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Viewing the Wreckage: Eco-Disaster Tourism in the Wake of Katrina

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Abstract
Before hurricane Katrina, “cultural tourism” was Louisiana’s second largest industry. Tourism agencies are now imploring potential tourists to visit New Orleans for “An eyewitness account of the events surrounding the worst natural disaster on American soil.” Economic need is driving tour agencies to construct ‘eco-disaster tourism,’ and the construction includes explicit causes of blame. Who is defining the new tourism? How is the controversy surrounding causation being negotiated in eco-disaster tour narratives? The main finding is that the big players in the tourism industry, namely Gray Line Tours, have maneuvered into a powerful position to rewrite the tourism narrative by allying with the state. Gray Lines’ narrative blames the oil and gas industry for Katrina’s severity, while avoiding pointing fingers at government agencies and officials.

Mirando el naufragio: turismo del desastre ecológico después de Katrina
Antes del huracán Katrina, el “turismo cultural” era la segunda más importante industria de Louisiana. Las Agencias de Turismo están ahora implorando a los turistas potenciales que visiten Nueva Orleans para “Dar cuenta personalmente de los acontecimientos que se dan cita en el peor desastre natural en suelo americano”. La necesidad impulsa a las agencias a construir un “turismo del desastre ecológico” y ello incluye inculpar a sus causantes. ¿Quien define el nuevo turismo? ¿Cómo se discute ello en la narrativa de ese turismo? La principal consecuencia es que los principales actores de la industria turística, Gray Line Tours, se han colocado en una posición que les permite reescribir la historia aliándose con el Estado. Gray Lines culpabiliza a la industria del petróleo y del gas por las dimensiones de Katrina, evitando señalar a las agencias gubernamentales y sus funcionarios.

Vues du sinistre: tourisme eco-désastre dans le sillage de Katrina
Les agences de Tourisme supplient les touristes potentiels de visiter New Orleans pour “Un témoignage oculaire des événements occasionnés par le pire désastre naturel jamais vu sur le sol Américain!” Les besoins économiques sont tels qu’ils incitent les tours opérateurs de l’industrie touristique à créer un ‘tourisme-éco-désastre’ et cette création génère de...
nombreux reproches pour des raisons explicites. Qui détermine ce nouveau genre de tourisme? Comment cette controverse autour de ce fait est-elle négociée? La grande découverte est de réaliser que les grands joueurs de la partie de cette industrie touristique ne sont autres que Gray Line Tours, et qu’ils ont œuvré habilement se positionnant dans une situation de force en s’alliant avec l’état. Gray Line tient pour responsables les sociétés de carburants et de gaz pour la gravité de la situation du sinistre Katrina; ce qui leur permet bien évidemment d’éviter de montrer du doigt les agences gouvernementales et leurs responsables officiels gouvernementaux.

Keywords
ccottourism, disaster, Katrina, New Orleans

Introduction: Eco-Disaster Strikes a Tourism Economy

On Monday, August 29, 2005 hurricane Katrina made landfall just east of New Orleans. As was feared and predicted, the disjuncture between the patterns of human settlement, ecological manipulation, and the ecosystemic realities of the region, produced a disaster of immense proportions. An unprecedented storm surge combined with inadequate infrastructure development and decades of barrier erosion and canal building to produce massive flooding of 80% of the city. In a matter of hours, New Orleans was transformed into an ecological disaster. Much of the story of the destruction and human suffering that followed is well known. The focus here is on how the intersection of a tourism dependent economy and ecological disaster produced a unique form of eco-disaster tourism in New Orleans.

Americans watched in horror and disbelief as hurricane Katrina breached New Orleans’ canal and levee system, sinking the city beneath up to 20 feet of contaminated water. For days the 24-hour cable news networks kept viewers riveted. Over a thousand citizens drowned. News media developed a number of narratives: a partial and problematic evacuation, a city mired in racial and class divisions, a government seemingly unable or unwilling to mount an aggressive rescue effort, a lawless free-for-all where looting, rape and murder quickly became routine, and a fatalistic urban culture certain that this worst case scenario was inevitable. The empirical basis for many of these narratives later proved shaky. Nevertheless, the initial media story lines and the endless hours of video imagery fused in viewer consciousness to produce both a fascination with the devastating event, and a series of explanatory narratives.

