

# Rethinking Tourism: On the politics and practices of 'staging' New Orleans

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## Introduction

Close your eyes and imagine New Orleans... What comes to mind? What do you see?

I first visited New Orleans in February 2013, almost eight years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city. The trip had been an entirely personal one and I enjoyed something of a tourist's dream visit. Staying with a good friend who had recently moved from the UK and who lived in the French Quarter, I had a personal guide for the duration of the trip... and I happened to arrive on the Friday before Mardi Gras. Experiencing the city in the throes of its biggest party season, in three days I crammed in food, music, parades of all kinds and dancing in the streets. Little wonder that I became beguiled by the city.

Yet, on the drive to the airport after my stay I had something of a reality check. The friend I had been visiting pointed up to a highway flyover we were about to drive under, drawing my attention to a long smear of discolouration on the wall facing us: a watermark left by the flooding caused as a result of 'the Storm'. It must have been 3 metres above the roof of the car and my affective encounter with this fairly innocuous sign was profoundly unsettling; my time in the city had not really taken account of the reality of the wreckage wrought by Katrina and the multiple failures of engineering and government that the hurricane made apparent. This was a stark indicator of the scale and power of the disaster.

Three years later, in March 2016, I went back to attend an academic conference but it was a bust and I found myself with time to explore the city in ways that I hadn't previously. I walked around a lot and was able to more fully dwell in places. Much had changed: the city felt cleaner, bigger, richer. The watermark had gone. Nevertheless, it became clear that these changes were not universally positive and I became intrigued with the city as a site of a particular kind of staging that felt

deliberately to be obscuring the physical, social and political wreckage of (or made painfully apparent by) Katrina a decade previous.

Walking home one evening, I noticed a church building that was dilapidated but being worked on and asked my friends (the same one and his partner) what it was: the Marigny Opera House, an old church damaged by the Storm and now repurposed into a professional and community performance space. This example is indicative of a wider set of observations I made on that trip, leading to a sense that this city was one to explore professionally—a city archive in which performance might have an exciting role to play as object of analysis, mode of city making and approach to understanding the city. That led to the development of an interdisciplinary and collaborative research project, Performing City Resilience, that took me back to the city for a third time in March/April 2018 with Stuart Andrews.<sup>[note]</sup><sup>1</sup> This article emerges from that trip and takes as its central case studies two ‘performances’ we encountered as part of the research: a private vehicular tour of the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, the area most devastated by flooding as a result of Katrina and the failure of the levees; and Goat in the Road’s production The Stranger Disease.

The tour was an ‘everyday’ performance in which Andrews and I were driven around the Lower Ninth Ward becoming witness to the still profoundly present wreckage of Katrina, even thirteen years on. Staged in a heritage museum in the French Quarter, The Stranger Disease was an immersive, promenade performance exploring questions of race, power and the wreckage wrought by ‘strangers’ in relation to an outbreak of yellow fever in the late nineteenth century in New Orleans. This essay analyses the affective encounter with the physical detritus of wreckage in the Lower Ninth, the unsettling embodied encounter of the tour and the ensuing experience of ‘being wrecked’, alongside analysis of the representational practices of a play that stages history to comment on contemporary politics. In so doing, I seek to understand how these two very different cultural objects might be seen to be ‘staging’ New Orleans in different but inter-related ways that illuminate and critique the politics of (disaster) tourism in the city, and cognate (urban) contexts.

### **Performance and wreckage in the ‘Big Easy’**

Although not necessarily framed in these terms, in New Orleans the breadth of 'performance' practices that engage with questions of wreckage, recovery and resilience is vast. While we were in the city, I became fascinated by two particular performances that raised interesting and troubling questions about the politics of wreckage in relation to conceptualizations and practices of tourism (and research visits, actually), class and race. In 'playing out' these concerns in very different ways, both these events might be seen as attempts to re-articulate understandings of the city and the place and role of the tourist-outsider within that. These works, I will argue, take account of New Orleans' long-established place in the cultural imaginary as a result of the circulation of cultural products of various kinds (films, music, advertisement, news media stories, plays) but seek also to interrogate popular representations and understandings of the 'Big Easy'. In so doing, the two central case studies of this analysis can be seen to critique more politicized representations of the city, like ex-Mayor Mitchell J. (Mitch) Landrieu's proclamation in 2010 that the city was 'post-recovery' (Landrieu 2011).

