10

Hurricane Katrina Goes Digital: Memory, Dark Tours, and YouTube

Diana I. Bowen and Susannah Bannon

Virtual Hurricane Katrina tours expose underlying strategic efforts of remembering and forgetting. Various videos, news reports, presidential tours, and speeches related to the disaster create a discourse that illuminates the public memory function in the narrative. Virtual disaster tours may be defined as the practice of visiting disaster sites facilitated through e-mediated technology. Virtual visitors "go" to New Orleans, including physical and rhetorical sites of devastation, both of which would be available on an in-person trip. This definition includes the use of media technology—such as voice-overs, footage of the face-to-face tours, and videos of the damage—as a means of taking virtual tourists through various "stops." Beyond making the tours accessible virtually, the producers of these videos archive Hurricane Katrina in a way that makes the efforts of the various stakeholders visible and exposes how uneasily consumerism blends with virtual (and real-world) dark tourism.

D. I. Bowen (✉)
University of Houston-Clear Lake, Houston, TX, USA

S. Bannon
University of Texas-Austin, Austin, TX, USA

K. N. McDaniel (ed.), *Virtual Dark Tourism*, Palgrave Studies in Cultural Heritage and Conflict, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74687-6_10

Virtual visits that include documentary, news footage, and application-based platforms highlight unique forms of virtual disaster tourism, exposing the good, the bad, and the ugly of Katrina tours. In doing so, virtual tours draw attention to the *technologies of tourism practices* and their role in unsettling patterns of globalization. A video on YouTube may serve several functions: for example, an advertisement, news report, or personal story. In addition to or perhaps *underlying* these functions is that of a virtual tour, with its own characteristics. The videos go beyond the simple presentation of information; they show how various players set the stage for what information the public needs to know about Katrina, and they also erase other important aspects of the disaster.

Hurricane Katrina: A Natural and Human-Made Disaster with Tourism Counterparts

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc on the Gulf Coast, causing devastation in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. The impact of Katrina was nowhere more apparent than in Louisiana, specifically the city of New Orleans. Breaches of the levee system exacerbated the initial damage of the storm, causing severe flooding in neighborhoods across the city. The next day, news outlets began covering the storm's aftermath. Images of the total devastation of New Orleans—and the desperation of its residents who congregated on rooftops pleading for rescue—rocked the rest of the country.[1]

A series of failures at the local and federal levels of government contributed to the chaos that ensued through that August weekend.[2] As reports of inhumane conditions at the Superdome, where 20,000 people sought refuge without electricity or sanitation for nearly a week, and violent interactions between storm victims and law enforcement rolled in, more and more people asked questions about why things had to get so bad before any help came.[3] At the time that Katrina hit, the majority of New Orleans residents were people of color (60% black, 5% Hispanic, and 3% Asian).[4] Additionally, New Orleans had a poverty rate of 28%, over twice the national average. As images continued to come in through the media, it became clear that the people left to fend for themselves were

overwhelmingly poor and black.[5] Of the 682 people in Orleans Parish who died as a result of Hurricane Katrina, two-thirds of the victims were people of color.[6]

Katrina also displaced 2,400,000 from homes in New Orleans.[7] Not all who left returned after rebuilding began, resulting in what scholars have called the *Katrina Diaspora*, a term that describes the "African American children and families from New Orleans who were displaced by Hurricane Katrina and now reside in cities, towns, and suburbs outside of New Orleans."[8] Over the last dozen years, the Crescent City has been largely rebuilt but it is undeniably different. Scholars have argued that the forced migration of black residents and resulting *Katrina Diaspora* are rooted in New Orleans's long history of racial segregation grounded in slavery, institutional racism, and white supremacy.[9] The poorest and hardest-hit neighborhoods were also the last to receive aid and to reconstruct following the storm—if rebuilding even happened. Scholars examining the intersection of natural disaster and race in New Orleans have drawn comparisons between the treatment of black residents of New Orleans during Katrina and that of black New Orleanians during the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, when levees were purposefully exploded to preserve the white neighborhoods of the city.[10] With post-Katrina rebuilding came gentrification; recent reports show that New Orleans has a significantly higher number of white residents than before the storm,[11] a change that some argue was the intended result of the local government's inadequate preparation and the federal government's sluggish deployment of aid.[12]

