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## **A Dark Experience at the House of Tears: The Consequences of Historical Patriarchy and Intersectionality and the Potential for Social Change**

### **Abstract**

This study examines visitors' emotional and reflective experiences at the Casa Figueroa Museum in Taxco, Mexico, and explores how their experiences connect to the themes of dark tourism, patriarchy, feminist intersectionality and social mobilisation. It focuses upon a 'secret room' in which young women hid during the Mexican Revolution which embodies various characteristics of dark tourism. Participants reported various negative emotions which prompted reflections on both historical and contemporary gender-based violence. The research reveals that although some visitors recognised the intersection of class privilege with gender oppression, others focused narrowly on individual suffering, reflecting varying levels of critical engagement. Furthermore, the study highlights the challenges of translating emotional responses into social mobilisation, with some participants expressing a desire to act against gender inequalities while others were unsure of which steps to take and feared that it would be ultimately inconsequential. The findings emphasise the importance of heritage spaces in fostering awareness of systemic inequalities, while suggesting that further support may be needed to encourage meaningful social action.

**Keywords:** *Dark Tourism, Patriarchy, Feminist Intersectionality, Social Mobilisation, Heritage Tourism Management*

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**Mark Speakman.** (Corresponding Author). Autonomous University of Guerrero. Address: CIPES 16 de septiembre #42 San Mateo, Chilpancingo CP 39022. Tel: 00 52 55 49679926

**Email:** mspeakmanuagro@outlook.com

**Flor Alejandra Trigo Hernández.** Autonomous University of Guerrero. Address: CIPES 16 de septiembre #42. San Mateo Chilpancingo CP 39022 Tel: 0052 747 159 9252

**Email:** lorien.vwk340@gmail.com

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Speakman, M. and Hernandez, F.A.T.

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## 1. Introduction

The Casa Figueroa Museum, also known as the House of Tears, provides visitors with a two-sided experience. It is officially presented as a heritage attraction containing traditional arts and craftwork for visitors to peruse and admire, yet the museum's tragic history also positions it as a site that resonates with dark tourism. Guides recount tales of the past that include the suffering of indigenous workers involved in the construction of the house (hence it being named locally as the house of tears), and violent incidents, such as an owner shooting dead his daughter's suitor and the murder of an old lady by workers (Diez Castrejon, 1980). Most notably, the museum features a 'secret room', where a group of young women hid during the Mexican Revolution to escape the sexual violence that was commonplace at this time. Over the course of several months, the room became overcrowded which resulted in several deaths by suffocation. The room has been arranged to closely resemble its original state to demonstrate the conditions experienced by the women who sought refuge there.

Therefore, while the room highlights a tragic episode in the house's history, it also reveals the normalisation of gender violence within the patriarchal structure of Mexican society at the time of the Revolution (Fernandez, 2009; Lagarde, 2008; Smith, 2009; Toledo Vasquez, 2009). On a subliminal level, it also reveals how gender inequality continues to influence Mexican society on both a structural and ideological level despite efforts to challenge patriarchal norms (Okoroafor & Iheriohanma, 2014; Rios Cazares, 2017; Frias Martinez, 2008). Moreover, the room exemplifies how class intersected with gender oppression, with only women from privileged backgrounds allowed to seek refuge. This highlights not only the impact of patriarchy but also how class structures create further inequality among women (Crenshaw Williams, 1991)

This study aims to examine the extent to which visitors connect historical and contemporary gender oppression, and how their emotional responses to the secret room (Farmaki, 2013) contribute to critical reflections on these issues (Gonzalez Tennant, 2013; Leach, Mehta, & Prabhakaran, 2016; Weaver, Tang, & Sheng, 2018; Qiu Zhang, Fan, Tse, & King, 2017). Additionally, it explores the potential for these reflections to lead to social mobilisation (Soulard, Stewart, Larson, & Samson, 2022). On a practical level, the study will also provide recommendations for the management of the museum and similar heritage sites to foster deeper engagement and encourage visitors to take an active role in addressing societal issues.

