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“Roots Run Deep Here”: The Construction of Black New Orleans in Post-Katrina Tourism Narratives

Lynnell L. Thomas

As a native New Orleanian, I have witnessed firsthand how writers, tourism promoters, and visitors to New Orleans have collectively created and perpetuated stories of New Orleans as exotic, dangerous, and unique—characterizations that are inextricably linked to racial mythologies about the city’s black population. Throughout the twentieth century—in response to national trends in the emergence of modern tourism and local economic imperatives—these stories of New Orleans have concretized into a predominant tourism narrative, one that exalts the city’s European heritage at the expense of its African one, that sentimentalizes slavery, and that ultimately sustains and propagates a racialized image of the city that diminishes and distorts African American history and culture.¹ This narrative reflects and reaffirms New Orleans’s position as an abiding site of racial exoticism in the national imagination. The emergence of a potentially new tourism narrative in the wake of Hurricane Katrina offers a unique and important vantage point from which to study the challenges, constraints, and possibilities of representing race, as well as the social and political consequences of these representations.

Further, this article fills a gap between the studies of New Orleans that focus primarily on the constructions of blackness in the wake of Hurricane Katrina without examining the role of tourism and those that examine tourism in New Orleans without a sustained analysis of the ways that blackness is represented.² By contrast, this study foregrounds the construction of blackness in the creation of and contestation over the image and idea of New Orleans promoted since Hurricane Katrina, and makes the case that race is imbricated in every aspect of New Orleans tourism. The number and range of tours and tourism messages contributing to this racialization calls for, not simply an analysis of a single tour or tour company, but a reexamination of New Orleans tourism as a whole. In documenting some of the underanalyzed social costs of creating, perpetuating, and attempting to resist New Orleans tourism narratives,

this article bridges cultural studies scholarship on hegemonic discourses and representation and historical analyses of events and their real-life consequences to offer a fuller, more accurate analysis of the racialization process as it is being constructed.

What is at stake in this battle over the historical memory of Hurricane Katrina is the very future of black New Orleans and its place in the nation. In describing the process of national healing following the trauma of the Civil War, historian David Blight contends that “how people . . . would come to define and commemorate that tragedy, where they would find heroism and villainy, and how they would decide what was lost and what was won, would have a great deal to do with determining the character of the new society that they were to build.”³ Likewise, at a time when the rebuilding of New Orleans is uneven and incomplete, how we come to remember and forget the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina has far-reaching political and social implications, particularly for racial justice.⁴ In a number of case studies, including recent work on New Orleans tourism, scholars have shown the powerful role of tourism in shaping the economy, public policy, and images in the popular imagination. As we witnessed following the hurricane, black New Orleanians’ fates are precariously tied to the city’s service economy; criminal justice, education, and housing policies; and media representations. Yet, any analysis of a nascent post-Katrina tourism narrative must first take into consideration what narratives are being supplanted.

On the Eve of the Storm: Post-Civil Rights Narratives of Desire and Disaster

The predominant pre-Katrina New Orleans tourism narrative represented black culture to tourists through two distinct but intersecting frames: desire and disaster. On the one hand, tourists were encouraged to think that they were experiencing and celebrating black culture by eating Creole cuisine, listening to jazz music, and sharing in anecdotes of quadroom balls and secret voodoo rites. On the other hand, tourists were directed to adopt the white supremacist memory of slavery and black culture that views the Old South with a sense of loss and nostalgia. In effect, the city’s promotion of black cultural consumption produced a “desire” for “blackness” at the same time that this “blackness” was used to signify the “disaster” of black emancipation and desegregation. New Orleans pre-Katrina tourism, then, was part of the historically paradoxical construction of blackness that acknowledges and celebrates black cultural contributions while simultaneously insisting upon black social and

cultural inferiority and indicting African Americans for perceived postbellum and post-civil-rights-era social ills of poverty, crime, immorality, educational inadequacy, and political corruption.⁵ These competing impulses of desire and disaster facilitated the symbolic continuance of slavery as appropriation of black labor and denial of black history and agency.

In New Orleans's predominant tourism narrative, this dynamic was exemplified by the modernizing of slave quarters into trendy restaurants, hotels, and tourist sites; the proliferation of racially stereotypical images and merchandise on display in tourist shops; and the omnipresence of African Americans in the service industry, whose performance of "happy servitude" is mandated by the conventions of the local tourist economy.⁶ In each case, tourists were signaled to consume or gaze upon black culture, without the uncomfortable acknowledgment of the history of slavery or its persistent legacy of racial and class inequality. New Orleans tourists, then, became acquainted with a representation of blackness that left the actual black New Orleans invisible.

One way that the tourism narrative achieved this duality was by limiting its historical focus to the colonial and antebellum periods and by focusing exclusively on the purportedly exceptional race relations that distinguished New Orleans from the rest of the slaveholding south. The emphasis on selected features of these eras—such as European cultural influences, the relative freedom of New Orleans's black population, the city's *laissez faire* attitudes regarding race, the social sanctioning of interracial unions, and a large population of free blacks—lent itself to the construction of New Orleans as benefiting from the most liberal and refined elements of southern culture while abdicating its most brutal, inhumane, and inegalitarian features.⁷ A dearth of mainstream tours that depict Reconstruction or civil rights history and their attendant bitter struggles for racial justice meant that the prevailing romantic, idyllic narrative of racial harmony and equality went unchallenged.