Katrina disaster tours extend from earlier practices of touring areas of catastrophe and provide insights on research about dark tourism. Phaedra Pezzullo's post-Katrina fieldwork discusses possibilities for civic engagement,[13] and DeMond Shondell Miller offers an autoethnography of Katrina tours.[14] Lynell Thomas uses theories of intersectionality and politics of memory,[15] observing that initial attempts at revitalizing tourism in New Orleans meant "shielding visitors from post-Katrina realities"[16]; however, "post-Katrina tourists expected and even sought out different stories that might help them make sense of the devastation and tragedy."[17] Documentaries, promotion materials, newscasts, and even apps for smartphones make up the online repository of information surrounding Hurricane Katrina disaster tours on YouTube. Although it may appear that

these YouTube videos provide informational materials *about* disaster tours, over time these videos have *become* their own form of disaster tourism. As a subcategory of dark tourism, these disaster tours went from being possible only for people physically visiting New Orleans to being available on YouTube, making the damage accessible via digital media. The dark tours of affected areas place the already known tourism destination into a new category, that of thanatourism—visiting sites associated with death and disaster. Catherine Roberts and Philip Stone explain that "traveling to meet with the dead has long been a feature of the touristic landscape."[18] People's fascination with going to places that have witnessed death is evident in narratives of Katrina. Prominent tour companies (such as Gray Line Tours) and smaller businesses (such as Tours by Isabelle) responded to the disaster by offering tours led by survivors for audiences wanting to see the damage.

While the tours may have brought curious leisure tourists, educational groups, and even survivors wishing to see what remained of their city,[19] the tours' virtual presence developed. People can find them by going online and doing a basic search for "Katrina Disaster Tours."[20] Dark online tourism reveals digital public memory practices in an age of globalization; these strategies are publicly available via popular video-sharing websites. The tours provide insights about the strategic rhetorical choices of the companies regarding this "sensitive" topic. The tours are shaped to portray a unifying view in place of one that emphasizes racial and class differences by occluding the visuals that, in the midst of the disaster, made those differences so apparent. This dynamic demonstrates an underlying component of dark tourism: the quest for a unifying and heroic ("persevering") interpretation of historical disaster, at the expense of forgetting major disruptive elements in the history itself.

Virtual Memoryscapes in YouTube Katrina Disaster Tours

To understand the value of having access to dark tours via the Internet, how narratives in YouTube videos fare with those of the in-person visits, and how these videos help to carve public memory[21] of Hurricane Katrina—topics that lie at the intersection of tourism, public memory, technology, and

globalization—an approach is necessary that meets the multidimensional demands of this text. Kendall Phillips and Mitch Reyes propose such an approach through their theory of global memoryscapes, defined as "a complex landscape upon which memories and memory practices move, come into contact, are contested by, and contest other forms of remembrance."[22] Hurricane Katrina tours provide an example of Phillips and Reyes's concept that new remembrance practices may unsettle the dynamic movements of globalization.[23]

In particular, new media unsettles the embodiment of touring a physical location while simultaneously demystifying the tour by making it available to the public via a basic online search. The tours inhabit contested grounds: they provide viewers a unique perspective on damage. Media coverage of Katrina tours, while accessible to the public, often focuses on the trip as a shopping experience rather than on what the guides say. On the other hand, publicly available accounts via the tour guides make issues surrounding race and class inescapable to the online visitor. Positive or negative, the various forms taken by these dark tours contribute to a memory of Katrina, one whose fragments can be pieced together by the visitor. Each of the videos we examined on YouTube dealing with Katrina disaster tours plays a role in memorializing the tragedy. Although several parties created the short clips, they illuminate the competing interests and struggles over how to memorialize this moment in history.