For a city and state highly dependent on a tourism economy, it was perhaps inevitable that in the aftermath of the Katrina disaster, media-fueled...
interest and a damaged but extensive hospitality infrastructure would combine to generate an eco-disaster tourism industry. Prior to Katrina, Louisiana’s cultural tourism was the state’s second largest industry, employing over 100,000 workers, and generating over $600 million in tax revenues. \(^1\)

But how would disaster tour operators negotiate the conflict between a tourism industry and state anxious to recover a positive destination image, and a potential clientele attracted by apocalyptic images and horrific media story lines? As investigations continued, how would the tourism industry construct the causal narrative and attribute blame?

Hurricane Katrina (and hurricane Rita which followed) brought New Orleans’ tourism industry to a screeching halt. Even as weeks passed and the flood waters were slowly pumped out of the city, the city remained a low priority destination for would-be tourists as the media continued to convey the very real disfunctionality of the metropolitan area produced by nearly total infrastructure failure and the evacuation of most of its residents. However, with an official focus on economic recovery, and the key tourist attraction of the French Quarter escaping largely unscathed, some rebounding of tourism was already evident by January of 2006. French Quarter and Garden District hotels regained capacity to function and the city announced its intention to stage a 2006 Mardi Gras despite some controversy over its appropriateness. Louis Armstrong International Airport was operating at roughly 1/3 its normal capacity, but some of those flights brought tourists with them. With roads reopened, interstate highway travelers also began to stop in on New Orleans. However, with merely 10% of New Orleans musicians remaining in residence, and services at hotels still limited, the rebounding tourism industry took on a distinctly post-Katrina flavor. Jazz and wrought iron work was less of a tourist draw than was the morbid curiosity to see the impacts of the ecological disaster.

Although some of the traditional tourism attractions came back into operation, such as riverboat rides on the Mississippi, many of the culture-based tours of historic New Orleans remained limited or non-operational. To fill the void and to reap economic opportunity, tour operators developed Katrina “disaster tours.” The emergence of eco-disaster tourism proved highly controversial, with some arguing that this represented early signs of economic renewal, and others arguing that it was an ethically reprehensible exploitation of suffering. This controversy became a national

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\(^1\) Landrieu 2006.

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and international news story when, in early December 2005, Gray Line Tours announced that it would add a disaster tour to its New Orleans operation beginning January 4th. Although small local entrepreneurs, such as Isabella’s, had begun running disaster tours already, it was Gray Line’s

Figure 1. EMS. Photo by Tammy Lewis.
high-profile announcement and the first run of its “Hurricane Katrina, America’s Greatest Catastrophe” tour that elevated the attempt to market the eco-disaster as a tourism attraction.

**Locating Eco-Disaster Tourism**

Much has been written about eco-disasters.\(^2\) Our purpose here is not to focus on the Katrina eco-disaster itself, but rather to examine the eco-disaster framing of the post-Katrina redevelopment of New Orleans’ tourism economy. Eco-disaster tourism is not new. A number of tourism destinations have been forced to adjust their narrative framing and marketing to account for ecological catastrophe. Mount St Helen’s arguably became a greater ecotourist draw following the 1980 volcanic eruption. It was, in fact, the devastating eruption that led the President and


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Congress to establish the 110,000 acre Mt. St. Helen's National Volcanic Monument in 1982. That protected designation and fascination with the high profile and deadly volcanic event has generated a substantial local ecotourism\(^3\) industry over the past quarter century. The tourism narrative at Mt. St. Helen's centers on disaster and post-disaster renewal. However, at Mt. St. Helen's, human intervention in the ecosystem is not implicated in the causation narrative. That is, the volcanic eruption flattening much of the forest surrounding Mt. St. Helen's is perceived (correctly) as a wholly natural event devoid of human agency. This is not true for the impacts of Katrina on New Orleans, nor is it true of other well-known eco-disaster tourist destinations.

The Great Yellowstone Fire of 1988 transformed the nature of ecotourism in what is perhaps the archetypal American ecotourism destination,

\(^3\) We use the term 'ecotourism' in this paper to refer to tourism in which ecological features of a destination form the primary basis for tourist interest. We do not employ 'ecotourism' to refer to the smaller set of ecologically based tourism destinations in which tourism is organized to minimize negative impacts on the environment.

