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Book Review: Desire and Disaster in New Orleans: Tourism, Race and Historical Memory by Lynnell L. Thomas

Casey Schreiber
Dillard University

Book Review

Desire and Disaster in New Orleans: Tourism, Race and Historical Memory

Lynnell L. Thomas
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Casey Schreiber

Abstract

Desire and Disaster in New Orleans: Tourism, Race and Historical Memory, by Lynnell L. Thomas, challenges the racial messages embedded within dominant tourism narratives in New Orleans. From tour guides, to websites, to travel brochures, Thomas extracts and analyzes a variety of messages to document how competing representations of race—desire and disaster—are two frames through which New Orleans tourism narratives represent black culture. Thomas leads readers to question the extent to which alternative tourism narratives can be constructed to more justly address constructions of blackness.

Tourism in the Crescent City

We have all been to New Orleans. That journey may have occurred in person, through the depths of our imaginations, or been fed to us by media outlets. We may have walked the streets of the French Quarter, paid for a city history tour, or watched images of New Orleans on TV as newscasters reported the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina. I remember being seduced by the food, jazz music, and French Quarter quaintness on my first trip to New Orleans as a seventeen-year-old girl trailing along after my parents. Did you ever question your experience as a New Orleans tourist? Did you ever question the images and historical "facts" presented about this exceptional city? The book *Desire and Disaster in New Orleans* by Lynnell L. Thomas will force you to second-guess how tourism sites constructed a story of race relations that paint New Orleans as a city distinct from others in the United States. Thomas draws readers into her critical analysis of New

Orleans racialized tourism narratives in a way that prevents idle acceptance of the stories told to tourists.

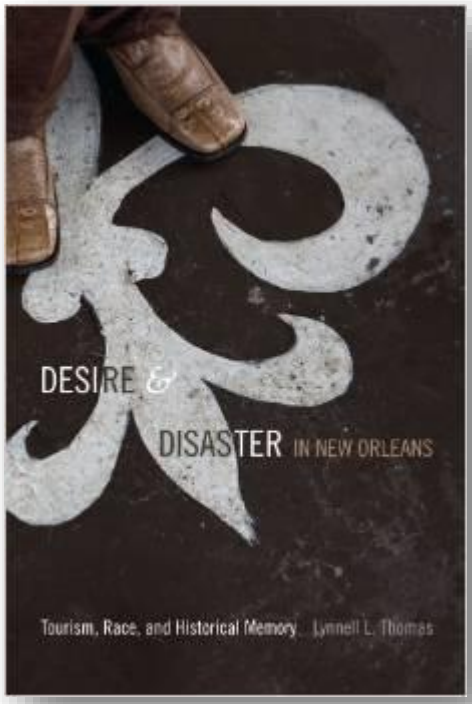
Thomas documents competing representations of race in tourism narratives about New Orleans in order to offer insights into the process of racialization in the post–civil rights era. She sums up these competing representations into the categories of desire and disaster, two distinct and intersecting frames through which New Orleans tourism narratives represent black culture. The New Orleans of desire is sensual, exotic, carefree, decadent, and taboo. The New Orleans of disaster encompasses natural, environmental, political, racial, and economic failures. Packaged messages cultivate a desire for New Orleans black culture while targeting black communities as sources of social and natural disaster. She slams the dominant, white tourism construct as one that creates a racial fantasy in order to propel the city's tourism image while masking true African American history, culture, and contemporary experience. Thomas fully explains the paradox between desire and disaster as a tourist construction of blackness that acknowledges and celebrates black cultural contributions but simultaneously insists on black cultural and social inferiority.

Constructing the Racialized Tourism Narrative

Thomas explains how tourism promoters and reputable historians erroneously portray New Orleans as a racially exceptional city. This commonly accepted narrative frames New Orleans as a place where race relations are and have always been different from the rest of America. These types of stories romanticize New Orleans as a multicultural gumbo where all races and ethnicities mix together, harmoniously, in close quarters. Thomas insists that this narrative is fictitious because it relies on incomplete historical, social, and political understandings of the city's black population. Tourism narratives emphasize the city's French heritage rather than its colonial African culture. This historical European influence feeds the structure of modern city tours. New Orleans city tours follow a conventional formula, taking visitors to predictable, predominantly white locations for three hours. Throughout the book's chapters, Thomas documents how city tours, plantation tours, and various tourist advertisements failed to include descriptions of black historical sites and contemporary black communities. Thomas not only shows how the dominant tourism narrative was constructed, but also spends a great deal of time bringing to light what was omitted.

Throughout the book, Thomas points out numerous ways that tour guides missed opportunities to deal truthfully with race and racism in New Orleans. Very few plantation tours integrated the history of slavery into the evocation of southern

wealth and grandeur that the tours celebrate. They ignored the realities of slavery in order to repackage history for tourist consumption. This repackaging included promoting former slave quarters and selling an array of images of slavery in gift shops at the sites. Tours did not accurately reflect and record black history and culture. Thomas characterizes the information presented in tours as relying on gossip, creating fictious slave characters, and fabricating stories to appeal to tourists, rather than seeking a more honest account of history. She does so in a way that leads readers to question the validity of "historical facts" presented to audiences. She convincingly argues that the history of New Orleans, as told through city and plantation tours, creates a fictitious racial story or revisionist history.