[{figure1}]

As historian and American Studies scholar Lynnell L. Thomas makes clear in *Desire and Disaster in New Orleans: Tourism, race, and historical memory*, very often (and even during the unfolding of Katrina) understandings of New Orleans are 'filtered through an image of the city that had been cultivated by writers and tourism boosters whose racial mythologizing left a lasting imprint on the national popular imagination' (2014: 1). The major 'tourist narratives' and images of the city that persist in popular and cultural imagination prioritize representations of the French Quarter and a predominantly white neo-European identity that goes with it. Thus, the tourist frame for New Orleans is one that unevenly represents the city through an idealized, white-centric iconography (1–3). Indeed, so powerful is this representation that food writer Brett Anderson has argued that New Orleans is a city that 'leaves impressions even on those who have never visited', such is the power of its 'iconicity':

Before arriving, you've imagined the wrought iron casting its skewed-lattice shadows, the brass bands rounding corners in full blare, and the Creole

cottages and shotgun shacks rising for blocks, some slanting ever so slightly in the sinking ground. It is all here, just as generations of culture despatches and Tennessee Williams adaptations advertised. (Anderson 2014: 98)

Such representations are fundamentally important in terms of understanding the role that tourists play in the city, and in relation to wider popular (and international) conceptualizations of the city. Indeed, they are part of the fabric of touristic practices in the city because, as cultural geographer Tim Edensor has argued, such representations engender particular types of 'tourist habitus' that codify and shape the ways tourists behave and the things they do and see in a given context (2001: 60–1). Moreover, 'tourists carry quotidian habits and responses with them' that involve 'unreflexive, habitual and practical enactments... of how to be a tourist' (Edensor 2001: 61). In New Orleans (to generalize somewhat), this results in an over-focus on the area of the French Quarter (and Bourbon Street in particular) and the activities that take place there, mainly eating, drinking alcohol at all times of the day, listening to music, dancing, and 'mis-behaving'.

Recalibrating or intervening in such well-established cultural imaginings of the city and its tourist activities is difficult both politically and in practice. However, by providing different kinds of opportunities to counter what Claire Menck and Richard A. Couto identify as the 'anomie' and 'unmooring of the self from the environment' that happens as a result of the destruction of community/communal spaces that came with the devastation of Katrina, I will argue that The Stranger Disease and the tour of the Lower Ninth Ward operate to challenge these popular cultural imaginings of New Orleans (2013: 417). In so doing, they offer new perspectives on the contemporary city and its history, especially in relation to tourism and touristic practices (ibid.). That is, these are performances that enable those who encounter them to '[make] sense of their place in the world' in the face of significant and varied social, cultural, political and practical challenges, both contemporary and historic (ibid.). This is in part because these performances intervene in, disrupt and challenge what performance and cultural studies scholar Ana Paulina Lee has called the 'memoryscapes' of the city—'the spatial and material dimensions of cultural memory' (2017: 72–3)—in different ways, in very different parts of the city, attending to different local challenges. These performance events operate politically at the

level of the 'content' of the performances, in relation to the sites of their staging and in terms of their form to ask fundamental questions of the 'spectator' about their role and position in relation to that which is being represented and the relation of those representations to the spectators' wider interactions and encounters in the city.

New Orleans, I contend, can be seen as a city made and remade through and in relation to what performance scholar Arabella Stanger terms in this issue, 'the wreckage of [disasters] not yet over' (2019: XX). That is, in many ways, New Orleans can be seen to be defined by wreckage. We might think here about the legacy of Katrina—about the ways in which failings in the engineering of the levees left the city devastated by flooding, and how that flooding still physically marks the city and permeates understandings of it. We might also think about the way in which the wreckage of Katrina is determinedly disavowed by certain sectors of the city who claim that they are 'done with Katrina'.<sup>[note]</sup><sup>2</sup> In so readily casting the lives still wrecked by Katrina aside, we might argue that this constitutes a new form of race and class wreckage where the Storm's legacy is no longer something to be considered by those no longer living within that legacy. We might also think about the detritus left by events like Mardi Gras where in an average year 'sanitation crews sweep up about 900 tons of waste' (Clark 2019). Or indeed the embodied experience of being wrecked by partying in the city. There is also the looming threat of devastation through environmental wreckage as the sea threatens to engulf the city.<sup>[note]</sup><sup>3</sup> Moreover, the 'wreckage' of racial segregation and the legacy of the Jim Crow laws can be seen in all sectors of the city from urban planning to the service industry to schooling.