Merging of Key Players, Tour Guides, and the Struggle for Meaning

The individuals whose narratives emerge through the Katrina tour videos, or the "key players," include tour companies, the company leaders, tour guides, and application content contributors and funding sources. The virtual visits highlight what these trips look like through a merging of the guide and company owner, promotional materials and tour, and watching face-to-face tours and attending virtually.

Unlike in-person tours, the online materials must include the entirety of the tour package, including promotional materials and any messages that might otherwise seem external. In the face-to-face situation, these

contextual materials would either be found online (for example, if someone is looking for information to book the tour prior to arrival) or directly at the travel site via brochures or fliers. Informational materials tourists read, such as brochures or online reviews, are all part of the tour. By adding these materials as part of the virtual tours, company owners and the producers of the videos necessarily merge with the tour guides, creating new meanings along the way. The personal narratives of the company's owners set up their business to increase sales and profit margins.

Tours by Isabelle is one of the two tour companies appearing in the videos. In "New Orleans Katrina Disaster Tours," business leader, French New Orleanian, and Katrina survivor Isabelle Cossart identifies herself as one of the first people to offer disaster tours of New Orleans and emphasizes the authenticity of her narrative. Cossart describes Katrina's effect on her life and company primarily as a shift in customer demand for her business. Prior to Katrina, Tours by Isabelle made revenue by giving swamp and plantation tours, but in the years since the disaster, Cossart and tour guide Ginnie Robilotta continue to provide tourists with what she claims they want: disaster tours of New Orleans. In the video, Cossart does not indicate how she was affected by the storm personally; the narrative focuses on her business instead.[24] She even contributed a BuzzFeed article, "I Was the Face of Disaster Tourism in Post-Katrina New Orleans," about how she responded to accusations of "cashing in on others' misery."[25]

A second tour company appearing in the videos is Gray Line Tours New Orleans. Gray Line's business leaders contributing to its narrative include Vice President and General Manager Greg Hoffman, Hotel Sales and Tour Operations Manager Jim Fewell, and Tour Development and Operations Manager Etienne-Emile Skrabo. Gray Line Tours company leaders seem to try to match Cossart's authenticity in the video "Gray Line New Orleans—Hurricane Katrina Tour" by offering their personal accounts of the storm, even though they all evacuated the city ahead of time. They make statements about how the storm did not discriminate according to class, but this leaves out the conditions of discrimination and racism already present. Their stories emphasize a need to shine a light on the perseverance of New Orleans residents in their rebuilding efforts as the rationale for creating the disaster tour. Notably, their accounts do not

detail if and how their personal lives were affected by the storm.[26] In a separate video "Hurricane Katrina Survivor Gives Tours of Its Destruction," a Gray Line Tours New Orleans guide named John Olivard is identified as a "survivor" of Katrina. Olivard provides an account of his experience with his more than 100-year-old home flooding under seven and a half feet of water and, in doing so, matches Cossart's credibility.[27] The only difference is that in the case of the Gray Line Tours, the people giving the contextual information about the tours are the administrators of the company. In some ways, this means that the information contains greater detail because the officials are trying to give a more personal narrative to boost ticket sales. The result, however, is that the tour guide gets less air time, and these business leaders gloss over the survivors' experiences.