Cover art by Tyrone Turner/National Geographic Creative.

Lynnell L. Thomas, a New Orleans native, is an associate professor of American studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Photo by Michael Malyszko. Reprinted by permission.

Limited Success Challenging the Dominant Narratives

Thomas documents in detail the inclusion of African Americans in the tourism narrative. Intentional marketing and policy efforts attempted to appease tourists looking for a multicultural depiction of New Orleans. The rise of multicultural tours that sought to capitalize on a growing black middle-class

presence among tourists provided competing narratives that acknowledged New Orleans's multiracial heritage and the contributions of black people to the city.

Thomas uses Le Monde Creole (LMC) tours of French Quarter courtyards as a case study to examine the multicultural framing of New Orleans's tourism narrative. LMC places Creole culture at the heart of its multicultural framework, making it a racially complex case for examination. Defining Creole is always problematic among social scientists and historians. Some scholars make assertions about Creoles or Creole culture without recognizing the various ways in which Creole is defined or depicted, depending on circumstances, time periods, and shifting points of view. Thomas does not make this mistake. She offers various definitions for Creole and strengthens her work by acknowledging the contentious evolution of the term Creole as a racial identifier.

Le Monde Creole gave attention to Creoles and free people of color during their tours. This practice serves as an example of an attempt to address the role of African American contributions to the city. Despite the intentions of LMC to be a multiculturally focused tour, Thomas concludes that the operator had only limited success in countering mainstream tourism portrayals.

Outside of LMC, Thomas found only small, isolated examples of counternarratives of resistance throughout the tourism landscape in New Orleans. For example, one tour guide omitted stories that romanticized relationships between slaves and masters, treated voodoo as a legitimate religion, and provided a historical context for black slave ownership. This exception shows that the way individual tour guides tell stories and omit or include certain information can either lead to the creation of a successful counternarrative or not. Another small success in creating a counternarrative was including the Tremé neighborhood as a black tourist site on the SoulofAmerica.com website. Thomas cites these small successes and other examples to evaluate the extent to which counternarratives are meaningful and disruptive to prevailing depictions of race in New Orleans.

Thomas also details the efforts of local African Americans to harness the city's tourism industry for their own advancement. For example, the Greater New Orleans Black Tourism Center (GNOBTC) and later the New Orleans Multicultural Tourism Network (NOMTC) were dedicated to including black-owned businesses in the city's billion-dollar tourism industry. The tourism landscape in New Orleans is a segregated system. Local, black-owned tour companies offered black heritage maps and tours of the city that deviated from the standard tourism script. The mainstream, three-hour tour was reconfigured to incorporate black neighborhoods, black history, and contemporary black cultural institutions. For example, the Soul of New Orleans brochure appealed directly to African American visitors with an Afrocentric tone, the revitalization of black history, and the identification of black sites of memory. According to Thomas,

these efforts presented a successful counternarrative and challenged the spatial and cultural mapping of tourist New Orleans.

Thomas carefully documents several attempts to produce racially just counternarratives and locate them within New Orleans tourism practices. She concludes, however, that even these well-intentioned examples of resistance ultimately failed to revise tourism narratives in a significant way. Black-owned businesses and the GNOBTC operated within the larger framework of a tourist-driven economy where culture has become a commodity. Within the confines of cultural consumption, black-owned businesses were faced with having to perpetuate familiar—often racist—tourism narratives if they hoped to gain any of the financial benefits of attracting tourist business.

Post-Katrina: Changing Stories and an Unknown Future

The final chapter documents how Hurricane Katrina forced the dominant tourism narrative to change and confront the experiences of the city's African Americans in ways that had not been done before the storm. National media images about Katrina bombarded the world with images of poverty, racism, and black faces trapped in the Superdome, and stories about a predominantly African American neighborhood called the Lower Ninth Ward. As a result, Hurricane Katrina forced the tourism industry to confront the city's black past and future. Tourists who came to New Orleans post-Katrina sought out different stories about the city to help them make sense of what happened during and after the storm.

The post-Katrina tours added new stories and sites to the conventional three-hour format. One major change included remapping the tour route to include African American spaces, such as the Lower Ninth Ward and Tremé neighborhoods, rather than avoid them. Prior to Katrina, these neighborhoods were avoided and scripted as nontourist spaces that were not safe.