Taking the relation of environmental and race wreckage together, writing about parading cultures in New Orleans, Lee argues that Katrina exposed underlying environmental vulnerabilities in the city that are demarcated along race lines (2017: 73). That is, in line with communication studies scholar Kevin Dowler's observations, disasters can reveal the operation of power structures and socio-cultural value systems to audiences beyond the confines of the events' unfolding (2011: 173). This is made complex, as Thomas convincingly outlines, by the ways in which media coverage of Katrina was problematically refracted through dominant popular

understandings of the city. Such as, for example, the dominance of the French Quarter as the representation of the city. This was borne out in early news-media reporting of the Storm where it was claimed that the city was unaffected by major flooding because reporters focused on the largely unflooded Quarter. Resultingly, although the disaster of Katrina may have eventually revealed to a wider audience systemic inequity and environmental racism at the heart of the city, the predominant narrative about the city has now returned to one that 'capitalizes on [New Orleans]' unique place identity... [such that] fictional accounts of New Orleans have been accepted as faithful representations of the city and have been promoted as such through the tourism industry' (Thomas 2014: 4). This results in a skewed view of the city, one in which narratives of being 'post-recovery' and 'done with Katrina' can be seen to resonate with the predominant embodied experience of being a (tourist) visitor to the city where self-led bike tours, 'greenways', live music, gastronomic delights and complex cocktails are the quotidian experience. However, venture further out of the city, beyond its major tourist areas, and the narrative and phenomenological experience of the city change profoundly. Such was my experience of visiting the Lower Ninth ward.

[[figure2]]

### **'Not not' disaster tourism**

Organized through a non-profit organization helping to rebuild the Lower Ninth Ward post-Katrina, the tour was just for Andrews and me and within moments of it starting, our driver stated that this would be 'the most biased tour [we'd] ever take' (Anonymous 2018). The analysis here thus focuses on my affective response to this mobile, vehicular performance to consider the politics of wreckage that are performed in the pickup truck by our 'guide', in relation to the scenography of wreckage that is apparent across the Ward as we traverse it.

The tour is not a commercial one; indeed those have been banned in the Lower Ninth. This is important to the analysis here because it sets the argument apart from those who have (eloquently and importantly) previously analysed the place and function of such tours within tourist contexts. That is, this tour was part of the

research activity of the wider research project I was doing with Andrews; it was part of the process of understanding the city from as many perspectives as possible. This is deliberately to distinguish it from what Devon Robbie calls 'disaster tourism' in which people visit 'sites of natural and human-made disasters, like Hurricane Katrina' in order to experience some form of 'authentic' encounter with 'a local New Orleanian and hurricane eye-witness identity' (2008: 257–8).<sup>[note]</sup><sup>4</sup> By contrast, we were not seeking an 'authentic encounter' but rather to broaden our knowledge of the place within the context of a research programme looking at performance, resilience and the city. However, while the tour Andrews and I took functions differently to more traditional 'dark' or disaster tourism experiences, it is, after Schechner, 'not not' disaster tourism (1985: 113). This is because it is both outside the representational practices of formal disaster tourism tours (such as those described by Robbie) and precisely mirrors those practices at a smaller scale (ibid.).

### **'The most biased tour you'll ever take'**

Standing at the corner of Orleans Street and North Rampart, I'm struck by the heat of the day and the nag of my jet-lag. The Voodoo Lounge bar is our meeting place and while it seems friendly enough we don't venture inside, assuming that we will be met on the street. We can't see anyone from our furtive glances that is immediately identifiable as our 'tour guide'.<sup>[note]</sup><sup>5</sup> After some minutes, she comes out and asks if I'm 'Peter'; I awkwardly correct her.

We walk to a well-used pick-up truck (a Toyota, I think). I get in the front passenger seat; it is loose and slides back and forth on its fixings as we break and accelerate. I hope we won't crash.