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*Figure 3.* Gray Line bus tour. Photo by Ken Gould.
with major focus now on the scope and cause of the fires, and the process of ecological recovery. The fires destroyed much of the ecotourism infrastructure of Yellowstone National Park, and transformed the ecosystem and profile of many cherished natural features. Unlike Mt. St. Helen’s, and more akin to the case of New Orleans, human agency is clearly implicated in the ecological disaster of the Great Yellowstone Fire. In this case, a long-standing policy of fire suppression, established in large part to facilitate ecotourism, generated unnatural ecological conditions that produced a bigger, hotter and more destructive fire event. The post-fire Yellowstone ecotourism narrative follows the familiar pattern of disaster and ecological regeneration seen in Mt. St. Helen’s, but human causation is also featured, indicating how public policy and human manipulation of the ecosystem created the conditions that would ultimately lead to disaster.

Along similar lines, the protected lands around Alaska’s Prince William Sound represent an ecotourism destination that experienced one of the world’s most well known ecological disasters. The 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill devastated attractive coastal ecotourism areas, forcing tourism narratives to again focus on disaster and renewal. Here, as in Yellowstone and New Orleans, it is the intersection of the political-economy and public policy with natural systems that forms the dynamic of disaster causation. And like the cases above, coastal Alaska experienced declines in ecotourism immediately following ecological disaster, and then a renewed ecotourism based in whole or in part, on tourists interested in seeing the impacts of the respective catastrophes. And, like Mt. St. Helen’s, the Exxon oil spill ultimately resulted in a reconfiguration of protected lands designations. Similarly, protected land redesignations are featured in redevelopment plans for the New Orleans region.

New Orleans, then, enters into a segment of the ecotourism industry already pioneered by other eco-disaster destinations. Although much of the literature on “dark tourism” applies a distinctly post-modern analytic frame; those who make a living taking tourists through the excavated remains of Pompeii can attest to the fact that eco-disaster tourism is not a new phenomenon. But although the nature of eco-disaster tourism in New Orleans bears important similarities that allow it to be categorized as an emergent eco-disaster tourism destination, the case of New Orleans is also unique. Like Yellowstone and Prince William Sound, and unlike

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Mt. St. Helen’s, human intervention in the natural environment is clearly implicated in the Katrina disaster causation narrative. New Orleans then represents a sub-category of eco-disaster tourism sites, which we term *sociogenic*, in which it is not nature alone, but the dynamic interplay of environment and society that creates the context for eco-disaster tourism.

The factor that distinguishes New Orleans from all of the other sociogenic eco-disaster tourism cases noted above, however, is that New Orleans was not primarily an ecotourism destination prior to the ecological disaster. That is, while New Orleans’s economy was dependent on tourism, the ecotourism segment of that industry was minimal. Although natural features like the Mississippi River, cypress swamps, and large live oaks and magnolias formed part of the city’s tourist appeal, this contribution was still less than that of even Biloxi, which boasts a sandy Gulf coast beach. Prior to Katrina, New Orleans’s niche was cultural tourism. Additionally, unlike Mt. St. Helen’s and the Great Yellowstone Fire that were primarily *ecotransforming* events, in that the majority of impacts accrued to natural rather than social systems, Katrina was primarily a *sociogenic* disaster.

### Chart 1. Situating Katrina tourism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CAUSE OF DISASTER</th>
<th>PRE-DISASTER SITE TYPE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mt. St. Helen’s</td>
<td>Ecotourism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Great Yellowstone</td>
<td>Non-ecotourism</td>
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<td>Fire</td>
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<td>Valdez, Alaska</td>
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<tr>
<td>Katrina, New Orleans</td>
<td></td>
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<td>World Trade Center</td>
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In some ways, the disaster eco-tourism of New Orleans is similar to the emergence of disaster tourism at the WTC site in lower Manhattan following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Here tourists flocked to witness, at first the remains, and now the mere location, of the tragedy at what has come to be known as “Ground Zero”. While the WTC was a tourist destination prior to the attacks, needless to say the nature and narrative of that tourism was transformed by the event. One can imagine that, as at Ground Zero, the Katrina tours will slowly move from viewing the wreckage, to a narrative of what once was there and now is not. New Orleans’s sociogenic disaster tourism narrative is distinguished from the WTC site by the absence of nature in the causation of the events of 9/11. That is, the WTC site is a case of sociogenic non-ecological disaster tourism.