One might have expected to find such a challenge in the more recent development of multicultural tourism that attempted to represent African American culture and history. After all, multicultural tourism followed the trends of the 1960s heritage industry and its populist interest in recovering the past. The central tenets of the new industry included making history more accessible to common experience and popular memory, sustaining a multiethnic vision of the future, and creating a more pluralist portrayal of the past.⁸ Yet, unlike other heritage movements that arose out of the uncertainties and seeming dislocation associated with postmodernism, the black heritage industry took root during the modern-day civil rights and Black Power movements. These movements marked a period of renewed optimism and possibility, when Af-

rican Americans gained some control in and over the institutions that could validate their own narratives, histories, and memories.⁹

In 1960s New Orleans, African Americans—through local and national political and civic organizations—organized at the grassroots level, litigated for desegregation, forged coalitions, engaged in direct action protests, agitated for economic opportunities, and slowly wielded their hard-won bargaining power to wrest concessions from the previously whites-only tourism industry. The crux of this bargaining power stemmed from the activists' recognition of their ability to hurt New Orleans's tourist image and disrupt the tourist trade. As historian Adam Fairclough asserts, African Americans' strategy of "bluff and brinkmanship" relied on the understanding that "the city's dependence on tourism made white businessmen in New Orleans peculiarly sensitive to the threat of disruption."¹⁰ African American activists had learned to adopt "a rhetoric of tourism" to fight for civil rights and would eventually employ this same rhetoric to gain entry into the tourism industry itself.¹¹

Increasingly by the mid-1980s, New Orleans tour owners, guides, and promoters began responding to post-civil rights movement demands by black New Orleanians for a stake in the burgeoning tourist industry and for stories that reflected the complexity and contributions of New Orleans black culture. About the same time that New Orleans turned almost exclusively to tourism to alleviate the problems of economic crisis following the oil bust and urban blight, the nation was experiencing an exponential rise of black heritage tourism and increased marketing of African Americans' historical past by mainstream institutions.¹² In New Orleans, the creation of the Louisiana Black Culture Commission in 1984, the New Orleans Black Tourism Network in 1990 (renamed the New Orleans Multicultural Tourism Network in 1999), the multicultural branch of the Louisiana Office of Tourism in 1996, and even mainstream tours "celebrating" racial and cultural diversity, attempted to meet demands for a more inclusive, authentic representation of the city's African-American past and provide opportunities for an economically viable future.

However, the inclusion of African Americans in the tourism industry came at a cost. The new attention to multicultural New Orleans further entrenched the predominant tourism narrative of racial desire and disaster for three primary reasons. First, although the late twentieth-century tourism narrative often referenced and even staged black history and cultural productions, such as traditional jazz performances, second line parades, and voodoo ceremonies, tourism promoters did so primarily by exploiting and commodifying black culture to suit mostly white visitors' expectations. Wrenched from

their cultural and community contexts, these static “performances” of black culture were physically and symbolically removed from local neighborhoods and living traditions characterized by resistance, survival, and innovation.¹³ By dissociating the city and its history from national and regional patterns of racial discrimination, violence, and black struggles for liberation, New Orleans’s construction as a multicultural city reinforced the idea that racism in the historic and contemporary city was either nonexistent or aberrant.¹⁴

Secondly, because predominantly poor and working-class African Americans had few employment options outside of the low-paying service industry, they were compelled by economic necessity to conform to these tourist performances that distorted and trivialized black history and culture. Many African-American performers, tour guides, and service industry employees found themselves in the same position as the brass bands identified by J. Mark Souther, who “took advantage of the economic benefits of grafting themselves onto the local tourist trade,” while simultaneously leveling incisive, if not sweeping, critiques of hegemonic discourses.¹⁵ For instance, some African Americans developed their own black heritage tours or subtly revised mainstream tours to craft counternarratives to the city’s racialized mythology. In these tours, they incorporated histories of slave uprisings, black entrepreneurship, civil rights milestones, and African-American educational, political, and cultural institutions. Yet, they faced systemic and institutional obstacles to financing and marketing their own black heritage tours in a city that exalted its European heritage over its African one.¹⁶

The final reason, then, that these critiques did not supplant the predominant tourism narrative is that they could not successfully compete against the mainstream tourism industry. An imbalance of resources, marketing, and industry support relegated most black heritage sites and tours to the periphery of the city’s tourism industry.¹⁷ In the post–civil rights era, white tourists’ black cultural consumption substituted for the much more difficult and abnegating task of sustained antiracist work to create economic, educational, and environmental parity for the black residents of the city. Hence, on the eve of Hurricane Katrina, the predominant historical and thematic tourism narrative about New Orleans had so effaced the lived experiences of the city’s black community that this community was effectively rendered invisible to the rest of the nation. It took the catastrophic destruction of Hurricane Katrina to lay bare the city’s long history of racial and class disparities.

Hurricane Katrina also exposed the devastating toll of the city’s racialized tourism narrative on black New Orleanians and our prospects for rescue and rebuilding. Media coverage of the storm and subsequent policy debates about

storm survivors often eerily simulated the pre-Katrina tourism narrative. An emphasis on safeguarding the French Quarter and other tourism spaces to the exclusion of black neighborhoods; the reckless spread of rumors about black lawlessness and inhumanity that brought rescue efforts to a halt; and the inadequate, and often reluctant, dispersal of resources to the most vulnerable communities, all relied on static, stereotypical constructions of the city's black population popularized by the city's tourism narrative.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Hurricane Katrina also thrust the images and stories of black New Orleanians into the national imagination, forcing past and potential New Orleans tourists to confront a black New Orleans that existed outside the tourist construction. As a result, post-Katrina tourists now expect and even seek out different stories of the city that help them to make sense of the devastation and tragedy and that incorporate alternative images and ideas—African Americans, Lower Ninth Ward, poverty, racism—that have become a part of the national discourse about New Orleans. At this very moment, a new dominant tourism narrative is being created and revised in response to—and as a way to profit from—these different expectations. In the following sections, I analyze this emergent narrative through participant-observation of six different post-Katrina bus or van tours and close readings of Web sites, tourist sites, and promotional materials following the storm.¹⁹

In the Wake of the Storm: Post-Katrina Narratives of Forgetting

In the years following Hurricane Katrina, the tourism industry has redoubled efforts to regain visitors lost after the storm with a series of new initiatives and ad campaigns.²⁰ Often these efforts are directed at shielding visitors from post-Katrina realities. In various ways, tourists are prompted to replace uncomfortable associations of New Orleans with black poverty, residential segregation, or African-American unrest with pre-Katrina tropes of racial harmony and tourist-sanctioned performances of blackness.