## 2. Literature Review

The following section explores the role of the Figueroa Museum's secret room within the framework of dark tourism. It considers themes such as the persistence of patriarchy, the impact of feminist intersectionality, and the capacity of dark tourism sites to encourage reflection on societal injustices and potentially inspire social mobilisation.

### 2.1 *The Figueroa Museum as a Dark Tourism Attraction*

The secret room at the Figueroa Museum occupies a somewhat unique position within the framework of dark tourism. Traditionally, dark tourism involves deliberate visits to sites explicitly associated with death, suffering, or atrocities, such as concentration camps or war memorials (Light, 2017). These sites are promoted and visited with the expectation that visitors will face unsettling historical truths, particularly in the case of those that fall on the darker end of Stone's (2006) spectrum. Other sites, though perhaps less intense—such as those Stone (2006) refers to as 'dark fun factories'—are still designed and presented as dark tourism attractions. However, the Figueroa Museum, primarily recognised as a cultural heritage site, attracts visitors for its artistic and historical significance rather than its

association with tragedy, hence, most visitors come unaware of the darker events of its past. In this sense, the secret room fits within Stone's (2005) concept of 'unintentional dark tourism', where individuals encounter dark elements at places not explicitly marketed as such.

Once encountered, however, it is suggested that the secret room has the potential to evoke many of the same emotional and intellectual responses that are central to dark tourism. The history of the room, where women sought refuge and some lost their lives, encourages reflection on hardship, tragedy and social inequality—key themes in dark tourism (Farmaki, 2013; Ivanova & Light, 2018; Magano, Fraiz-Brea, & Leite, 2022)). Though unexpected for many visitors, the room's story forces them to confront an uncomfortable historical reality and its connotations, therefore while the museum is primarily a heritage site, the secret room can be viewed as a dark tourism element within it.

## ***2.2 Patriarchy and Gender Violence in Mexico***

Patriarchy has deep historical roots dating back to ancient Mesopotamia (Lerner, 1986). It is concerned with the systemic inequality of women within societal institutions such as the family, workplace, religion, and education (Diamini & Adams, 2014; Makama, 2013). Dobash & Dobash (1979) describe patriarchy as consisting of two core components: structural and ideological patriarchy. Structural patriarchy is evident in the hierarchical organisation of social institutions, which males tend to control, while ideological patriarchy is the societal acceptance of these power imbalances, in effect legitimising structural patriarchy (Smith, 1990). As Bahlieda (2015: 15) observes, patriarchy, "now draped in the clothing of postmodern civilization, continues to function in much the same way it did thousands of years ago.

Violence against women is widely regarded as a direct consequence of patriarchal structures (Frias Gonzalez, 2008; Yilo & Straus, 1990). While much of the literature on this topic focuses on partner violence, patriarchal systems also contribute to the widespread violence against women during periods of conflict and social upheaval (Fanm, 2022). For instance, during the Rwandan genocide in 1994, the breakdown of societal protections led to rampant violence against women (Burnet, 2015).

In Mexico, patriarchy has long been embedded within society. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mexican women were generally expected to stay at home with educational opportunities limited to those from upper-class families (Kilroy, 2019). The impact of patriarchy was particularly evident during the Mexican Revolution, where sexual violence against women became widespread. Macias (1980: 75) describes how "During the worst years of the fighting, rape followed by murder became as commonplace as the routine shooting of prisoners. Hundreds of thousands of women... died in the gratuitous slaughter that marked the period or perished from disease, exposure, and hunger". Despite the rise of feminist movements in recent decades, patriarchy remains deeply entrenched within Mexican society (Frias Martinez, 2010), reinforced by cultural notions of *machismo*, which glorifies male dominance (Goldwert, 1980; Lipsett Rivera, 2019).