Key players also contribute to dark tourism accessed via smart technology. Through the New Orleans Historical smartphone application, which "features stories and scholarship about New Orleans," individuals can access the Virtual Levee Breach Tour.[28] Although the application is a type of virtual tourism, the YouTube video that describes it is also part of this tour. A collective of state and cultural institutions curated the app: Levees.org, New Orleans Public Library, Louisiana State Museum, and the University of New Orleans History Department. Levees.org, the nonprofit launched by Sandy and Stanford Rosenthal, New Orleans residents who fled their home during Katrina, is "devoted to educating America on the facts associated with the 2005 catastrophic flooding of the New Orleans region."[29] Another major key player, the Louisiana State Museum, consists of a "statewide network of National Historic Landmarks and architecturally significant structures … that showcase Louisiana's history and culture."[30] The key players from state and cultural institutions contribute narratives focused on public education and historical record by employing technology that grants dark tour access to anyone with a smartphone. The description for a public service announcement (PSA) for the application on the Levees.org YouTube channel states, "The app brings the history of the disaster right to the palm of your hand, in a free app. This PSA explains just how cool it is!"[31] In the case of the application description, the YouTube video serves as another type of informational context that allows users to make decisions about downloading the program. It serves the same function as distributed printed ephemera that

persuade tourists to take a tour, except that its existence on YouTube makes it a virtual tour.

Some Katrina narratives are not represented in these tours. Aside from Olivard's story about his home flooding, none of the major stakeholders provide accounts of the damage caused by Katrina, despite their roles in bringing tourists to that destruction. Note the absence of people of color, specifically African Americans, in the dominant narratives of the videos. While one video shows African American tourists on a bus,[32] they are usually presented in the depths of the disaster, fleeing their homes, or carrying their possessions while wading through the flood waters. The stories of the individuals who were most directly and dramatically affected by Hurricane Katrina appear to be missing. The key players craft a somewhat unified memory. We do not see images from the neighborhoods that have not recovered, nor do we hear the experiences of people of color affected by Katrina. A struggle for meaning is present at the intersection of the various narratives represented in these videos, a struggle that is also evident in the commentary posted on the video's YouTube page. Comments allow individuals who take the virtual tours to engage in dialogue about the tour experience and appear to reinforce the unified Katrina narrative created by the tour guides.

Comment sections reveal an intersection between the major players in the Katrina tourism industry. Under the promotional video "Gray Line New Orleans—Hurricane Katrina Tour," the lone comment from "AdministratorLevees.org," states, "Grayline [*sic*] pays the monthly water bill to sustain the beautiful garden at our Levee Exhibit Hall—a featured visiting spot for Grayline's [*sic*] Katrina tour. Our museum quality exhibits explain why the levees breached and the affect [*sic*] on the neighborhoods and lives." This comment serves dual purposes, framing the Gray Line Tours company as one that gives back to the New Orleans community by paying the water bill for the Levee Exhibit Hall, while simultaneously plugging Gray Line Tour and the "museum quality exhibits" at the Hall.[33]

Comments also operate as a space where meaning is contested and virtual tourists reflect upon the Katrina narratives promoted through the videos. For example, the National Geographic video "Hurricane Katrina Survivor Gives Tours of Its Destruction" features Olivard, who as described earlier lost his life-long home in Katrina and now leads one of

Gray Line's Katrina tours. The comments focus on Olivard's narrative. Messages, such as "What a good man. Using his pain as a tool to educate is an amazing talent" and "Great job, thank you," call attention to a particular Katrina narrative that the virtual and physical tours promote: positive outcomes despite tragedy and individual perseverance. Drawing a connection between Katrina tourism and recovery, the same commenter praising Olivard for using his pain as an educational tool also makes an argument in support of the disaster tourism industry. This person states that, while they are making a profit, tours also provide opportunities for "rebuilding and education" as well as "opening eyes." A third commenter focuses not on Olivard but on the changes observable in the city of New Orleans and calls attention to what is framed as a positive outcome of the storm. This commenter states that "areas tied to critical and desirable industries have come back" but that "non-viable" parts of the city are what "shouldn't and isn't coming back."[34] This problematic comment highlights the person's view that other, less positive interpretations of this event should purposely be excluded and, therefore, forgotten.