One example is the 2007 ad campaign “Fall in Love with New Orleans All Over Again.” The brainchild of the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation, the campaign tries to create or rekindle fonder, more innocent recollections of New Orleans, free from the troublesome images of a forsaken black community that predominated in the storm's aftermath. This campaign suggests, in fact, that instead of destroying New Orleans's vibrant culture and community, Hurricane Katrina may have enhanced it. In the 2007 *Official Visitors Guide to New Orleans*, an interracial group of celebrities with New Orleans ties contend that “the food seems to taste better. The music sounds

more exuberant. The art and ambience feel *more poignant*.”²¹ The presentation of an interracial coalition around New Orleans food, music, art, and ambience jarred with the contemporaneous political battles over rebuilding and economic recovery along racial and class lines.²² In other words, by emphasizing the shared values of all New Orleanians, irrespective of ongoing race and class disparities, the 2007 advertising campaign approximates the “Becoming Americans” theme at Colonial Williamsburg. While acknowledging the balanced presentation of blacks and whites, Richard Handler and Eric Gable concur that Williamsburg “tends to downplay the hierarchical relationship (white over black) of the two groups in favor of a type of benign multiculturalism in which group differences are all similar and therefore unthreatening.”²³ In New Orleans, the reality of systemic racial and class inequality threatens the racial fantasy that propels the city’s tourist image.

The New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau has responded by encouraging tourists to return literally and imaginatively to the fantasy of pre-Katrina New Orleans. A year after the storm, its Web site reassured potential tourists that

The most celebrated and historic core of the city—including the Faubourg Marigny, French Quarter, Central Business District, Warehouse and Arts District, Magazine Street, Garden District, Audubon Park and Zoo, and St. Charles Avenue—not only remains intact, both physically and spiritually, but is thriving. The cultural riches, sensual indulgences, and unparalleled service that define the New Orleans experience continue to flourish, as they have for centuries. We are open, fully prepared, and eager to welcome all of our visitors again.²⁴

This statement, since adopted by countless vendors and travel sites, evokes the tension between desire and disaster characterizing the pre-Katrina narrative. The description omits New Orleans’s significant black historical sites as well as its contemporary black communities and our ongoing struggle for survival. The predominantly black neighborhoods of the city that are not “intact,” one may assume, are presented as disaster zones, safely removed from the predominantly white, elite “historic core of the city.” Although African-American neighborhoods are absent from this core, African Americans themselves can be viewed as providing the “cultural riches, sensual indulgences and unparalleled service” that distinguished New Orleans tourist economy. This construction of Afro-Creole culture has not changed substantively from the tourist image of the mid-twentieth century, when, as J. Mark Souther describes it, “white promoters cast blacks merely as supporting actors who furnished service and amusement in a tourist-oriented tableau.”²⁵

Another example of the tenacity of this narrative is the promotion of the Forest Products Machinery and Equipment Exposition, to be held in New Orleans in 2009. The marketing of the exposition relies on a subtext of desire for black tourist culture and service, while conflating real African Americans with disaster. Its Web site enjoins: "Forget the images of streets swamped by Hurricane Katrina. New Orleans has worked 24/7 to restore its ability to host conventions and exhibitions in a way no city can duplicate. And this famous Southern city—known for its food, music and hospitality—is ready to host EXPO 2009."²⁶ The EXPO's reassurance demands the willful forgetting of the natural and man-made disasters that devastated New Orleans and its most vulnerable communities. Joseph Roach's conception of culture as a process of both memory and forgetting suggests that the EXPO's appeal to conventioners is part of a larger performance by which "improvised narratives of authenticity and priority may congeal into full-blown myths of legitimacy and origin." Often in the face of calamity, Roach continues, "selective memory requires public enactments of forgetting, either to blur the obvious discontinuities, misalliances, and ruptures or, more desperately, to exaggerate them in order to mystify a previous Golden Age, now lapsed."²⁷ Tellingly, the EXPO's return to a pre-Katrina tourism narrative requires the erasure of black New Orleans, *except* insofar as blackness is used to perform, through the "food, music, and hospitality," a romantic mythology of the antebellum south, landscaped with cooking, dancing, singing, and serving black stereotypes.²⁸

In the Wake of the Storm: Post-Katrina Narratives of Rememory

Not all post-Katrina tourism, however, so unambiguously asks tourists to ignore "the streets swamped by Hurricane Katrina" or those people who lived and worked on those streets. Some tours mandate that visitors come face-to-face with post-Katrina New Orleans and the histories and memories of a painful past. Unlike the narratives of forgetting, these tourism narratives conjure up the literary conceptualization of "rememory," whereby communal healing depends upon the "re-membling of a dis-membered past."²⁹ The rapid development of bus and van tours conveying visitors from the French Quarter directly to the most ravaged hurricane sites, and the international controversy that they created, responded to and generated interest in a different type of New Orleans tourism.³⁰