## ***2.3 The Secret Room as an Example of Intersectional Feminism***

Ciurria (2020: 2) defines intersectional feminism as a "system of analysis and praxis that embodies feminist concerns and is suitably sensitive to multiple, overlapping intersections of power and oppression". This approach seeks to recognise the complexities of inequality and how different forms of oppression intersect to create diverse experiences for individuals in marginalised groups. As hooks (1984: 69) notes, "patriarchy does not negate the existence of class and race privilege or exploitation." In other words, women should not be treated as a uniform group, as doing so risks overlooking important differences in their experiences. Instead, these variations should be considered based on factors such as age, class, ethnicity, and sexuality (Crenshaw Williams, 1991; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020).

From this perspective, the secret room at the Figueroa Museum not only exemplifies the impact of patriarchy but also serves as an illustration of intersectional feminism. The young women who sought refuge in the room came from upper-class families, and their access to the house was directly connected to their privileged social status. While these women undoubtedly endured significant hardship, women from lower social classes were denied access to the room and thus remained exposed to violence. Thus, it is essential to consider both the experiences of the women who hid in the secret room and the plight of those who, due to social and economic exclusion, were left excluded. This broader analysis highlights the significance of recognising how marginalisation occurs in the context of oppression.

#### **2.4 Dark Tourism, Emotion, and Social Mobilisation**

The recent *Barbie* film (Gerwig, 2023) was praised for confronting patriarchy (Byrnes, 2024). In a similar way, gazing upon the secret room invites visitors to reflect on issues relating to patriarchy, aligning with Singer's (2006) concept of 'perspective-taking,' where individuals, through empathy with victims, are encouraged to confront societal injustices.

Dark tourism, characterised by the emotional engagement of visitors with themes of suffering and death, offers transformative experiences that encourage reflection on historical injustices and their relevance today (Martini & Buda, 2020). Research highlights a variety of emotional responses provoked by dark tourism, including anger, discomfort, sorrow, frustration, despair, grief, empathy, hope, and inspiration (Austin, 2002; Best, 2007; Montes & Butler, 2008; Stone, 2012; Brown, 2016; Nawjin, van Liempt & Mitas, 2023; Sharpley, 2012; Wang, Shen, Zheng, Wu & Cao, 2021). These emotions often lead visitors to consider broader societal implications beyond the historical narratives being presented.

Although primarily a heritage site, the secret room at the Figueroa Museum shares key elements with dark tourism. By revealing the suffering of the women who sought refuge during the Revolution, the room provokes reflection on both historical oppression and ongoing issues of patriarchy and intersectionality. Furthermore, visitors' emotional engagement has the potential to extend beyond passive observation, inspiring them to take active steps toward addressing societal injustices. As Soulard et al., (2023: 821) suggest, emotional experiences can motivate individuals to raise awareness and participate in social action.

In particular, positive emotions, such as hope and inspiration, play a crucial role in social mobilisation (Brosch & Steg, 2021; Greenaway, Cichocka, van Veelen, Likki & Branscombe, 2016; Summers Effler, 2002). Martini & Buda (2020) propose that museums can foster social catharsis, wherein visitors link historical events to current societal challenges, facilitating both reflection and the possibility for collective action. Within the context of the secret room, this could serve as a catalyst for visitors to connect the struggles of the past with ongoing social movements, fostering a deeper understanding of gender-based oppression and encouraging them to challenge contemporary injustices.

However, while the secret room holds the potential for this type of emotional response and social engagement, this study was necessary to determine whether these reactions do indeed trigger a desire for social action (even if this does not necessarily result in concrete action) or remain confined to personal reflection. In other words, the goal is to understand if the emotional responses generated by the secret room inspire visitors to think critically about patriarchy and female intersectionality and the possibility of engaging with them more actively (and how the findings could be incorporated into future management strategy). The following section will explain the methodology chosen to assess visitors' emotional responses and explore whether these inspire a desire for social engagement or remain as personal reflections.

### 3. Methodology

In 1767, Don Manuel de Flon Tejada, also known as Count Cadena, commissioned the construction of a grand house along a cobblestone street in Taxco de Alarcón, Mexico. As mentioned in the introduction, over the years the property witnessed several tragic events, including a former owner murdering his daughter’s suitor, the killing of an elderly woman by workers in 1935 (O'Donnel, 1953), and, of course, the events linked to the secret room. In 1943, Fidel Figueroa acquired the house and converted it into a museum. After his death, the museum remained closed for two decades, reopening in 2013 under the name Casa Figueroa. The museum now attracts between 400 and 800 visitors per month, with attendance peaking during holidays like Easter.