The documentary that focuses on local activism, "Disaster Tours: New Orleans after Katrina," includes a dialogue between two commenters about the value of disaster tourism, specifically about the people of the hardest hit areas of the city and the authenticity of the tours. The first comment from etmeyutub states that people "hating" on the tours need to consider that the tourism industry has to "get the message out" that the city has been rebuilt and is open for business. The rationale for this commenter's argument is that the people of neighborhoods like the ninth ward who work in the French Quarter *need* tourism to survive and rebuild their lives. The last statement of this quote is particularly salient to the focus of this study, as the commenter argues that the tours function to remind people "who may have forgot" about the devastation of Katrina.[35]

Comments also raise questions about the authenticity of the Katrina narratives produced by the tours, a phenomenon that is also evident in the documentary "Disaster Tours: New Orleans after Katrina." Commenter etmeytub argues for the authenticity of locally based tour guides like John Olivard, challenging claims made by Common Ground activists that Katrina tours represent the storm and aftermath inaccurately. The comment admits that this could be true, "unless that tour guide is from here

and lost all his shit too. You don't know who that tour guide is riding by. Most likely a local. most [*sic*] likely a 'victim' too." Responding to etmeytub's comment, Svenson argues that the guide featured in the video is a friend and he is going by a "script" constructed by Gray Line Tours intended to promote a "positive" and "encouraging" version of Katrina. Svenson's comment continues, "There are 'official' stories and unofficial stories. His job as tour guide in this context was to uplift people, to be positive. The tours run off a script that is generic. Lie is a strong word. Different stories or versions might be more appropriate. Problem is most of the time we don't get diverse perspectives or stories—we get the official one."[36] Here the struggle for meaning over "official" and "unofficial" Katrina narratives spills over from the actual tours into their comment sections.

Comment sections offer a space for public discourse where virtual tourists attempt to make sense of their tour experience and the narratives embedded in the tour itself. The comments posted under virtual tour videos reflect a unified story of positivity and progress emerging from tragedy. However, the potential remains for these comments to also serve as a disruption to these dominant narratives by calling attention to their scripted nature.

Reluctance as a Persuasive Strategy

Katrina virtual disaster tours have a striking element: they communicate a sense of reluctance or hesitation about taking the tours as part of the experience. This theme emerges from explanations of how the tours came about despite reluctance on the part of the company, a type of apologia expressed throughout the narrative of Gray Line Tours and Tours by Isabelle. Although not all videos convey this theme, it is a relevant part of the narrative. This sense of reluctance is evident in both the leadership of tour groups (that is, the owners) and the tour guides. This hesitation also requires explanation and refutation to maximize persuasive attempts at driving business. Reluctance in virtual dark tours includes online materials that might not exist in face-to-face visits (for example, voiceovers and footage of damaged neighborhoods) but that highlight the merging of informational materials along with the tour for the purposes of persuasion.

Through strategic placement of news footage and scenes showing people overcoming feelings of hesitation, the promotional materials become part of the tour. In doing so, the story of the company's leadership erases or forgets the experiences of the tour guides and survivors who may not agree with displaying their personal tragedy.

In "Gray Line New Orleans—Hurricane Katrina Tour," Hoffman succinctly expresses his hesitation about providing disaster tours and, interestingly, these statements *become part of the virtual tours.* Hoffman states that he is unsure of "how the idea of a Katrina tour originated," signaling an uncertain, but also organic beginning. Even though he is uncertain of how this idea came to be, he emphasizes that, "when it was first suggested, we dismissed it immediately." This statement intends to communicate sensitivity. Not only were he and the leadership team of Gray Line Tours *not* the originators of the idea, but they displayed sensitivity by initially opposing the tours. Despite his initial reluctance, Hoffman explains how the idea persisted: "But then, more people recommended to consider such a tour, including our employees, tour guides, family members, and a local convention and visitor's bureau." Hoffman recognizes that as a leader, it is not his position to push this type of tour. However, the push from other parties, as the narrative goes, came from several different places.[37]

The actions taken by Gray Line provide a contrast to the earlier narrative of reluctance when they go through with the tours. Hoffman recalls, "We launched the tour on January 4th, 2006. It was a cutting-edge day for Gray Line. When the first tour returned and passengers, many wiping the tears from their eyes, exited the vehicle with glowing remarks for the waiting media, we knew we had done the right thing."[38] By crafting the company's narrative as one in which they listened to the public, the theme of reluctance becomes a story of success for Gray Line Tours.