The day before the drive, we had been told that people in the city were 'done with Katrina', bored of talking about it. We mention this to our guide and her reaction suggests that it is an over-simplification at best, and a profound articulation of privilege at worst. She comments that one can only be 'done' with it if one is no longer recovering from it. On the drive from the bar to the St Claude Avenue bridge over the Industrial Canal (some three stop-start miles), our guide is animated about

her work and what brought her to the City. She tells us that this will be the most biased tour we could ever have.

Our guide's (near) monologue is incredibly fast and she moves from one register or topic to another without pause or acknowledgement of the shift: complaining about some erratic driving in front of us (while swerving at speed away from the encounter), merges with statistics about the city, merges with politicized commentary on the tour or the city. I have to concentrate hard to 'tune in'. She 'helps' me with this by intermittently but frequently moving her hand from the steering wheel to tap me, firmly, on the arm with the back of her hand. Although a familiar action and one not meant to be difficult, the affective experience of it is profoundly unsettling. I begin to register it as something of an electric shock, an invasion of my personal space even in the confines of the car that jolts me to attention and reminds me of my embodied position as captive (and captivated) passenger, listener and spectator.

[{figure3}]

Our participation in the tour was framed by differentiations from disaster tourism in important ways: it was a fundamental part of our field research; we had to find it through long Internet search processes (it is not advertised nor is it easy to find); and we approached the tour cautiously and with a desire to determinedly distance ourselves from 'normal' disaster tourist practice because of 'the ethical implications of profiting from human suffering' (Robbie 2008: 259). Nevertheless, the tour participates in many of the markers of just such practice (see Robbie 2008): the route is clearly set and well-established (there are particular stopping points and 'highlights'); the narrative of the guide is well-rehearsed (although it takes account of serendipity and local conditions on the day) and framed through markers of personal authenticity (the guide makes clear they helped in the immediate recovery effort, they now live in the Lower Ninth and so forth); and there is an aesthetic practice underpinning the use of a beaten-up old pick-up truck that, while potentially (probably) accidental, lends the encounter a mobile scenography that adds to a sense of embodied authenticity (both mirroring the everyday working conditions of our guide and insofar as it is an uncomfortable and claustrophobic experience for the spectator). The tour thus echoes familiar practices of disaster tourism while



remaining markedly different in terms of how one accesses it, the rationale framing the availability of it (all donations go directly back into rebuilding efforts—not commercial gain), the type of vehicles used and the size of tour party possible as a result, and the profoundly embodied and intimate nature of the encounter. The tour was not about pointing out devastation, although this was inevitably part of it, but rather about highlighting rebuilding efforts in the area (such as those carried out by [www.lowernine.org](http://www.lowernine.org) and others) and making clear the differences in quotidian experiences of those living in the Lower Ninth from others living just across the Industrial Canal, and, especially, from the tourist-driven experience of the city. As a result, the tour places those experiencing it into the uncertain position of not not being tourists in which ‘common-sense understandings of how to be a tourist’, and thus normative conceptualizations of the city, become troubled by the affective staging of wreckage. Using the tropes and echoing the practices of tourism, the tour stages an encounter with the Lower Ninth as it is now in order to perform and make visible the legacy of Katrina and the ways in which the race–class politics that underpinned its aftermath, and long before, are still being played out in contemporary New Orleans. This, then, is a performed and performative inversion of what cultural geographers Dallen Timothy and Stephen Boyd refer to as the ‘present use of the past’ to reveal sites, politics and practices of cultural, historical and social importance (2006: 2). Rather, this tour stages the present to make visible the politics and practices (of city making, of segregation, of environmental racism) of the past as they are felt, lived and (re)performed now. And as they butt up against the politics of tourism that drive much of the decision-making in the city today (see, for example, Morris 2019).

Pulling up at the bridge, our driver and guide nods towards the traffic jam quickly and unexpectedly forming before us and says that we are now encountering first-hand the ‘environmental racism’ that divides the Lower Ninth from the rest of the city. The bridge is up to let a ship along the Industrial Canal, the top of its funnel visible to the right of us. We wait. Apparently this can take up to 30 minutes. We’re asked to think about the implications of that in terms of emergency services getting to a crisis, given none are based on the Lower Ninth side of the canal. Crossing the bridge, I’m struck by the vastness of this human-made waterway, the scale that dwarfs the architecture on either side of it, and while I do not know it yet (for it will be some days until I

witness it for myself)—you have to look up at passing ships from the street level. We turn a hard right immediately as we exit the bridge, the car pulling up to an abrupt stop. My stomach flips at the combination of deceleration and the sudden lurch forward of my seat.