A qualitative approach was elected because it aligns with the authors' ontological belief in socially constructed realities and the epistemological stance that knowledge is best understood through the subjective experiences of individuals. This interpretivist paradigm emphasises the importance of understanding human experiences from the perspectives of those who live them (Mason, 2002). Additionally, the qualitative approach supports the research objective of examining visitors' “lived experiences” (Creswell, 2007: 57) within the secret room, making semi-structured interviews the most suitable method for data collection.

Fieldwork for the study took place in October and November of 2021. A total of 35 participants—18 women and 17 men—were included, with an average age of 43. All participants were Mexican, reflecting the study's aim to gather insights relevant to Mexican society. Visitors were approached as they left the museum and asked to participate in interviews that would explore their experience at the Museum, in particular within the secret room. The initial questions were designed to determine whether participants perceived the experience as ‘dark’ and how it compared to other dark tourism sites they might have visited. The interviews also sought to investigate the participants' emotional responses to the secret room, particularly their recognition of the influence of patriarchy and feminist intersectionality on the events that took place there. Finally, participants were asked about any potential inclination to engage in social mobilisation against the injustices highlighted in the secret room.

**Table 1:** Interview questions and their objectives

<i>Question category</i>	<i>Example questions</i>	<i>Purpose</i>
<i>Perception of the experience</i>	As you explored the secret room and learned about its history, how did the overall atmosphere affect you? Did anything about it feel unsettling or significant?	To explore how visitors emotionally connected with the atmosphere and story of the secret room, uncovering whether they found the experience significant or unsettling.
<i>Comparison with Other Memorial or Historical Sites</i>	Thinking about other memorial or historical sites you have visited; how does this experience compare? What stands out to you?	To understand how visitors interpret the secret room experience in relation to other sites, helping to highlight its unique or comparative emotional impact.
<i>Emotional Responses to the</i>	As you learned about the women’s story in the secret	To encourage participants to reflect deeply on their

<i>Secret Room</i>	room, how did it make you feel, and did any specific emotions or thoughts stand out?	emotions during the visit, offering insights into how the secret room's story resonated with them.
<i>Recognition of Patriarchy</i>	What do you think about the way women were treated during the Revolution, especially in the context of the secret room? What factors might have contributed to this?	To assess visitors' understanding of gender-based violence, encouraging them to think about the broader historical and societal context that enabled such events.
<i>Recognition of Feminist Intersectionality</i>	Do you think the women's social or economic background influenced their ability to seek refuge in the secret room? How do you view their situation compared to others who didn't have the same opportunity?	To reveal whether participants recognised class-based inequalities, and to explore their reflections on how privilege shaped the women's experiences in the secret room.
<i>Inclination for Social Mobilisation</i>	After reflecting on this experience, do you feel motivated to engage in any actions related to gender or social justice, or did it raise any questions for you about what should be done?	To understand if and how the experience might inspire visitors to reflect on or act against gender and social inequalities, and to explore any lingering questions or doubts they might have.

The interviews were conducted in Spanish by the second author who is Mexican and then transcribed and translated into English by the first author, whose native language is English. To ensure translation accuracy, the cross-language method proposed by Lopez, Figueroa, Connor & Maliski (2008) was used, involving translation and back-translation to minimise errors.

For data analysis, an inductive approach was employed to reveal the participants' recognition of patriarchy and feminist intersectionality, as well as their emotional responses to the secret room experience. The analysis process followed three key steps: first, open coding was conducted to identify relevant words and phrases from the interview transcripts. Next, the codes were grouped into broader themes representing patterns emerging from the data. Finally, the emergent themes were compared with existing theories from the literature (Jennings, 2010; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013) to enhance the interpretation of the finding.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 *The Secret Room as a Site of Darkness*

Although the Museum is primarily presented as a cultural and heritage institution, several participants noted that the secret room carried a sense of darkness and found it somewhat unsettling. Its cramped space and oppressive atmosphere evoked feelings of discomfort, while the narratives provided by the museum guides served to further amplify the experience.