The actual tours are also part of the online materials; they merge with the informational materials. The Gray Line New Orleans—Hurricane Katrina Tour, for example, blends images of New Orleans while the company administrators offer their narrative. The second Gray Line Tours video "Hurricane Survivor Gives Tours of Its Destruction" also cuts to one sample tour in which Olivard's story combines with that of the administrators. The difference between the virtual tours and in-person visits is that the guide also provides voiceovers for video footage. The scenes seem

always to exist through narrative interpretation provided by the guides and voiceovers. What also makes the virtual trips different is that they incorporate promotional materials as part of the tour.

The narrative of reluctance is not unique to Gray Line tours. In "New Orleans Katrina Disaster Tours," Isabelle Cossart explains that when tourists come to her company, she asks what kind of tour they want, hoping that they will choose their traditional options. To Cossart's perceived disappointment, they continuously choose the Katrina tour. She expresses feeling hopeful to lead a plantation tour or city tour, but based on demand, she leads the Katrina tour. It is interesting that Cossart appears at the top of this set of videos showing hesitation when she has spent much of her professional career over the last ten years stating how important the tours are to other media outlets. As someone who experienced the storm and a tour guide who employs other guides, she is the most authentic choice. Therefore, her response to the demand for the tours provides a glimpse of the mixed responses that residents may have about opening up their personal experience with disaster to the public. The video makes visible an important dimension of tourism: giving visitors what they want.[39]

Hesitation also serves as a persuasive strategy. By addressing possible uncertainty from audiences, reluctance turns into resolve. For example, the video "Hurricane Katrina Tour" addresses possible doubts about cultural insensitivity: "This tour is operated with the utmost sensitivity to the thousands of local residents who lost their homes and possessions and who are still trying to get their lives back in order." The virtual excursion also addresses safety concerns: "The tour travels only on major thoroughs that are open to all vehicular traffic. Passengers will not be allowed to exit the vehicles, except at the refreshment stop," and just in case people want to base their decision on reviews, "Feedback from this tour has been 100% positive with the standard response being: You can't believe it until you see it with your own eyes."[40]

Leaders of the tours are not the only ones who display a sense of reluctance about the tours; Olivard also plays into this narrative. In the video "Hurricane Katrina Survivor Gives Tours of Its Destruction," Olivard states, "I was semi-reluctant because I would have to live through Katrina once again, but it turned out to be pretty good therapy actually." He also reassures the tourists that it is okay for them to take the tour: "I look at it

as educational. I look at it as something great for the city of New Orleans because 80% of the city was underwater, and we're making it right, and I'm proud of the city." Olivard acknowledges that audiences might also experience this sense of reluctance, and uses it as an opportunity to make the pitch for the tour. It is okay for people to feel hesitation since he felt it, too; however, his goal appears to be to persuade people to take the tour as a means to give back to the city.[41]

Reluctance to go on the tours was a typical response, which is why it makes up such a sizeable element of virtual e-tours. Reluctance was not evident in all of the narratives, but it was available on the first set of hits. Overcoming the obstacle of hesitation on the part of the audience not only becomes a marketing tool but also helps to frame the way in which Katrina tours will be remembered. Moreover, while hesitation appears to be a personal reaction, having the videos take on this feeling enables it to become part of the memory of Katrina tours. Because this hesitation is not just an isolated feeling that stops one individual, and can potentially prevent large numbers of people from visiting New Orleans, overcoming these feelings is an important part of memorializing the disaster. Together, promotional materials and news materials, through images of the tours and voiceovers, serve as virtual tours that advance the perspective that the tours are an appropriate response to the disaster.