So in New Orleans we have a unique case of sociogenic eco-disaster tourism in which a previously non-ecological tourism destination is transformed, in part, into an eco-disaster tourism destination. And while the traditional tourism industry will no doubt redevelop over time and likely come to overshadow eco-disaster tourism, just as likely, eco-disaster tourism will remain one feature of the new New Orleans tourism industry for many years to come. New Orleans is now firmly located within the eco-disaster tourism industry.

A final dimension of variation is the presence of disaster victims within the disaster tourism destination. Unlike the WTC site, in New Orleans, tourists view disaster survivors struggling to recover. In this regard eco-disaster tourism in post-Katrina New Orleans is similar to economic-disaster tourism in places like Soweto, where the fortunate view the less fortunate and the misery in which they are mired. The presence of surviving victims deepens the political controversy surrounding such tours. Tourism at the WTC site generated criticism as a socially inappropriate activity at a location where so many had so recently died, and especially harsh criticism directed at those profiting from tourism by selling souvenirs. New Orleans eco-disaster tourism generates even greater controversy, as tourists pay a fee to view the disaster victims’ loved ones sorting through the rubble.
Genesis and Legitimation of Gray Line’s Katrina Tour

Why develop an eco-disaster tourism industry in New Orleans? First, and perhaps foremost, to profit. With the total number of tourists visiting New Orleans dramatically reduced, tour operators like Gray Line are experiencing economic loss and seeking new opportunities. Government reports estimate that the New Orleans tourism and hospitality industry is losing $15 million per day due to Katrina’s effects. Gray Line’s director of hotel sales states unabashedly, “We hope we profit off it.” Directly profiting from disaster is, of course, controversial. Gray Line representatives pre-empt some critique by donating a portion of net revenues to relief efforts. Gray Line sells tickets for its three-hour tour for $35 and gives purchasers a choice among five non-profits to donate $3 per ticket. The eco-disaster enterprise appears to be economically viable. Gray Line initially planned to offer only a single bus tour per day, but by the second day of operations was

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5) Landrieu 2006.

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already running two buses, and planning to go to three by the first weekend of operation. Regional tourism may prove especially fruitful, as indicated by a call to Gray Line from a Dallas couple interested in coming to New Orleans for the weekend, but only if they could secure tickets for the tour.

Since profiting from tragedy is ethically questionable, the Gray Line tour narrative begins with legitimation discourse. Gray Line promotes the job-creation aspects of the eco-disaster tour, with the tour guides serving as in situ examples of jobs being restored by the industry. However, the acute labor shortage, evidenced by the proliferation of help wanted signs throughout the city, raises questions about the credibility of such a justification. Unless affordable housing is restored, chronic labor shortage, not job shortage, will remain the key labor market problem in New Orleans.

Woven through the profit-making and job-creating narratives is the promise of tax revenue generation. The tour guide highlights that both she and Gray Line contribute much needed tax revenues to the struggling city. In this line of legitimation, business profits and job creation are overtly linked

Figure 4. Help wanted. Photo by Ken Gould.
to the state's capacity to acquire the funds needed to pay for relief, recovery and rebuilding in the city. The tour guide appeals to non-locals by underscoring how her job prevents her from receiving a government “hand out” and by paying her taxes, she is able to defray federal rebuilding costs incurred by non-local taxpayers. This narrative conveys to the tourist that, simply by touring the site, they are part of the solution.

Another central justification Gray Lines offers for the eco-disaster tour is the desire to localize the story of the ecodisaster. The tour guide's scripted narrative emphasizes that non-local journalists via the non-local media presented the story of Katrina to the outside world. The Gray Line tour is promoted as an opportunity for New Orlineans to tell their own story to those who were not there to experience it first hand. The marketing brochure for the tour portrays the experience as “An eyewitness account of the events surrounding the worst natural disaster on American soil.” The tour is thereby cast as an important corrective, in that it affords an opportunity for visitors to learn of the event from “those who know New Orleans best.” Certainly, the inclusion of the tour guides' personal experiences of Katrina

Figure 5. Julie, tour guide. Photo by Ken Gould.
serves to personalize what was inevitably received remotely as a somewhat abstract event. As one tour guide indicated, this is not “cashing in on other people’s pain. This is my pain too.”