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Some participants immediately recognised a parallel between the secret room and other dark tourism sites that they had previously visited and suggested that the intimate nature of the secret room made it even more impactful. That is, the smaller scale of the space, focusing on individual rather than mass suffering, made the tragedy feel more personal. For example, one participant stated:

*"There was something about the small, confined room that made it feel more intense. It wasn't like other places I've visited—it was more personal, like you could feel the weight of each story in that room."*  
(Participant 2, personal communication, Taxco, 18 October, 2021).

Nonetheless, not all the participants drew such clear connections. Several were unsure whether the secret room aligned with what they understood to be dark tourism, as either they did not have experience with dark tourism, or their previous experiences had involved larger, public memorials or sites of mass death. Some felt that the suffering that had occurred in the room gave it a precarious connection with dark tourism, even though the museum did not frame it as such, while others were more hesitant to place it within this framework, viewing it primarily as a historical exhibit.

*"I wasn't sure if this really fit with what I think of as dark tourism. To me, it felt more like a historical display than a dark tourism site."*  
(Participant 32, personal communication, Taxco, 11 November, 2021).

#### **4.2 Reflections on Patriarchy and Gendered Violence**

The secret room prompted many participants to reflect on the role of patriarchy during the Mexican Revolution. For these, the story of the women hiding to escape violence highlighted how gendered violence was deeply ingrained within Mexico's power structures at the time.

The experience also encouraged some participants to connect historical oppression with ongoing struggles, highlighting the persistence of patriarchy in contemporary Mexican society. For these individuals, the secret room served as a powerful reminder of how gender-based violence and oppression have deep historical roots that continue to affect women's lives today. This awareness led many participants to reflect on the structural inequalities still present in modern Mexican society, including disparities in power, representation, and opportunities between men and women. Indeed, several participants questioned their own role in challenging gender inequality. For some, the experience acted as a catalyst, causing them to consider how their actions or inactions contribute to the situation. For instance, one participant commented:

*"Hearing these stories, I realised that gender violence isn't just a thing of the past. The same power dynamics are still affecting women today, and it made me question what role I play in all this."*  
(Participant 11, personal communication, Taxco, 28 October, 2021).

However, not all participants interpreted the experience in the same way. Some focused more on the personal suffering of the women in the secret room, viewing the events through a lens of individual tragedy rather than linking them to broader systemic issues. For these participants, the emotional intensity of the women's experiences overshadowed the larger context of patriarchy and historical oppression. While they empathised with the women's plight, their thoughts remained centred on the specific circumstances of the individuals involved, rather than expanding to consider the broader picture.

*"I keep thinking about what each woman must have endured, the fear and panic—it is hard to look beyond that."* (Participant 25, personal communication, Taxco, 7 November, 2021).

The differences in how the participants engaged with the secret room and its history appeared to be influenced by their personal backgrounds, knowledge of history, and prior exposure to gender issues, shaping the range of responses observed during the study.

#### ***4.3 Feminist Intersectionality and Class Privilege***

Many participants acknowledged that only women from privileged social backgrounds were granted refuge in the secret room, while those from lower social classes were denied access. For some, this deepened their understanding of how both gender and class intersect to shape individuals' opportunities and access to protection, both historically and in contemporary society.

*"I hadn't really thought about class in this context before. Knowing that some women were left out because of their social status really added another layer to the story."* (Participant 21, personal communication, Taxco, 4 November, 2021).

Nevertheless, not all participants fully engaged with the concept of intersectionality. Some continued to focus on the immediate suffering of the women in the secret room, without reflecting on the wider inequalities that led to others being excluded from the room. One participant revealed:

*"I felt terrible for the women who went through that ordeal. It was heartbreaking to think of their suffering, but I didn't really consider why some were there and others weren't."* (Participant 30, personal communication, Taxco, 11 November, 2021).