Agenda-Setting/Memory-Setting of a Cohesive National Narrative

Both the identity of key players and their sense of reluctance lay the groundwork for what gets memorialized through the tour. Over the course of the videos, a clear agenda of New Orleans's place in history, levee breaches, and relevant structures emerges, along with a narrative of overcoming adversity. This narrative requires forgetting alternative memories and experiences that do not fit a model of consumerism and profit for these businesses.

The virtual tour "Gray Line New Orleans—Hurricane Katrina Tour" provides the clearest sense of how Gray Line made decisions about the narrative. Stating that "there were several elements we needed to include,"

Fewel reminds viewers that certain parts of the story are crucial to the history of Katrina. First, Fewel wants to provide tourists with the feelings that New Orleans residents experienced right before and during the storm through a timeline: "When do we leave? Do we leave? How long do we leave?" These questions dominated people's thoughts and conversations as the hurricane neared and Fewel expresses that residents were glued to the television following the storm. The second element of the tour includes certain landmarks that repeatedly appeared on television, such as "the Superdome which was the shelter of last resort and the convention center where people waited to be bussed out of the city." Perhaps tourists know both of the landmarks from seeing them on the news, but they may not have understood the functions of each place. Having an awareness of what each of these structures meant to the overall narrative of Katrina and seeing them as relevant landmarks are major components of the tour. Beyond expressing the tension of the timeline and exploring landmarks, Fewel states that "the most important part of the story" is the "four major levee breaks and the neighborhoods surround[ing]."[42] Along with the evacuation routes, those elements frame the story of struggle and survival, a narrative that seems to ignore the human-made aspect of the disaster.

Another example of Fewel's attempt to create a single cohesive narrative occurs when he compares Katrina to another historical event—Pearl Harbor. The voiceover on the video "Gray Line New Orleans—Hurricane Katrina Tour" claims that while Hurricane Katrina and Pearl Harbor were "not one of the finest moments of American history," they show determination "to move forward in the face of adversity."[43] The company seeks to unite these two events rhetorically. The comparison to Pearl Harbor is significant because it represents an event that is a sure lesson in any history curriculum and makes a strong statement about historical fluidity and public memory. On the one hand, the producers of the video imply that Katrina is just as important an historical event as Pearl Harbor, a defining moment in which the US could no longer remain neutral against an outside attack. On the other hand, Pearl Harbor is not anything like Katrina; even though the hurricane was an "attack," the devastation resulted from a natural disaster compounded by poor decisions within our borders. The producers' "memory" of Katrina emphasizes it as the result of an external threat (a "natural disaster"), and not the state's decision-making. Regardless of the connection, this rhetorical choice of

bringing Pearl Harbor and Katrina together showcases the fluidity of public memory by altering the meaning of one historical event to shape the implications of another.

The strategy behind the tour creates a narrative of victory and survival. However, in making this memory, other essential components of the disaster get completely glossed over in the tours. Gray Line expresses that "Katrina was a storm that hit everyone. It did not discriminate against class level or any of that, and the neighborhoods that we go through show that."[44] Although this statement regarding class might seem banal, it hides that this disaster disproportionately affected people of color. Their voices, bodies, and stories are erased from a memory that, while not a static interpretation of the past, creates the illusion of a unified narrative through the amalgamation of virtual tours. As Phillips and Reyes note, "Not only are these contests related to memories that help constitute different publics, but the struggles often revolve around which/whose memories will be made visible and in what ways."[45] In the present case, the people who own their respective companies shape the virtual tourism landscape, constituting themselves as publics and minimizing the experiences of people of color and human-made failures leading to this disaster.