Finally, Gray Line makes the argument that people are going to come to look at the damage in any case, and that this informal tourism would be better channeled into a job creating, revenue-generating enterprise in which information could be conveyed and local perspectives offered. Informal tourism was evident in the Lower 9th Ward, despite the official ban on non-resident entry to the area. Ironically, informal, self-directed tourism afforded greater opportunities for interacting with disaster victims and hearing their stories. The formal Gray Line tour isolates tourists on a bus and precludes interactions with victims.

The elaborate legitimation discourse that is presented early on in the Gray Line tour is meant to counter the criticism of the new eco-disaster industry. The fact of the tour itself becomes a part of the tour narrative and eco-disaster tour experience. Is this a case of crass parasitism and morbid rubbernecking or a legitimate effort at economic renewal and giving voice? Non-local journalists initially took a distinctly critical perspective on the issue. Public officials were more mixed in their response, wanting to encourage both economic enterprise and a renewed tourist industry on the one hand; yet feeling compelled (by morality or constituency) to appear protective of the people and communities that are the objects of the new sightseeing. Public officials also find themselves walking a fine line between renewed promotion of New Orleans as a tourism destination, yet wishing the public image of that destination to be positive and fun (Mardi Gras) rather than melancholy and horrific (the Lower 9th Ward).

The Eco-Disaster Tourist

A question that emerges at the start of any new service industry is, who is the potential clientele? In the earliest stages of New Orleans’ eco-disaster tourism industry the clientele was comprised primarily of journalists, both local and non-local. The tour was controversial, and became a human interest sideline to the ongoing coverage of post-Katrina New Orleans. By the second day, the clientele began to broaden.

Our tour was split – about half local and half out of towners. New Orleans residents indicated interest in seeing for themselves how other parts of their city had been impacted. One New Orlinean who had suffered
Figure 6. Informal tourism. Photo by Tammy Lewis.

Figure 7. Interaction in 9th ward. Photo by Tammy Lewis.
major loss in the disaster stated, “People ask me questions, and I don’t know the answers. I didn’t feel like driving around on my own.” Another local tourist noted that she was using the tour to help her to decide whether to stay in New Orleans or relocate. A Gray Line sales manager reported that half of ticket sales have been to locals. Local public officials also formed a part of the early clientele, largely as a fact-finding opportunity as the debate over permitting this type of tourism raged on. As with the journalist-tourists, the public issue generated by the tour became a motivation to participate. The tour itself had become a tourist destination for those attracted by the issue of the ethics of eco-disaster tourism.

The non-locals included journalists, academics (authors included), and tourists who were “just curious.” Some in this group had come to New Orleans specifically, while others were traveling across country and chose to detour into the city for the experience. One couple noted “We knew it was real bad, but you really don’t know until you come and see it with your own eyes.” Some of the non-local tourists had vested interests in New Orleans. For examples, a couple from Los Angeles whose daughter will be attending school in New Orleans; a woman from Miami who used to own a second home in New Orleans. She retains friends in the city and wanted
to see the damage, but did not want to put her friends through the stress of driving her around.

The Katrina Tour Narrative: Causation, Universality & Renewal

The Gray Line tour narrative begins with legitimation discourse, and then proceeds to outline a three-point approach to the tour. First, the tour provides a time-line of events preceding, during and following the hurricane. This includes a causal model of the disaster’s genesis. The Gray Line narrative unambiguously places blame for the ecological disaster on human manipulation of the natural environment. It attributes responsibility for the flooding to the role of the oil and gas industry in cutting straight canals through the wetlands to facilitate the quickest possible river-gulf access, thus creating a vector through which the storm surge was directed into the city. It was further noted that the oil and gas industry only repatriates 1% of the profits from offshore production to the state of Louisiana, contrasting that with 50% to the state of Texas for similar offshore production. The implication that Louisiana has paid a very high price for a very low return was made crystal clear. A secondary cause of the flood was attributed to the logging industry said to be a major contributor to the wetlands loss that eliminated the natural barrier protecting New Orleans from hurricanes. Gray Line’s attribution of blame to corporate resource extraction was further reinforced in the printed materials provided to tourists, including maps illustrating coastal wetlands loss due to “the impacts of oil and gas withdrawal.”