These varied responses again suggested that while the secret room has the potential to promote critical reflection on multiple dimensions of oppression, the extent to which visitors engaged with these ideas depended on their personal perspectives and level of understanding.

#### ***4.4 Emotional Responses and Potential for Social Mobilisation***

The participants mentioned a range of emotions, including sorrow, empathy, anger, and frustration. For some, these emotions served as an impetus to contemplate broader societal issues, with a few expressing a desire to go a step further and engage in social mobilisation. These participants saw the secret room as not only a site of reflection but also as a call to action.

*"Being in that room stirred something in me. It wasn't just sadness; it made me want to do something, to find a way to help people beyond just feeling sorry for them."* (Participant 35, personal communication, Taxco, 12 November, 2021).

Conversely, some participants described feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of the issues presented in the secret room, particularly the interconnected nature of patriarchy, gender violence and feminist intersectionality. A number mentioned that while the experience evoked strong emotions, it did not provide guidance on how to channel these feelings into action. A few participants noted that they felt powerless, unsure whether individual efforts would make a difference in addressing such deeply rooted issues.

*"There was just so much to take in, and I left feeling unsure of what I could actually do about it. The issues felt too big for any one person to tackle alone."* (Participant 15, personal communication, Taxco, 29 October, 2021).



**Table 2:** Summary of research findings

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Key Findings</i>
<i>The Secret Room as a Site of Darkness</i>	The cramped and oppressive atmosphere, combined with the guides' narratives, evoked discomfort. Some participants saw parallels with dark tourism, while others viewed it as a heritage exhibit. Visitor responses varied in terms of recognising it as dark tourism.
<i>Reflections on Patriarchy and Gendered Violence</i>	The experience highlighted how gendered violence was embedded in power structures during the Mexican Revolution. Some connected these historical oppressions to contemporary struggles with patriarchy, reflecting on their role in addressing inequality, though others focused solely on individual suffering
<i>Feminist Intersectionality and Class Privilege</i>	Participants noted that only women from privileged backgrounds were given refuge, reflecting the intersection of gender and class. Some gained new insights into systemic inequality, though others concentrated on individual suffering, missing broader patterns of exclusion.
<i>Emotional Responses and Social Mobilisation</i>	Visitors reported emotions such as sorrow, empathy, anger, and frustration. Some saw the experience as a call to action, but others felt overwhelmed by the complexity of the issues and unsure how to engage in meaningful activism, with a few expressing powerlessness

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 *The Secret Room as a Site of Darkness*

Although the museum is officially presented as a cultural and heritage attraction, the secret room embodies several characteristics of dark tourism by confronting visitors with narratives of personal suffering, fear, and tragedy (Stone, 2006). While larger dark tourism sites often emphasise mass death and public memorialisation, the secret room offers a more intimate experience that focuses on the suffering of a relatively small group of women, evoking emotional responses such as discomfort, empathy, and sorrow, consistent with research on dark tourism (Farmaki, 2013; Martini & Buda, 2020).

However, participants' responses revealed some ambiguity in categorising the secret room as dark tourism. That is, for some visitors, the experience resonated with previous visits to dark tourism sites, suggesting that smaller-scale narratives can provoke equally powerful emotional responses (Packer et al., 2019). Others, however, felt that the room's focus on

individual suffering differed from the large scale, more infamous tragedies typically associated with dark tourism, such as war memorials or genocide sites (Sharples, 2009). This reflects the fluid boundaries of dark tourism, indicating that the emotional impact and significance of a site are not solely determined by the scale of tragedy but also by the personal connections and reflective opportunities it offers to visitors.

### ***5.2 Reflections on Patriarchy and Gendered Violence***

The secret room's narrative of women hiding to escape violence during the Mexican Revolution provided visitors with an opportunity to reflect upon how historical power structures enabled gender violence amidst an air of impunity. Patriarchy, as argued by Frias Martinez (2008) and Rios Cazares (2017), has deep roots in Mexican society, legitimising violence against women and enabling it to persist. For some participants, the secret room served as a reminder that gender inequality is not confined to history but continues to shape contemporary Mexico.

