way he was, already dead, and another thing for them to tell me (...). You hear it, but seeing it, "touching" it, in quotation marks, is totally different from just hearing it. Hearing leaves something behind, but seeing it stays with you.

These responses highlight the broader museological challenge of representing violence when archives are incomplete or destroyed.

Across all groups, two main themes emerged. The first revolved around the opposition of narrative vs. materiality: while narratives of repression were acknowledged, their impact was weakened by the absence of physical evidence. The second had to do with generational distance and low political awareness. Younger participants, lacking lived memory, but also having a low degree of political awareness, were more likely to express doubt or disengagement, underscoring the need for new forms of mediation.

These findings suggest a gap between the museum's narrative strategies and visitors' desire for tangible materiality. They also point to the potential of Critical DH to intervene, creating new forms of evidence and presence that can bridge this gap.

Discussion: Towards New Materialities through Critical Digital Humanities

The empirical findings reveal a recurring tension between narrative and materiality in the Aljube Museum. While testimonies and narratives of repression are present, visitors, especially younger audiences and those with a lower degree of political awareness, often struggle to engage without tangible evidence. This absence of

materiality risks undermining the museum's ability to foster empathy, identification, and critical reflection. At the same time, it opens a space for rethinking how memory can be mediated through digital interventions.

Digital Humanities projects have the capacity to assemble dispersed or fragile archives, making them accessible to wider publics. In contexts where physical traces of repression are scarce, digital archives can provide new forms of evidence that respond to visitors' desire for materiality. However, as Isasi & Flores (2023) note, many DH initiatives remain confined to national or monolingual frameworks, reflecting Eurocentric infrastructures – they cannot be dissociated from geophysical realities (Riande & Fiormonte, 2022). Critical DH must therefore move beyond these limitations, designing archives that integrate multilingual, multicultural, and subaltern perspectives.

Visitors' skepticism and disengagement highlight the need for embodied experiences. Tools such as augmented or virtual reality can reconstruct prison cells, interrogation rooms, or everyday life under dictatorship, offering immersive encounters that bridge the gap between narrative and materiality. Drucker (2014) reminds us that visualization and interface design are interpretive acts, not neutral representations. Thus, immersive reconstructions must be critically designed to avoid sensationalism or commodification, instead fostering empathy and critical reflection.

Visualization can also serve as a powerful tool for making repression visible. Mapping networks of political prisons and concentration camps, charting numbers of detainees, or visualizing colonial violence can provide visitors with concrete, data-driven insights. Yet, as Berry (2014) argues, computational systems are embedded in ideological affordances and must be critically interrogated:

critical theory (...) must engage with the structures and foundations of the digital. These need to be explored both in their materiality and in their ideological affordances, not only to offer critique, but also to develop new concepts and ways of thinking in relation to the new streaming technical world. (Berry, 2014, p. 12)

Critical visualization can therefore function as a counter-narrative, exposing silences and challenging hegemonic representations. Beyond archives and visualization, narrative interfaces, such as interactive storytelling or character-based audio guides, can create affective connections between visitors and historical subjects. Sather-Wagstaff (2011) emphasizes that Dark Tourism facilitates empathy with victims, but this empathy is always mediated by political discourse. Digital storytelling can help situate visitors within these discourses, encouraging them to reflect critically on both past and present injustices.

The Portuguese case illustrates how Dark Tourism sites are not only spaces of commemoration but also arenas where contested histories are negotiated. The Aljube Museum, dedicated to remembering resistance and repression under the Estado Novo, embodies the challenges of representing authoritarian violence in

the absence of abundant material evidence. Yet this absence is not neutral: it reflects broader dynamics of silencing and erasure that extend beyond the dictatorship to Portugal's colonial past. Indeed, the Portuguese case underscores the importance of integrating colonial dimensions into memory work. The Estado Novo was not only authoritarian but also colonial, and its violence extended beyond metropolitan repression to colonial subjects. Risam (2018) argues that postcolonial DH must design tools and workflows rooted in local practices, resisting universalist models and amplifying marginalized voices:

These practices which favor the particular over the universal, offer the promise of a more expansive humanities that takes advantage of the technological means of digital knowledge production to create space for underrepresented communities to populate the digital cultural record with their own stories (Risam, 2018, p. 9).