Locating blame in corporate power and its ecological consequences contrasts with the more common narrative heard elsewhere in the city as well as through the national media. In those narratives, the role of the state figures more prominently. Poor civil engineering by the Army Corps of Engineers, insufficient and reduced federal funding for infrastructure improvement, and the failure of local and state officials to effectively advocate for preventative action in the face of dire predictions, all feature centrally. Added to that are state failures in evacuation planning and post-disaster relief and recovery efforts. Those issues are barely alluded to in the tour narrative.

In the local media, and especially the incisive coverage by the *Times-Picayune*, the synergistic impacts of unconstrained corporate greed and captured and inept government forms the most balanced, accurate and
scathing causal model. But with Gray Line dependent on the approval of public officials to continue its enterprise, and the regional tourism industry floating on public advertising funds, discussion of government failure is strategically absent from the eco-disaster tour narrative.

The second stated point of the tour is to illustrate the extent of the damage, with an emphasis on universalizing discourse. “Everybody here has a story.” “No one was unaffected.” In contrast to the mass media focus on...
the unequal distribution of the eco-disaster's impacts by race and class, and the well documented unequal impacts of ecodisasters in general, Gray Line takes an obvious detour around this politically hazardous terrain. Many of the tourists were surprised by this omission and surprised that the tour would be avoiding the Lower 9th Ward, which featured prominently in the mass-media's inequality discourse. This was explained by a Gray Line executive as an effort to demonstrate that the rest of the city was dramatically affected, noting that rather than showing the most destruction, the tour aims to show people what they have not seen on TV. Such an approach has a certain logic, however, when combined with the fact that not a single reference to race or class division appears in the entire tour, it becomes likely that such divisive issues were intentionally written out of the script. Perhaps not coincidentally, within a week of the first Gray Line Katrina tour, the city council voted to ban tourism enterprises from some areas, notably, the politically volatile Lower 9th Ward. This vote amplified Gray Line's narrative by effectively shutting down competing tours operated by smaller tour providers.

The third stated point of the tour is to promote the need to rebuild, the resilience of New Orlineans, and to present some avenues for the city's renewal. Like all eco-disaster tourism destinations, the Gray Line Katrina tour narrative focuses on processes of renewal. This narrative norm in eco-disaster tourism is rooted in natural processes of ecological regeneration. However, in New Orleans, the regeneration narrative is recast from its origins in ecotransforming disaster sites and adapted to a site of sociotransforming disaster. Agency in the regeneration process is necessarily transferred from natural forces to social forces in this eco-disaster tourism narrative.

Throughout the tour, references to the indomitable spirit of New Orlineans, their resilience in the face of adversity, and their commitment to recovery and rebuilding appear often. The concluding portion of the tour weaves past specific tourist attractions that have reopened, such as the art museum. The narrative moves into a more upbeat tone as the focus shifts from disaster and damage to a hopeful future and the triumph of the human spirit, including stories of Harry Connick, Jr. and Branford Marsalis' project developing a community for musicians with Habitat for Humanity. This narrative path from sadness to celebration mimics, and is consciously linked to, the tradition of the jazz funeral in New Orleans.

Figure 10. 9th ward devastation. Photo by Ken Gould.

Figure 11. View from bus. Photo by Ken Gould.
Tourists are told that New Orlineans accept loss, mourn, and then quickly shift to a celebration of life. Gray Line’s eco-disaster tour is framed as a variant of a jazz funeral, and eco-disaster tourists are encouraged to mourn, and then join in the celebration of life. That Mardi Gras would go on in 2006 was presented as a milestone on the road to renewal.

Tourists are included in the process of rebirth in a number of ways. First, by simply joining the tour they are helping to generate the jobs and tax base needed for rebuilding. Second, they are encouraged to sign a petition asking the federal government to provide greater funding and support to New Orleans recovery efforts. Third, they are reminded that $3 of their ticket price will be donated to a non-profit working on relief and recovery efforts. Finally, they are asked to take the story of rebirth and renewal home to rebuild the tourist industry that is central to the local economy.

The concluding phase of the Gray Line “jazz funeral” is both an effort to leave tour participants feeling less traumatized by the experience, and to return to the legitimation themes that appeared at the start of the tour. Framing tour participants as active players in the effort to rebuild New Orleans provides moral cover for Gray Line’s profit-seeking venture, while simultaneously providing moral cover for the tourists. Tourists have just engaged in a tour of a sociotransforming disaster in which victims remain in the tourist viewscape, which is prone to evoke feelings of unease about the experience. Telling those tourists that they have just helped the victims, and applying the image of the jazz funeral, lets tour participants feel that it is all right to have participated in a sad occasion, and that in New Orleans it is all right to have enjoyed the experience. As one New Orleans bumper sticker notes, “We put the fun in funeral.”