This experience also challenged a number of visitors to reconsider their personal roles in addressing gender inequality, corresponding with Leach et al.'s (2016) argument that heritage spaces can inspire visitors to engage with such issues on a personal level. However, the study found variability in the depth of engagement among participants. While some visitors made connections between the women's experiences and contemporary struggles with patriarchy, others focused narrowly on the personal suffering within the room, without seeming to recognise the broader implications. The difference in the levels of engagement emphasises the challenge for heritage spaces in facilitating critical reflection. It suggests that while personal narratives can evoke empathy and emotional responses, this does not automatically translate into visitor enlightenment. As Soulard et al., (2022) point out, the effectiveness of such spaces in fostering critical awareness depends heavily on the visitor's prior knowledge, personal perspective, and capacity for reflective and critical thinking. This implies that without intentional strategies to guide visitors towards fully recognising the issues being presented, the potential impact of the experience may be limited, reducing the likelihood of the visitors participating in future acts related to social mobilisation.

### ***5.3 Feminist Intersectionality and Class Privilege***

The secret room also provided insight into the intersection of gender and class privilege, revealing how this shaped who had access to the room during the Revolution. Participants acknowledged that only women from privileged social backgrounds were granted refuge, while those from lower classes were left on the outside, vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

For some participants, this served to further establish their understanding of how privilege operates in both a historical and contemporary context. This reflects the assertion of Qiu Zhang et al., (2017) that heritage sites can encourage critical reflection on systemic inequalities by demonstrating how the past and present are inter-connected. However, as with the issue of patriarchy, not all participants fully engaged with such notions. Some visitors focused primarily on the immediate narrative of suffering within the room, without considering the societal structures that determined who was protected and who was excluded. As mentioned above, these findings stress the need for heritage attractions to develop interpretive strategies that encourage profound engagement with the themes that are represented (Weaver et al., 2018).

### ***5.4 Emotional Responses and Barriers to Social Mobilisation***

The emotional responses elicited by the secret room underscore the ability of heritage spaces to encourage reflection on societal issues. Emotional engagement can inspire social action by fostering a sense of solidarity and moral responsibility (Summers Effler, 2002; Greenaway et al., 2016). In fact, some participants expressed a desire to engage in activism, with the secret room acting as a catalyst for addressing gender inequality and oppression. Although the literature often links positive emotions with motivation for activism, no positive emotions were reported in this case. Nevertheless, activism was still seen as a possible outcome in certain instances.

However, the findings also revealed significant challenges in translating these emotions into sustained social mobilisation. Some participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of the issues presented and suggested that the issues were so entrenched in Mexican society that they felt incapable of making a difference. Others expressed uncertainty about how to take meaningful steps, again reflecting the limitations of such experiences in fostering long-term action (Brosch & Steg, 2021). These findings align with research suggesting that while emotional engagement can prompt serious reflection, it does not guarantee social mobilisation without clear pathways for action (Greenaway et al., 2016).

Dark heritage attractions like the Figueroa Museum could play a role in bridging this gap by offering visitors follow-up resources and partnerships with social justice organisations, helping to channel visitors' emotional responses into meaningful social engagement. By expanding their role beyond historical education, heritage spaces have the potential to contribute to broader societal change (Qiu Zhang et al., 2017).

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 General conclusion

The findings highlight the distinct ways in which visitors engage with these themes, revealing that the room serves not only as a site of emotional engagement but also as a platform for reflection on historical and contemporary social issues. However, the extent to which visitors connect their emotions to broader concepts of patriarchy, privilege, and social inequality varies, suggesting that while the room has the potential to inspire personal reflection and social awareness, its impact on fostering sustained mobilisation depends heavily on individual perspectives and prior knowledge.