Applying this perspective to the Aljube Museum suggests that digital interventions should not only reconstruct metropolitan repression but also integrate colonial violence, thereby expanding the scope of memory politics for the museum.

As Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) argue, heritage is always selective, shaped by deliberate choices of inclusion and exclusion. In Portugal, the memory of the Estado Novo has often been narrated primarily through metropolitan repression, while colonial violence has remained marginal or silenced (Rosas, 2018). This selective remembrance risks reproducing what Logan and Reeves (2009) call difficult heritage, where shame and discomfort lead to avoidance or erasure.

Berry (2014) and Liu (2013) remind us that digital infrastructures are not neutral but embedded in ideological affordances. Drucker (2014) highlights that visualization and interface design are interpretive acts. Together, these arguments stress the importance of critically designing digital projects to avoid reinforcing dominant perspectives. In the Portuguese context, specifically at the Aljube Museum, this means creating digital heterotopias that challenge silences, amplify marginalized voices, and situate memory within broader postcolonial struggles.

Postcolonial digital humanities, as articulated by Risam (2018), provides a possible framework for addressing these silences. It emphasizes that the digital cultural record often reproduces colonial and neocolonial dynamics, perpetuating epistemic violence against marginalized communities: "the digital cultural record (...) has a chronic problem of epistemic violence, which contravenes cultural survival for communities whose languages are underrepresented, histories are suppressed, and stories are untold" (Risam, 2018, p. 4). For Risam (2018), then, the promise of DH lies in designing archives, tools, and workflows that actively resist erasure and create space for communities to tell their own stories.

This perspective resonates with the Aljube case. The absence of material traces of repression, combined with the marginalization of colonial violence, underscores the need for digital interventions that foreground silenced histories. Thus, Critical DH, informed by

a postcolonial perspective, can help construct new materialities that integrate both metropolitan and colonial dimensions, ensuring that memory work does not reproduce hegemonic narratives.

Conclusions

This article positions Critical Digital Humanities as a mediating force in Dark Tourism. It argues how DH can enrich sites like the Aljube Museum by responding to visitors' desire for materiality, fostering empathy, and enabling critical reflection. More broadly, it argues that DH, when practiced critically and postcolonially, can transform contested heritage into spaces of education, social responsibility, and reconciliation. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates about the role of memory, heritage, and digital technologies in shaping how societies confront difficult pasts

The empirical study at the Aljube Museum demonstrates that the politics of memory in Dark Tourism sites are deeply shaped by the tension between narrative and materiality. Visitors' responses, ranging from students' skepticism about repression to citizens' lament over the absence of tangible traces, highlight the limits of narrative alone in fostering empathy and identification. These findings underscore a broader challenge in post-authoritarian contexts: how to represent violence and oppression when physical evidence is scarce or erased.

We believe that Critical DH offers a productive framework for addressing this challenge. By creating new materialities through digital archives, immersive reconstructions, critical visualizations, and narrative interfaces, DH can bridge the gap between narrative and evidence. Yet these interventions must be critically designed, attentive to ideological affordances and postcolonial silences. As Risam (2018) argues, postcolonial DH requires praxis that resists reinscriptions of colonialism and amplifies marginalized voices. In the Portuguese case, this means integrating both metropolitan repression and colonial violence into digital memory work, ensuring that silences are not perpetuated.

By situating the Aljube Museum within postcolonial DH, we sought to highlight how digital interventions can resist erasure and reimagine memory politics. Critical and postcolonial perspectives emphasize that DH is not simply a technical solution but a political and ethical practice. In post-authoritarian and postcolonial contexts, such as Portugal, Critical DH can help transform Dark Tourism sites into spaces of critical reflection, empathy, and social responsibility.

Ultimately, we believe that Critical DH can respond to the empirical challenges identified in the Aljube Museum. By creating new materialities, be it through archives, immersive reconstructions, visualizations, or narrative interfaces, DH can bridge the gap between narrative and evidence. Yet these interventions must be critically and postcolonially informed, ensuring that they resist erasure, avoid commodification, and amplify silenced voices. In this way, Critical DH can help transform Dark Tourism sites such as the Aljube Museum into spaces of education, empathy, and social responsibility.

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