Although Gray Line Tours' "Hurricane Katrina: 'America's Greatest Catastrophe'" may have garnered the most attention, it is not the only, or even the first, company to participate in the post-Katrina repackaging of tourist New

Orleans.³¹ In fact, by 2007, just about every tour company, across a broad spectrum of tourism genres, offered some type of Hurricane Katrina-related tour, including but not limited to Airboat Adventures Swamp Tours, Cajun Encounters, and Old River Road Plantation Adventure. Most tour companies have incorporated a post-Katrina narrative into a conventional, preexisting three-hour city tour format. In the standard pre-Katrina city tour, tour guides would narrate the history of the city, identify historic neighborhoods and architecture, interpret New Orleans customs and traditions, and describe unique features of the city's physical and cultural geography as they drove through the French Quarter, Faubourg Marigny, Lakeview, Central Business District, and Garden District. Yet, whereas pre-Katrina city tours strategically circumnavigated the city to avoid most historically and predominantly African-American neighborhoods, post-Katrina tours consistently remap tourist New Orleans to include African-American spaces in the Upper and Lower Ninth wards, parts of New Orleans East and Gentilly, and the Tremé. At the very least, this spatial rerouting of the tourist map forces visitors to physically and psychically confront both the presence and absence of African Americans in the city.

Most apparent is the new imperative to identify and describe communities outside of tourist New Orleans. Tour guides have responded by stressing the commonalities between New Orleans's black communities and the rest of the—that is, white—city and nation. They point out sites such as Congo Square, Louis Armstrong's childhood neighborhood, the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club headquarters, and other African-American lieux de mémoire that were unacknowledged before Hurricane Katrina.³² In respect to African-American literary sites of memory, author Melvin Dixon argues that these locales are used “not only to evoke a sense of place but, more importantly, to enlarge the frame of cultural reference for the depiction of black experiences by anchoring that experience in memory—a memory that ultimately rewrites history.”³³ As part of this rewriting of history, tour guides emphasize that the Tremé and Ninth wards are old, historic neighborhoods, implicitly increasing their value in a city that pays especial homage to the past. Most tour guides refute the media representations of black criminality and destitution with counternarratives of Ninth Ward homeowners, public housing residents who were unjustly prohibited from retrieving belongings from structurally sound units, and upper- and middle-income neighborhoods devastated by the storm. One tour guide's indictment, “We were done in by an act of man,” typifies the post-Katrina narrative's shifting of blame from the victims of the storm to the government authorities and private corporations—particularly the Corps

of Engineers, the Road Home grant program, and insurance companies—who had violated the public trust.³⁴ A recurring theme is that Katrina hit all classes and races of New Orleans and that the dismal recovery efforts did not reflect the character of the people—or more specifically the deviance of black people—but the failures of political and business authorities.

Despite being more inclusive of black spaces and stories, the post-Katrina narrative often places black communities within the preexisting framework of New Orleans racial exceptionalism. The idea that all black and white New Orleanians are unified and undifferentiated in their pre- and post-Katrina struggles obscures a history of racial and class inequalities and denies the persistent role of race and racism in post-Katrina policies. Robert C. Lieberman explains the contradictions inherent in such notions of a “color blind” society:

Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath constitute, in effect, a metaphor for the deep tension between color-blind and race-conscious models of politics and policy that has been one of the central defining themes of U.S. political culture, dating back to the founding of the American republic and even before. On the one hand, American politics is founded on the basis of a set of egalitarian liberal principles, which imply that race, like any other ascriptive category of social relations, should be irrelevant to public life and that the racial distinctions that often structure public life, for whatever purpose, are anomalous or invalid. On the other hand, even a cursory glance at U.S. history reveals that color blindness has more often been the exception than the rule and suggests that racial hierarchy and inequality are central to American political development.³⁵

This illogic of a color-blind society extends to issues of class, as well. One tour guide went so far as to proclaim, “We don’t have poverty,” despite the fact that a third of the city’s black population lived below the poverty line before Katrina. Since Katrina, a lack of affordable housing and stalemates with insurance companies and the Road Home housing recovery program have contributed to a 100 percent increase in homelessness (fig. 1).³⁶ If the idea of a color-blind society obscures New Orleans racial hierarchy, the corollary construction of the “white savior” glorifies this hierarchy. In general, the New Orleans post-Katrina narrative presents African Americans as victims awaiting the action and expertise of whites to intervene on their behalf. Tour guides often invoke this trope when presenting Musician’s Village, the Habitat for Humanity musician-themed community in the Upper Ninth Ward, or Brad Pitt’s Make It Right Foundation and its architectural innovations in the Lower Ninth Ward. Stories heralding the racial, economic, human rights, and environmental justice activism of local grassroots organizations, cultural centers, and religious institutions go untold.³⁷

Still, it is not difficult to find examples of African-American agency in the post-Katrina narrative. One tour company makes its restroom stop at Stewart's Diner, a black-owned restaurant in the Ninth Ward whose owners generously answer tourists' questions and share photographs of President Bush's visit to the restaurant and their family's subsequent visit to the White House, as his guests.³⁸ The displayed photographs of a smiling president and Mrs. Bush, mayor Ray Nagin, and the Stewart family and employees, coupled with the renaming of the Monday red beans and rice dinner "the president's special" in honor of Bush's 2006 visit, did garner more positive press for the president after his abysmal response immediately following the hurricane. Yet, co-owner Kim Stewart, while unexpectedly charmed by the president and his real-life persona, says she plans to hold him accountable for his promises that "help is on the way, that he is working to make sure it goes into the right hands."³⁹ More important, perhaps, is the Stewart family's implicit incrimination of the Bush administration and its failure to provide assistance to her family or community even two years after the storm. Before the lunch hour rush, Kim Stewart gives sole credit for the reopening of the restaurant and the ongoing rebuilding of neighborhood homes and businesses to the generosity of family and friends. Her acknowledgment exposes the lack of accountability by government agencies and private insurers and, in turn, testifies to the resilience and resolve of New Orleans's black community.