**Table 3:** Research conclusions

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Conclusion</i>
<i>Dark tourism</i>	The secret room aligns with dark tourism by confronting visitors with personal narratives of fear, suffering, and survival. Emotional responses like sorrow, discomfort, and empathy mirror those found at recognised dark tourism sites, demonstrating that smaller, intimate narratives can evoke deep reflection. However, some visitors were hesitant to categorise the room as dark tourism, as they associated it primarily with heritage rather than tragedy.
<i>Patriarchy and Feminist Intersectionality</i>	While many visitors identified the role of

patriarchy in enabling the violence faced by the women, others focused only on the individual suffering, missing the broader systemic implications. Similarly, some participants recognised how class privilege shaped access to safety, deepening their understanding of intersectionality. However, not all visitors engaged with these complexities, reflecting the challenges of fostering awareness of such matters in heritage settings.

### *Social mobilisation*

Although the secret room encouraged reflection, participants varied in their ability to translate emotions into advocacy. Some expressed a desire to act against gender-based violence, while others felt overwhelmed or unsure of how to proceed. The findings suggest that while emotional experiences can foster awareness, additional support—such as partnerships with social justice organizations—may be needed to bridge the gap between reflection and meaningful social mobilisation.

## **6.2 Broader Implications for Museum Management and Similar Heritage Sites**

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for the management of the Figueroa Museum. The emotional and reflective potential of the secret room presents the museum with an opportunity to expand its role from a cultural and heritage attraction to a space for critical reflection into persistent issues that prevent social sustainability. The management could use these insights to develop new educational programmes that highlight the themes of patriarchy, class privilege, and feminist intersectionality. The museum could also capitalise on the potential of social mobilisation by forming partnerships with organisations focused on gender equality and social justice, providing visitors with a channel from which to engage in activism after their visit.

In addition, the museum's management could refine its interpretive strategy to improve visitor engagement with the themes of the secret room. By providing more contextual information about the patriarchal and intersectional dimensions of the women's experiences, the museum could enhance visitor understanding of these issues. For example, this could be done by means of digital resources that link the historical events of the secret room to contemporary struggles for gender equality.

These insights are not only applicable to the Figueroa Museum but can also be extended to similar cultural and heritage sites that wish to engage visitors with difficult histories. For managers of such sites, the findings highlight the importance of leveraging emotionally charged spaces to encourage critical reflection on contemporary societal issues. By linking historical events to ongoing social struggles, dark heritage sites can become vital places for social education and future mobilisation.

### **6.3 Limitations and Future Research**

As with all research, it is important that limitations are acknowledged. The sample size of 35 participants, though sufficient for qualitative analysis, could be said to limit the generalisability of the results. Additionally, in order to reflect the cultural context of the research, the study focused solely on Mexican visitors. Future studies could explore how visitors from different cultural backgrounds engage with similar dark heritage sites, particularly in relation to issues of patriarchy and intersectionality.

Meanwhile, future research could also explore how dark tourism sites can more effectively bridge the gap between emotional engagement and social mobilisation. While this study revealed that some visitors felt motivated to act, it also highlighted the challenge of translating emotional responses into actual social mobilisation. Investigating how interpretive strategies, educational programmes, or partnerships with social justice organisations can enhance visitors' ability to act on their reflections would be a valuable next step in this line of inquiry.

### **6.4 Final thoughts**

This study emphasises the important role that heritage and dark tourism sites, like the Casa Figueroa Museum, can play in generating emotional engagement and critical reflection on both historical and contemporary societal issues. However, as demonstrated by the findings in this case, emotional responses are not always enough to inspire actual social mobilisation. It is through the focused management of these sites that their full potential to inspire and educate visitors can be realised.

The way forward for institutions like the Figueroa Museum lies in bridging the gap between personal reflection and social action. It is vital that visitors are provided with the tools to connect historical narratives to present-day struggles and that they are presented with clear channels for activism. In other words, such institutions are not only places of remembrance but must also offer visitors concrete opportunities to turn their reflections into meaningful action. Ultimately, the success of such sites in driving social change depends on their ability to guide visitors from emotional engagement to real-world activism.

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### **ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER**

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