The role of tour guides' agency in crafting additional stories or alternate narratives is given attention throughout the book. Tour guides went off script, shared personal stories, and deviated from company policy in order to recast Hurricane Katrina victims as survivors and citizens. Despite this, the black heritage tours faced tremendous financial cuts post-Katrina. Lack of institutional support had negative effects on progress made by groups such as NOMTC. The black heritage bus tours disappeared because of a lack of financial support and changing attitudes among black middle- class visitors, who may have felt guilty about acting as tourists to black devastation. Local black leadership in tourism initiatives may have grown wary of having to constantly prove they had a right to exist.

The post-Katrina period marked a turning point where New Orleans dominant tourism narratives were reconceptualized. The extent to which actors in

the tourism industry will be able to continue to produce new narratives or will relapse into the old stories has yet to be determined.

The Author, Method, and Book Structure

Lynnell L. Thomas, an associate professor of American studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston, is a native New Orleanian and an African American. She admits this project was partially fueled by trying to make sense of the contradictions between her experiences as an African American New Orleanian and the barrage of racialized tourist constructions of blackness. Her reflection and perspective offer value to the analysis.

Her main motivation in completing this book was to better understand the ways that race is simultaneously being erased and deployed through tourism practices. Thomas accomplishes this with an ethnographic approach and meticulous data collection that focused on a variety of tourism activities. Regularly operating city tours and such promotional materials as brochures, websites, landmarks, or tour sites, served as data points of analysis. The book illustrates pictures of such common items for sale in French Quarter shops as postcards and figurines that exemplify racially stereotypical images. She takes these and other images that tourists come across in the city and questions the way these totems facilitate a representation of blackness that leaves the actual black New Orleans invisible. While aboard tour buses, Thomas takes readers on the ride with her by including extensive quotes from guides and offering a critique of how they provide an incomplete racial image of the city. As I read through the pages of *Desire and Disaster*, I constantly reflected on my own experiences with New Orleans tourism information and artifacts. Items for sale such as black figurines and brochures depicting New Orleans are no longer innocuous, but rather carry a distinct and disturbing collective representation of race.

Thomas's fieldwork and analysis roughly covers the time period from 2000 through 2010 and is accompanied with relevant descriptions of the cultural and geographic landscape of New Orleans history. She connects what we see today to a racial ambivalence that characterized the development of New Orleans since its founding. She clearly separates the book timeline into a pre- and post-Katrina dichotomy. The first four chapters document the tourism narratives leading up to the 2005 storm. Chapter 5 explores how Hurricane Katrina created an opportunity to change the dominant tourism narrative in ways that even previous intentional attempts had not been able to achieve. The epilogue updates events to the five-year mark after Katrina. While the main chapters focus on locally produced tourism messages, the epilogue gives Thomas room to briefly analyze national tourism

information presented through mass-mediated popular cultural forms such as New Orleans Saints football and the HBO series *Tremé*.

Many footnotes and an extensive bibliography accompany the narrative chapters. Thomas assimilated numerous sources that ask questions about New Orleans, tourism, race, representation, and disaster in a way that demonstrated she has gone to great lengths to make sense of what she is seeing in tourist spaces and connect these practices to important conceptions of race, cultural consumption, and city identity. This structure leaves no doubt that Thomas produced a thoroughly researched, scholarly analysis that contributes to the scarce resources on African American tourism in the United States.

What Should We Expect for the Future?

Desire and Disaster in New Orleans documents the problematic relationship between race and tourist spaces in New Orleans. The intersection of race and tourist space will experience more changes in the years ahead, particularly as New Orleans grapples with its post-Katrina identity. We do not yet know the nuances of how this relationship will continue.

The technique of using tour guides as a main source of analysis allows readers to ask questions about agency. Although Thomas guides readers through triumphs and failures in producing counternarratives, readers have room to judge for themselves the value of this agency. The book prompts self-reflection for all those who have come into contact with New Orleans tourism spaces, artifacts, and publications.

To what extent should we hold tourism promoters, tour guides, or tourists responsible for challenging the dominant narrative and retelling a more socially just and inclusive history of black New Orleans? Tour guides' performances are tied to their livelihood. Tourists are people on vacation who want to be entertained. Given these constraints, tourism may seem like an unlikely place to talk seriously of racial politics. The ability of tourist spaces and messages to craft a story that becomes accepted as part of popular culture, however, can be a very powerful medium. In addition, the political and economic importance placed on New Orleans's tourism industry within the post-Katrina recovery context cannot be ignored. In many ways, New Orleans pursued its revitalization through redefining and promoting its tourist image.

Marketed messages can be a politically powerful space for communicating alternative racial constructions. In my own research on New Orleans, I have found that leisure spaces are not frivolous, but rather spaces that reflect the broader social conditions within which they are situated. Spaces that seem like places for entertainment are actually spaces of social interactions and collective

representations that can be used to interpret and challenge dominant forms of oppression.

Thomas calls for a more truthful and thoughtful historical assessment, interpretation, and reimaging of New Orleans on the part of cultural institutions, the tourism industry, and public officials. One persistent question remains: Do the incremental successes in rewriting tourism narratives actually challenge the status quo, or are these acts of resistance merely giving the illusion of effecting real social change?