As we drive on, we crump over huge potholes and are shaken around the cab of the truck. At the southern end of the district, a part of the Lower Ninth area ‘least’ impacted by the aftermath of Katrina, we pull up at the shell of a home destroyed by the flooding and subsequent neglect over time. It seems to me in need of tearing down and starting again: ‘we could fix that up easily, it’s actually in pretty good shape’, our guide says, before explaining that the ‘barge board’ inner skin of the house still looks strong.{{note}}6 A few yards further on we pull up at an abandoned home; it looks in better condition but the orange ‘Kartina cross’ still marks it out as ‘blight’. We’ve already seen a number of houses in other parts of the city that have been done up but have kept their crosses. Our guide explains how the X system works, with each quadrant containing specific information in an internationally agreed code. I’m relieved to see that no one died here.{{note}}7

[[figure4]]

Later, we drive up a short, steep hill and onto land owned by the Port of New Orleans; we are atop a natural levee overlooking the Mississippi River. A runner pounds towards us and I wonder how she can cope with the heat. After talking about the port a little, we accelerate back down the hill in reverse and turn 180 degrees. The car moves unnervingly fast in what is evidently a practiced manoeuvre but one that is disconcerting nonetheless. As we move through the area, our guide waves at everyone, a friendly and familiar greeting but I can’t work out who she actually knows and who she is just greeting because it is the friendly thing to do. These encounters offer a strange counterpoint to the narrative our guide tells of people trapped for days in tiny loft spaces, waters rising and eventually consuming all breathable space. {{note}}8

At one point we approach a house that is being renovated; the car slows and a man emerges from the front door. Waving enthusiastically, he calls from the door to ask if

we are stopping to have a look around. Our guide beckons him over and he bounds down the front steps, along the path and up to the car. They chat and our guide explains she doesn't have time to stop. He has just hung the kitchen cabinets. We are not introduced or acknowledged. Although the man flicks his gaze to mine, and away again rapidly, we are not afforded the opportunity to say hello. We—Stuart and I—are not invited to get out of the car; we seem permitted only to occupy a mute spectatorial position and, as a result, are, it seems to me, made unwilling voyeurs on a private moment. The moment is one in which my white, male, middle-class, educated and outsider privilege becomes palpably, awkwardly apparent to me and, I suspect, to the man leaning into the car. And while I am here for what I would consider legitimate (research, not disaster tourist) reasons, I cannot help but feel I am participating in something ethically troubling. I desperately want to escape the confines of the car but in being refused this luxury, the tour uncannily echoes the experience of being trapped that many during the flood endured.

This is not in any way to suggest that the experiences are the same; they are not and I do not wish to banalize that experience in any way. However, what we might think of here as a dramaturgy of being 'trapped' during this performance certainly makes the experience uncomfortable, emotionally and physically. To borrow from theatre scholar Miriam Haughton, this operates as an embodied encounter with the 'staging of suffering' that creates 'a shared space for the unspeakable to struggle in its desire for articulation and acknowledgment' (2018: 1–2). The tour operates in a mode analogous to theatre practices that try to deploy structural echoes of trauma (for example, repetitions, fragments, flashbacks, ellipses) in order to 'make direct links to events of crisis in the socio-cultural sphere, provoking dialogue and debate regarding how society reads and receives these personal and public events of trauma' (32–3). In so doing, the tour offers a close encounter with wreckage, material and political, historic and contemporary, that provides a means through which the traumatic events, histories, stories and legacies of Katrina, and race politics in the area more broadly, can be productively interrogated and remediated through this aesthetic practice.