Even when tourists are not given the opportunity to talk to black residents, the tours provide other, sometimes unintentional, occasions to witness the city's black presence and participation. Along the revised routes, tour buses drive past pre-Katrina murals and post-Katrina memorials depicting black life and loss throughout the city's history. Cultural anthropologist Helen Regis reminds us that these indicators of a once vibrant black community "express a critical moral consciousness" that questions or challenges powerful institutions and narratives.⁴⁰ On the post-Katrina bus tours, tourists are confronted by the literal signs of this challenge that are brought into relief against the background of the topographical and tourist landscapes. A sign in front of the St. Bernard Housing Project, "The People Must Decide," unsuccessfully protested the demolition of that public housing complex. Another sign in the Lower Ninth Ward, "We want our country to love us as much as we love it," resisted the designation of evacuees as refugees and silently claimed citizenship for those who had been displaced by the storm and government negligence. Similarly, the sign "Roots Run Deep Here," posted on a house in the Lower Ninth Ward, attested to a history and community in New Orleans not often acknowledged in popular narratives about the city (fig. 2).



Nevertheless, there is no denying that the absence of African Americans is conspicuous on these tours. At the time that I took them, two years after the storm (and as subsequent visits have revealed), the drive through predominantly black neighborhoods was often a drive through a scarred landscape of razed houses, dilapidated structures, piles of debris, and impassable streets and sidewalks overtaken by weeds and decaying trees (fig. 3). Only occasionally did we see even paltry signs of life or rebuilding. One Gray Line tour guide, referring to New Orleans East, said matter-of-factly, "I don't think much is going to come back here. I think it's just going to go away."⁴¹ Other tour guides intimated as much for portions of the Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly. Still, even the absence of black residents and recovery in black neighborhoods eerily and powerfully critiques the exclusion of African Americans from the

Figure 1.

In December 2007, city officials removed a homeless community from City Hall's Duncan Plaza and erected fences for supposed construction projects. Photo courtesy of author.

rebuilding efforts in New Orleans and from the local and national narratives that precipitated that exclusion. In her justification for not including the voices of poor women in her study of Puerto Rican women and U.S. colonialism, Laura Briggs admits that "silent subalterns are troubling, and should be; they haunt texts as the victims of violence, the bad conscience of imperialism and racism."⁴² In a similar way, New Orleans's African-American population, disproportionately displaced since the storm, continue to indict the city and the nation.

After the Katrina Tour: Narratives of New Orleans's Future?

No sooner is this indictment made than most tours complete the "Katrina portion of the tour" and head uptown to the palatial mansions of the Garden District.⁴³ The visual and thematic transition between neighborhoods is abrupt and usually unacknowledged.⁴⁴ The journey along St. Charles Avenue lacks any social history or commentary and apparently does not deviate from pre-Katrina tours of the area. As tour guides point out marble stairways, Greco-Roman columns, and Victorian cottages, the tour catapults passengers back to a period preserved in time that, according to one guide, is bound by the years 1803 to 1848. The guide's pronouncement that "the whole city's a museum" accurately reflects the tourism industry's enshrinement of a racialized fantasy.⁴⁵ The retreat into the sanctity of the antebellum white city from the trauma of the abandoned black city signifies a retreat from the difficulty of redressing racism into the security of a white mythical past. Even when tour guides refer to the present during this portion of the tour, they do so often to promote the



Figure 2.
 “Roots Run Deep Here” hints at the family and community history of this Ninth Ward home. Photo courtesy of author.

frivolity and *joie de vivre* so closely associated with the city. One tour guide plays Benny Grunch’s song “There Ain’t No Place to Pee on Mardi Gras Day.” Another hands out Mardi Gras beads to passengers.⁴⁶ Before passengers disembark, tour guides thank them profusely for taking the tour, visiting the city, and helping to support the economy. Their assurances “Thank God y’all are coming,” “Every penny spent helps recovery,” and tourists “cannot do more than just being here” indicate a continued reliance on tourism or, as Souther rightly argues, “the very economic development strategy that magnified the social disaster of Katrina.”⁴⁷ This reliance on tourism mitigates against an overhaul of predominant tourism narratives or other challenges to the status quo.

What results is an uneven, inconsistent construction of black New Orleans. By foregrounding disaster, most post-Katrina bus tours have been forced to acknowledge another New Orleans—outside the tourist boundaries, primarily black, often poor, and still largely neglected by their city and government. Tourism brochures and advertisements, on the other hand, fail to relinquish (and encourage tourists to recall) the myths of racial exoticism and white supremacist desire for a construction of blacks as artistically talented but



Figure 3.

Two years after Hurricane Katrina, many neighborhoods, such as this one in the lower Ninth Ward, were still destroyed. Photo courtesy of author.

socially inferior. In the midst of this tension is the constant exuberant reassurance that the city that tourists love, that is, the white-dominated, “historic”, and exotic New Orleans, has not been damaged and is better than ever. In

scripted and unscripted ways, New Orleans’s emerging post-Katrina tourism vacillates between conventional narratives of white southern mythology and more recent narratives of black history and agency. Even the post-Katrina bus tours, which physically leave behind the “Disneyfied” stability of tourist New Orleans, exhibit this uncertainty.⁴⁸ Mimicking their movement between the revitalized French Quarter and the ruins of the Ninth Ward, these tours ambivalently express both that the city has recovered from the storm intact, ready to do business as usual *and* that New Orleans and its residents, particularly its black population, continue to languish from neglect and abandonment. In most tours, the pre-Katrina narrative of racial desire rests uneasily alongside an emerging post-Katrina counternarrative of racial disaster.