Producing such a virtual tour necessarily takes away the ability of survivors to share their stories in an unfiltered way. Or, and perhaps more importantly, it makes evident that which has always been the case. Due to the mediated nature of tourism—working for a tour company, signing a contract or application, work-for-hire agreements—the narratives are not quite the guides' own. They always must collaborate with the enterprise that employs them. Some companies might have varying degrees of wanting to preserve survivors' stories; however, when profits motivate organizations, something has to give. In this case, the guides must make their tours "fit" the model of the experience required by tourists.

Through visuals—people speaking in newscasts, promoting the application-based tours, and discussing their ownership of a company—the virtual tours highlight racial disparities. The virtual tours appear "whiter" than the disaster was in reality, ignoring the disproportionate number of people of color affected by the storm; however, this phenomenon also highlights that the individuals who create the narratives of these tours are not always the survivors who lost it all, but the advertisers, the company owners, and so on.

The Struggle Over Memory: Possibilities and Standstills

The virtual tours exhibit the same properties of a history that is told by the people in charge, so to speak. To our surprise, the lived experiences of people of New Orleans and the tour guides were mostly missing in the tours, particularly with the blended narratives of the tour guides and company administrators. Although the Internet offers possibilities for democratization because many people have access to YouTube, the virtual tours display experts crafting memories strategically. What would it take for a real democratization of virtual tours to occur? Phillips states:

> Despite our best efforts, however, memories refuse to remain stable and immutable. Their appearance, often unbidden, within our cultural experience is like a mirage: vivid and poignant but impermanent and fluid. No matter their importance or revered place in our collective lives, we cannot grasp them fully nor fix them permanently. We can only envision a fixed stable memory, chiseled in stone or encased within museum walls, when we neglect—or better yet subvert—their nature as appearing. However, if we attend to the appearance of memories in public, then the illusion of their stability is dispelled and the transitory and fluid nature of memory in public is recovered.[46]

The possibilities of expanding the types of narratives communicated via virtual tours are available; however, dominant memories of perseverance, rebuilding, and survival pervade the landscape. Katrina virtual tours elucidate this "global memoryscapes" concept by showcasing the role of memory, forgetting, and the illusion of fixed, stable historical memory of disasters.

Katrina virtual tours also help define the tourism landscape. Virtual tourism is a practice of visiting sites in a mediated way. New technology and platforms make this distinction more relevant. Tourism scholarship has delved into the role of engaging documentary as a form of tourist practice. Pezzullo, for example, includes such a film in her book *Toxic Tourism: Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel, and Environmental Justice* to explore the documentary *Matamoros: The Human Face of Globalization* as a tour. Pezzullo

explains, "Toxic tours are constituted by and circulated through various media, including videos and the internet" and do "not require going to the site of contamination or production."[47] Pezzullo shares her participation in toxic tours as part of her larger book project and also suggests that documentary constitutes a separate trip, arguing that "although going to such places is significant, the structure of feeling present should not be confused with physical copresence."[48] Important differences exist between watching a mediated show or documentary—which cannot provide "physical copresence"—and taking a face-to-face tour. However, virtual tours and in-person tours share a possibility of garnering affect for important causes.

It is also necessary to consider how Katrina virtual dark tours may evolve in the future. Depending on the popularity of application-based platforms, these forms of virtual disaster tours might grow and reach new audiences. Until then, the YouTube videos and other video-sharing platforms seem to pervade the virtual tourism landscape. Commercialism continues to produce overtly positive interpretations of the disaster based on the blending of narratives of the tour guides and company administrators, but as seen in our analysis, there are pockets of possibility and resistance.

Notes

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21. Public memory studies provide scholars with various theoretical and methodological approaches for conceptualizing ways of commemorating, remembering, and even forgetting the past. For studies on where remembrance occurs, see *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, ed. Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian Ott (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2010). For theories about the active nature of forgetting, see Bradford Vivian, *Public Forgetting: The Rhetoric and Politics of Beginning Again* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).
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