[[figure5]]

[{figure6}]

Driving further north we see an increasing number of empty plots, concrete plinths—rectangular negative spaces in the landscape—mark the absence of houses. These plots are not really empty; they have been given over to nature in a curious sort of way. The boundary lines between properties are discernible, either marked out by some kind of fence or, more often, by the differentiation between one plot being mowed and cleared of debris, and another being wild (given back to nature in an eerie kind of way) and overgrown. This is a particular kind of staging of absence and wreckage, one that acknowledges the disparity between those who can make it back to the area to work on their plot and those who cannot. These are the traces of lives not (yet) recovered. We are told that the City insists that plots are cleared or the local government will reclaim the land: I remember the statement that this is the most 'biased tour' we would ever take and wonder if there isn't a more complex, nuanced element to this statement. I feel guilty for doubting it, especially in light of arguments like Darwin BondGraham's that highlight the systematic and historic ways in which the 'eradication of poorer neighborhoods [sic.] like the 9th Ward [have] long been a dream amongst many of New Orleans' more affluent and privileged' (BondGraham 2007: 15).

These plots in the Lower Ninth stage the wreckage of Katrina in both an evidence-based way (high-water lines, Katrina crosses, shattered homes, empty foundation blocks, massively overgrown plots) and in the absence of 'evidence' (plots that have been cleared and 'curated' but not rebuilt, garden paths that have been made from building debris). There is a relationship here between an attempt to erase Katrina's touch through aestheticization (however rudimentary) and the absolute presence of its traces. At the same time, this relation between the historic wreckage that has been 'left' by Katrina and the staged wreckage of 'cleaned' plots performatively presents the absence of the people of the Lower Ninth who have either never returned after displacement because of the Storm, or who perhaps died during it, trapped in their houses with nowhere to go and no one to rescue them.

There are no pavements. There are no streetlights. There are very few working fire hydrants and there are uncovered storm drains everywhere: they are at least two

feet wide, four feet long and five feet deep. These cavernous, gaping mouths seem symptomatic of a broken bureaucracy. They are also violent in the threat that they pose to anyone using the streets. Some stretches of the road have been resurfaced, maybe twenty metres in length. There seems to be no logic to the repairs and they abut other bits of the road that are potholed, cracked, riven. The pick-up truck is bounced and bucked remorselessly and my seat shifts back and forward violently throughout. Piles of construction debris and dumped domestic waste often interrupt the flow of the road. Apparently, people drive to the Lower Ninth to burn out cars. This seems a place out of time, dislocated, isolated and determinedly not 'post-recovery'. People smile and offer a wave as we pass.

This is not the quotidian tourist experience of New Orleans, nor is it the disaster-tourist experience of so-called Katrina Tours. Rather, this is a performative encounter that brings into sharp relief the romanticized versions of the city that drive dominant narratives of it. Throughout the drive we are denied the opportunity to explore on foot or at a different pace to the one set by our guide. There is no opportunity to be caught by stray music carried around a corner or lured by the chill blast of air-conditioned bars as one might in the Quarter. Instead, this is a performance that might be seen both to echo the operation of the immediate aftermath of Katrina and highlight the complexities and the nature of ongoing recovery from the wreckage of it.

At the most northerly end of Flood Street, right by the Industrial Canal and the levee walls, the scene is one of near total abandonment. Scrub has grown up on what would once have been the places where homes stood. The area would clearly have been well populated. It feels lonely now, haunted by the regular and rectangular outlines of plots of land where families once lived. We arrive at the end of a road and directly in front of us, atop a sloping grass verge, a tall, harsh, sharp line of dark grey wall marks the extremity of the Lower Ninth. The Industrial Canal and its new levee wall. We are dwarfed by the architecture, made small by its height and length. This is where the most catastrophic breach of the levee system in the city took place. I'm struck by how much the looming architecture of the levee wall makes me think of being inside a prison.<sup>9</sup> There is one, fairly large house to our left; its front

porch addresses the levee. Stuart asks how people who live looking out at it feel: 'safe', comes the reply.

Disasters, as anthropologist Anthony Oliver-Smith argues, 'disclose in their unfolding the linkages and the interpenetration of natural forces and agents, power structures and social arrangements, and cultural values and belief systems' (2002: 26). In a profoundly embodied, claustrophobic way, the tour makes apparent the contemporary ramifications of what African American Studies scholar Cedric Johnson has argued is the way that 'the Katrina crisis was mobilized by powerful interests to their advantage' (2015: 177). Contra dominant paradigms of 'being done with Katrina' and being 'post-recovery' that drive tourism in the city, this performance encounter reveals the still evolving ways that 'market-driven recovery and reconstruction privileged certain residents and interests and marginalized others' (178).