As these post-Katrina tours shift focus to “rebirth” and “recovery,” I am left to wonder if the incipient moment of an alternative tourism has passed. The space—however limited—for African-American stories and histories

of resistance to vie with, or perhaps overtake, mainstream constructions of blackness is rapidly diminishing. One need only compare the brochures for the 2007 and 2008 Tours by Isabelle to see the tenacity of pre-Katrina narratives. The 2007 brochure cover presents a split image of New Orleans, exemplified by the juxtaposition of two unrelated images depicting two of the company's tours. The top half of the cover features a photograph of company owner Isabelle Cossart costumed as a southern belle against the backdrop of the palatial Oak Alley plantation. Her photograph is captioned by the company motto "We'll make you fall in love with Louisiana!"⁴⁹ This visual introduction to the company's plantation tours clearly links the appeal of Louisiana for white tourists to the staging of antebellum romance. Visitors are promised a "pilgrimage back in time" that will presumably transport them to an era in which the opulence and grandeur represented in the photograph were sustained by the subjugation and exploitation of black Louisianans.⁵⁰ The bottom half of the cover, however, promotes the company's "Post-Katrina and City Tour." A meteorological representation of the eye of the storm as it made landfall in Louisiana directs the eye to the photograph below of an actual dilapidated house, seemingly imploded by the storm surge. Above the photograph, the imperative "Witness post-Katrina devastation" demands that potential tourists face the harsh realities of contemporary Louisiana, thereby offering an unintended rejoinder to the antebellum mythology depicted by the costumed Cossart.⁵¹

These competing images visually replicate the competing narratives that tour companies and tourists negotiated in the first two years following Hurricane Katrina. Though eluding an easy resolution, their opposition pointed to the possibility of a tourism narrative in flux. That the two photographs vied for the same tourists suggested that there may have been an opening—even in the mainstream tourism narrative—for alternative voices and visions of the region. Although Tours by Isabelle continues to offer its "Post-Katrina City Tour," the 2008 cover has reverted exclusively to the plantation imagery. The photograph of the costumed Cossart beneath a canopy of oak trees that frame the Big House now fills the entire cover of the brochure, a sign perhaps that the post-Katrina narrative of disaster has been subsumed by the pre-Katrina narrative of desire.⁵² If so, an opportunity has been lost to understand who black New Orleanians are, what we have contributed to the city, and what we might need now.

Notes

- Research for this article was conducted with the assistance of the College of Liberal Arts, Dean's Fund for Faculty Development research grants, Faculty Career Development Award, and a Joseph P. Healey research grant, all awarded by the University of Massachusetts, Boston.
1. See Kevin Fox Gotham, *Authentic New Orleans: New Orleans, Culture, and Race in the Big Easy* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); J. Mark Souther, *New Orleans on Parade: Tourism and the Transformation of the Crescent City* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Anthony Stanonis, *Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1918–1945* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006); and Lynnell Thomas, "Race and Erasure in New Orleans Tourism" (PhD diss., Emory University, 2005).
 2. For examples of the former, see Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); and David Dante Troutt, ed., *After the Storm: Black Intellectuals Explore the Meaning of Hurricane Katrina* (New York: New Press, 2006). For examples of the latter, see Souther, *New Orleans on Parade*, and Stanonis, *Creating the Big Easy*.
 3. David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 19. Other studies arguing for the importance of collective memory in appropriating the past and shaping the future of the nation include Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Malley, eds., *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1991); and Stephanie E. Yuhl, *A Golden Haze of Memory: The Making of Historic Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
 4. Numerous news reports chronicling the slow progress of New Orleans recovery efforts and the multiple reasons behind it have appeared in the three years since the storm. Examples include Julia Cass, "Notable Mardi Gras Absences Reflect Loss of Black Middle Class," special section to *The Washington Post*, February 25, 2006; Mike Davis, "Who Is Killing New Orleans?" *The Nation*, March 23, 2006, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060410/davis> (accessed April 12, 2006); Leslie Eaton, "New Orleans Recovery Is Slowed by Closed Hospitals," *New York Times*, July 24, 2007; Jordan Flaherty, "The Second Looting of New Orleans," *AlterNet*, January 18, 2007, <http://www.alternet.org/story/45953/> (accessed January 22, 2007); Ruth Gidley, "Three Years After Katrina Swept Through Town," Reuters Foundation AlertNet, August 27, 2008, <http://www.alertnet.org/db/blogs/1264/2008/07/27-162945-1.htm> (accessed October 3, 2008); Adam Nossiter, "After Fanfare, Hurricane Katrina Grants Leave Little Mark," *New York Times*, August 30, 2008; Nossiter, "Largely Alone, Pioneers Reclaim New Orleans," *New York Times*, July 2, 2007; Nossiter, "With Regrets, New Orleans Is Left Behind," *New York Times*, December 18, 2007; Bill Quigley, "The Right to Return to New Orleans," *Counterpunch*, <http://www.counterpunch.org/quigley02262007.html> (accessed March 20, 2007).
 5. For a broader argument about white cooptation of black culture, see Ellis Cashmore, *The Black Culture Industry* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
 6. Lynnell Thomas, "'The City I Used to . . . Visit': Tourist New Orleans and the Racialized Response to Hurricane Katrina," in *Seeking Higher Ground: The Hurricane Katrina Crisis, Race, and Public Policy Reader*, eds. Manning Marable and Kristen Clarke (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 256.
 7. Thomas, "The City I Used . . . to Visit," 256–60.
 8. Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (London: Verso, 1994), 276–308. Other scholars have critiqued the heritage industry for trivializing cultures, commodifying and fictionalizing an idealized past, and creating hegemonic forms of discourse. See, for instance, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World* (London: Routledge, 1992).
 9. Thomas, "Race and Erasure," 136–37.
 10. Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915–1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 336.
 11. Souther examines how African-American activists employed this rhetoric of tourism to compel New Orleans tourism industry leadership to change the city's Jim Crow image in the chapter "Into the Big League" in *New Orleans on Parade*, 73–101.
 12. For a range of publications documenting the rise of black heritage tourism, see George Cantor, *Historic Landmarks of Black America* (Detroit: Gale, 1991); Henry Chase, *In Their Footsteps: The American*