Conclusions: Eco-Disaster Tourism Politics in New Orleans

The Katrina eco-disaster produced a flood on the ground and a firestorm in politics. The true story of race, class and Katrina lies in the grey area between the mass media’s particularization and the Gray Line tour’s universalization. Gray Line’s eco-disaster narrative bypassed this risky terrain to stay in the good graces of the City Council and continue operating their tour. By allying with the state, Gray Line, the dominant tour company, has maneuvered into a powerful position to rewrite the tourism narrative.

Unlike ecogenic disasters, sociogenic disasters generate political conflict surrounding the attribution of blame. Gray Line blames the oil and gas...
industry for Katrina’s severity, while avoiding pointing fingers at government agencies and officials. This strategy makes sense for the tour operator: government subsidies will help refuel the tourism industry (the federal government has recently allotted $50 million for Louisiana tourism advertising), while the oil and gas industry detracts from it. Gray Line’s story does not resonate with what is heard on the streets, where residents deride local, state, and national officials and agencies, to the extent to which FEMA workers choose not to wear agency-identifying clothing in the field. Regardless of its validity, the tour’s narrative of causation assuages government officials at a time when they are under scrutiny.

Since Katrina, the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism has refocused its energies to rebuild tourism and make “Louisiana’s culture economy the engine of economic and social rebirth.”

Marketing is key to this effort. Lt. Governor Landrieu notes, “When we traveled to New York to consult with the national tourism leaders who helped with the New York City rebound effort post 9/11, we learned that marketing is the key to rebuilding credibility with your customer base.” The state’s objectives and Gray Line’s message reinforce each other.

Gray Line’s narrative helps shape the debates around the redevelopment plans of the city. A tour itinerary and tour narrative is designed to shape impressions, and in doing so helps to shape responses to the place toured. Gray Line’s construction of an alternative frame to the more wide-spread inequality and state failure frames makes Gray Line an active player in the political debates. Given that the tour’s clientele includes mass media, academics, and visitors, all of whom will leave and recount their stories to wider audiences, the Gray Line narrative is well positioned to achieve a high degree of frame amplification as tour guides explicitly urge tourists to “Take the story home.” That powerful private and public interests promoting a specific direction for redevelopment are bolstered as a result may be an unintended side effect.

Gray Line’s “Hurricane Katrina, America’s Greatest Catastrophe” tour thus reflects, and is an active participant in, major political conflicts resulting from the eco-disaster in New Orleans. At the same time, the tour has generated its own set of political conflicts regarding the appropriateness of disaster tourism in a space in which victims struggle to recover. The Katrina

7) Osborne n.d.
8) Landrieu 2006.
9) Snow, Burke Rochford, Jr., Worden, and Benford 1986.
tour enters into the realm of controversy surrounding other forms of tourism including those related to sociogenic disasters such as the WTC site and Auschwitz, but particularly akin to the arena of so-called “poverty tourism” in places such as Soweto and the similarly infamous slums of Rio de Janeiro. Unlike the WTC site and Auschwitz, and more like Soweto, the victims of Katrina are present in the tourist viewscape. As one critic noted, “Tours of concentration camps did not open before Holocaust survivors vacated.” These types of tour experiences are bound to generate feelings of unease for tourists, and the tour narratives associated with them must address these feelings in ways that allow tourists to feel that they are part of the solution, rather than part of the problem.

Gray Line’s Katrina ecodisaster tour is ultimately a manifestation of power. The tour narrative and route represent the interests of the local growth coalition (tourism industry and public officials), in opposition to extralocal power and interests (resources extraction firms). Both the attribution of blame for the ecodisaster, and the erasure of racial and class conflict serve the redevelopment agendas of local elites. Tourism has a long history of reinforcing inequalities, so it is no surprise that it continues to do so in its ecodisaster form. With tourism representing the primary source of revenue influx, and extraction now clearly at odds with the tourism economy, Gray Line’s Katrina tour should be viewed as a powerful political statement on New Orleans’ future.

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12 Logan and Molotch 1987.
13 See for example Norkunas 1993.

https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol2/iss2/2

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