We've been in the Lower Ninth for about ninety minutes. We have not passed a single café, restaurant or grocery store. As we drive back across the Industrial Canal, via a different bridge, I start to feel a bit broken by the experience. I'm exhausted and desperate to vacate the confines of the truck; I want to be quiet and to be with my own thoughts. I don't want to be nudged and tapped and talked at. I feel wrecked. Back outside the Voodoo Lounge we bid farewell to our guide and head back into the familiar, habitual raucous of the French Quarter.

### **The Stranger Disease**

A few days later, we encounter a very different performance but one that similarly attempts to intervene in the 'common-sense' of the tourist experience and does so, in nuanced and diverse ways, from within the heart of the city's tourist machine that is the French Quarter. Set in 1878, Goat in the Road's The Stranger Disease (2018) was an immersive, promenade performance about an outbreak of yellow fever in the late nineteenth century in New Orleans. The piece was staged in Madame John's Legacy, a museum and heritage site owned and run by the Louisiana State Museum. One of the oldest residences in New Orleans (the current structure dating from

1788), the building occupies a prominent site in the heart of the main tourist area of the city.

[[figure7]]

As we enter the pale green doors of Madame John's, I am struck by the low ceilings and the gloominess of the space, a stark contrast to the bright evening sun outside. The space is pleasantly cool and we are invited to explore the museum a little before the performance begins. The historic character of the space is central to the work, lending an authenticity to the performance that speaks to the company's careful and detailed research and design processes. It is hard to distinguish performance props from museum artefacts. We wander around and I climb a flight of stairs; as I am beginning to read about the history of the building a bell rings—the performance is starting. I find myself looking down into a narrow courtyard from a balcony at the back of the building.

The performance follows the intersecting lives of seven people who 'live in or orbit around a boarding house' as they prepare to evacuate the city, or buck against that idea, because of a fast-spreading yellow fever epidemic. Early in the piece we learn that a city-wide quarantine is about to be imposed, lending performance an urgency that drives the unfolding narrative in 'real-time'.

The piece centres on the relationship between Adeline, a black woman who runs the boarding house, and Joe, a white man who co-owns the building with his fairly caustic brother Louis. Adeline and Joe are married 'in all but name'—interracial marriage was forbidden at the time. As the play begins we are given insight to the complexities and challenges of this relationship. This is only heightened by Louis's arrival and insistence that Joe leave the city with him to the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain where, we learn, Adeline would most certainly not be welcome. Joe refuses to leave without her, and she refuses to leave Joe, much to the chagrin of Saul, a young servant, who urges Adeline just to go. He insists that ultimately 'the white boys [will] stick together'.

Louis's insistence that rent be collected from those boarding or running businesses in the building reveals divisions and disparities between the seven characters. Meanwhile, the importance of tourism to the city and people's livelihoods even in 1878 is made clear when Eleanor, a struggling hatmaker whose shop is on the ground floor of the building, urgently comments that 'if it's an epidemic, tourists will stay away an extra month; and many people will die'. The plot is thus underpinned by questions about money, security and who has the means to leave the city, and how they might mobilize their resources to do so before the quarantine. The time pressure of the quarantine is a smart dramaturgical device, revealing the tensions incumbent with the impending arrival of something that will wreck the city, and the sense of being trapped by circumstance. As Joe says to Adeline towards the end of the play as he succumbs to infection, 'Sweetheart, there's nowhere else for us to go.' As a result, the performance makes clear the complex interrelation of race, class and wealth at the time of its setting, and now.

In this performance, audience members arrived and were allowed to wander the museum, learning its layout and contemplating the objects on display. Once the performance started, they could choose which room to be in and see aspects of the performance unfold around them, with different characters coming in and out of the space. Alternatively, one could choose to follow a particular character on their journey through the site and the performance, exploring the spaces—and atmospheres—of the building as part of the work. Or, one could embark on a combination of both approaches (as I did). Although non-linear, scenes flowed between one another, and while the whole picture was never quite revealed, clues were given as to that which was happening elsewhere in the performance that one may not have encountered. The storylines revealed themselves subtly and through what we might think of as a dramaturgy of infection, one that reflected the narrative content.