- Visions Guide to African-American Heritage Sites* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994); and Gerrie Ferris, "Around the South in Search of the Past: Black Tourism Industry Thrives in 90s Search for Black Heritage South," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, June 30, 1996.
13. See Helen A. Regis, "Blackness and the Politics of Memory in the New Orleans Second Line," *American Ethnologist* 28.4 (November 2001): 752–77; Regis, "Second Lines, Minstrelsy, and the Contested Landscapes of New Orleans Afro-Creole Festivals," *Cultural Anthropology* 14.4 (November 1999): 472–504; and J. Mark Souther, "Making the Birthplace of Jazz," in *New Orleans on Parade*, 102–31.
 14. Thomas, "The City I Used to . . . Visit," 260–63.
 15. Souther, *New Orleans on Parade*, 129. For examples of African American agency in New Orleans performance culture see also George Lipsitz, "Mardi Gras Indians: Carnival and Counter-Narrative in Black New Orleans," *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 233–53; Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Lynnell Thomas, "Kissing Ass and Other Performative Acts of Resistance: Austin, Fanon, and New Orleans Tourism," *Performance Research* 12.3 (September 2007): 137–45.
 16. Africans in Louisiana Tours, Le'Obs Tours and Travel, Loews Transportation, Sojourner Tours, and Williams Tours and Transportation were among the local black-owned tour companies that operated black heritage tours in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina. See Thomas, "Race and Erasure," 140–64.
 17. Thomas, "Kissing Ass," 142.
 18. Thomas, "The City I Used to . . . Visit," 255–70.
 19. I took the following bus/van tours: Cajun Encounters Tours' "City Tour," Celebration Tours' "Katrina Recovery Tour," Dixie Tours' "Katrina Recovery Tour," Gray Line Tours' "Hurricane Katrina: 'America's Greatest Catastrophe,'" Louisiana Swamp Tours/Louisiana Tour Company's "New Orleans City and Post-Katrina Tour," and Tours by Isabelle's "Post-Katrina City Tour." At the time of my field research in August 2007, Airboat Adventures' "Hurricane Katrina Tour" was not available due to mechanical problems and the Old River Road Plantation Adventure's "Chronicles of Katrina" was not operating because business was slow during the month of August.
 20. "New Orleans CVB Announces Aggressive Rebranding Campaign to Focus on Authentic and Dynamic Culture of New Orleans," Hotel Online, January 25, 2007, http://www.hotel-online.com/News/PR2007_1st/Jan07_NewOrleansCVB.html (accessed October 6, 2008); "New Orleans CVB Encourages Locals to Be a Tourist in Your Own Hometown," New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau, May 14, 2007, <http://www.neworleanscvb.com/articles/index.cfm/action/view/typeID/1/articleID/1058/> (accessed August 3, 2007); Ron Stodghill, "Driving Back into Louisiana's History," *New York Times*, Travel, May 25, 2008; Richard A. Webster, "New Orleans Tourism Industry Still Plagued with Same Problems It Had," BNet, December 25, 2006, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4200/is_20061225/ai_n17075812 (accessed August 3, 2007); Jaquetta White, "Multicultural Tourism Network Hit Hard by Storm," *Times Picayune*, May 11, 2008.
 21. Allen Toussaint, Wynton Marsalis, Patricia Clarkson, and Emeril Lagasse, "Dear Friend of New Orleans," *New Orleans Official Visitors Guide* (New Orleans: New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation, 2007), 3; italics in original.
 22. Nicolai Ouroussoff, "History vs. Homogeneity in New Orleans Housing Fight," *New York Times*, February 22, 2007; Adolph Reed and Stephen Steinberg, "Liberal Bad Faith in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina," May 4, 2006, http://www.blackcommentator.com/182/182_cover_liberals_katrina.html (accessed May 4, 2006); and John Valery White, "The Persistence of Race Politics and the Restraint of Recovery in Katrina's Wake," in *After the Storm*, ed. Troutt, 41–62. The *Du Bois Review's* special issue "Katrina: Unmasking Race, Poverty, and Politics in the Twenty-first Century" 3 (2006) includes several articles addressing the class and racial divisions that the storm uncovered.
 23. Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 116.
 24. New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau, <http://www.neworleanscvb.com/static/index.cfm/contentID/708/sectionID/1/subsectionID/708> (accessed July 30, 2006).
 25. Souther, *New Orleans on Parade*, 28.
 26. "New Orleans Ready for Expo! Forest Products Machinery and Equipment Exposition, <http://www.sfpaexpo.com/News/071218.htm> (accessed September 20, 2008).

27. Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 3.
28. For a historical overview of the role of stereotypes in shaping U.S. popular culture, see Jannette L. Bates and William Barlow, *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1990); and Kevern Verney, *African Americans and U.S. Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
29. Toni Morrison introduced this term in her novel *Beloved* (1987). Adam McKible, "'These Are the Facts of the Darky's History': Thinking History and Reading Names in Four African American Texts," *African American Review* 28 (Summer 1994): 231.
30. For the range of media coverage surrounding Gray Line Tours, in particular, see Jim Auchmuty, "Katrina Tour Gives a Look at New Orleans Devastation," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 26, 2007; Dave Caldwell, "New Orleans Company Plans a Tour of the Catastrophe," *New York Times*, Travel, December 25, 2005; Nate Guidry, "New Orleans Bus Tour Shows Ravages of Hurricane Katrina," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 20, 2006; "Hurricane Katrina Disaster Tours Still Popular," *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 13, 2007, <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2007/06/13/1181414340980.html> (accessed July 27, 2007); Janet McConaughy, "Katrina Tours Get Mixed Reaction," *Seattlepi.com*, December 16, 2005, http://seattlepi.nsource.com/national/252282_tour16.html (accessed July 31, 2007); "New Tour of Katrina-Devastated Area Is Sold Out," *USA Today*, http://www.usatoday.com/travel/news/2006-01-04-new-orleans-tours_x.htm?POE=click-refer (accessed July 31, 2007); Stacey Plaisance, "Demand High for Bus Tour of Katrina Devastation," *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City), BNet, January 5, 2006, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4188/is_20060105/ai_n15996590 (accessed July 31, 2007); and Linton Weeks, "A Bus Tour of Hurricane Hell," *Washington Post*, February 18, 2006.
31. Tours by Isabelle claims to have begun tours in September 2005, whereas Gray Line's tour began in January 2006. See Janet McConaughy, "Demand for Post-Katrina Disaster Tours Remains High," *USA Today*, August 13, 2007, http://www.usatoday.com/travel/destinations/2007-08-13-post-Katrina-disaster-tours_N.htm (accessed September 20, 2008).
32. For instance, New Orleans jazz history was poorly represented in the city prior to Hurricane Katrina. See Ronette King, "Blowing Life Back into the Birthplace of Jazz," Newhouse News Service, 2001, <http://www.newhousenews.com/archive/story1b012601.html> (accessed June 7, 2003).
33. Melvin Dixon, "The Black Writer's Use of Memory," in *History and Memory*, eds. Fabre and O'Meally, 20.
34. "Post-Katrina City Tour," Tours by Isabelle, July 30, 2007.
35. Robert C. Lieberman, "'The Storm Didn't Discriminate': Katrina and the Politics of Color Blindness," *Du Bois Review* 3 (2006): 8.
36. "Katrina Recovery Tour," Celebration Tours, August 1, 2007. Shaila Dewan, "Resources Scarce, Homelessness Persists in New Orleans," *New York Times*, May 28, 2008; Gidley, "Three Years After Katrina Swept Through Town."
37. For a sample list of such organizations, see "Alphabetical Listing of Some Grassroots Racial Justice Organizations in New Orleans Since Katrina," *A Katrina Reader: Readings by and for Anti-Racist Educators and Organizers*, http://cswsworkshop.org/katrinareader/view/org_listing (accessed March 16, 2009).
38. "Katrina Recovery Tour," Dixie Tours, August 6, 2007.
39. Bill Sasser, "Our Town: Bush Visits Local Diner, Promises Help Is Coming," Katrina Help Center, March 16, 2006, <http://www.thebeehive.org/Templates/HurricaneKatrina/Level3NoFrills.aspx?PageId=1.5369.6532.7343> (accessed October 4, 2008); and "President George W. Bush and Laura Bush Stop in at Stewart's Diner in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans," White House, March 2006, http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/03/images/20060308-1_otr-515h.html (accessed October 4, 2008).
40. Regis, "Blackness," 765.
41. "Hurricane Katrina: 'America's Greatest Catastrophe,'" Gray Line Tours New Orleans, July 25, 2007.
42. Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 205.
43. "City Tour," Cajun Encounters Tours, July 26, 2007. Only Gray Line's "Hurricane Katrina: 'America's Greatest Catastrophe'" and Tours by Isabelle's "Post-Katrina City Tour" do not travel to the Garden District and remain in the areas most affected by the storm.

44. An exception was the tour guide for Dixie Tours' "Katrina Recovery Tour," who polled passengers to see if they would prefer to see more Katrina-ravaged neighborhoods in St. Bernard parish or to resume the traditional route to St. Charles Ave. The passengers voted to follow the traditional route, August 6, 2007.
45. "Katrina Recovery Tour," Celebration Tours, August 1, 2007.
46. "New Orleans City and Post-Katrina Tour," Louisiana Swamp Tours, August 2, 2007, and "Katrina Recovery Tour," Dixie Tours, August 6, 2007.
47. "Post-Katrina City Tour," Tours by Isabelle, July 30, 2007; "City Tour," Cajun Encounters Tours, July 26, 2007; "Katrina Recovery Tour," Celebration Tours, August 1, 2007; and Souther, "The Disneyfication of New Orleans: The French Quarter as Façade in a Divided City," *The Journal of American History* 94 (2007): 811.
48. Souther, "Creole Disneyland," 159–84, and "The Disneyfication of New Orleans," 804–811, in *New Orleans on Parade*.
49. "Tours by Isabelle," 2007.
50. Tours by Isabelle, http://www.toursbyisabelle.com/tours_plantation.html (accessed 5 October 2008).
51. "Tours by Isabelle," 2007.
52. "Tours by Isabelle," 2008.