In what ever approach one took to following the performance, the audience's body was implicated in the unfolding action as one was moved by characters when in the way, or simply pushed past for dramatic effect, or because one had suddenly to move to another room or chase up a flight of stairs in order to keep up with a fleeing performer and then search for them at the top. For the company, this was a



deliberate attempt to force the audience 'to step into the decision-making' that the characters were involved in working through; it ensured that the audience could not absent themselves from 'the feeling of putting yourself in the [characters'] shoes' (Flaherty and Kaminstein 2018: interview with author). The performance played out twice during each showing, so the audience had two opportunities to see the work in order to encounter it from different perspectives and to engage with it in different ways. Nevertheless, the experience was always partial and fragmentary. It simply was not possible to see all of the performance; some aspect of it remained just out of grasp no matter which route one took through it.

With a multi-racial cast, the central story presented in The Stranger Disease was about the complexities of domestic life 'across the colour line' during the outbreak of yellow fever in 1878 (see *Goat in the Road* 2018). Yellow fever was a disease brought to New Orleans by strangers (mainly coming by ship from overseas) and in being performed at the heart of the tourist industry in the city, the performance was examining the difficulties and benefits of tourism in the city now. That is, in deliberately engaging with both the tourist industry (being in the French Quarter, staged in an existing tourist attraction) and with tourists (as audience members) the company attempted to put into conversation the benefits of tourists coming into the city alongside complex narratives about the city that relate to tourism (for example, gentrification and local landlords being priced out by companies like Airbnb; financial and race inequity; environmental and ecological disaster). The work seeks to engage in a critique of contemporary social systems and structures that are related to—perhaps even propagate—current social traumas. The performance interrogates what it means to be a stranger coming to this city, and asks the spectator to contemplate their own subject position in relation to that, through narrative content and the embodied dramaturgy of making decisions about what to see/do as the play unfolds. The Stranger Disease is thus looking at how people from outside the city come into New Orleans and change it—potentially, 'wrecking' it—either by 'transplanting' themselves from elsewhere to take advantage of the post-Katrina depression in property prices or by attending the city as tourists who come, consume and leave. In so doing, the piece makes complex the position of the audience, many of whom were tourists (an assumption I made at the time of viewing and that was

subsequently confirmed by the co-directors of *Goat in the Road*, Shannon Flaherty and Chris Kaminstein, in interview).

Moreover, the work enabled a complex interrogation of the wreckages brought by historical race relations in the city through the 'historically inspired... love [story] across the color line in post-Reconstruction New Orleans' (*Goat in the Road* 2018). This, however, was used as a prism through which to look at much more contemporary race-related traumas. In having a determinedly multi-racial cast the production staged diversity for a predominantly white audience. Being performed in a heritage site in the city, in an area that is mainly populated by white people and tourists, it is hardly surprising that the audience for the majority of performances were 'all white'. This was because, as Flaherty and Kaminstein put it:

The Stranger Disease audience ended up not being our traditional audience because it was [made up of] so many tourists ... which [was] exactly who we were trying to reach... One of the main things that New Orleans has to offer in terms of how our city functions, is the tourist economy. [We were asking], how can we tap into that situation? (Flaherty and Kaminstein 2018: interview with author)

In a city like New Orleans, one deeply and complexly bound up in histories of slavery, segregation and the subjugation of people of colour, to stage a performance that critiques these histories of violent wreckage—that continue to be played out in various ways—is importantly political. Being performed in the tourist district, an area profoundly associated with people from outside the city, *The Stranger Disease* questions unthinking engagements with the city as that relates to contemporary social-politics: it asked the mainly white audience to attend to complex questions about race and equality, about who is affected by the city's housing crisis (the play stages the fleeing of one's home) and wider questions of equity, power and diversity. It did this in both form and content, through embodied decision-making and the playing out of interpersonal and systemic relations.

[[figure8]]

However, in being staged within Madame John's Legacy, a museum and heritage site, it also ran the risk of perpetuating some of the problems it sought to critique because:

for people of colour, heritage sites and museums are really dangerous because you don't always know what you're walking into and what that museum is celebrating, especially in the South... [we] certainly understand why people feel like they are taking a risk. (Flaherty and Kaminstein 2018: interview with author)

The performance stages a live thinking through of the complex politics of New Orleans in the moment of its unfolding. That is, following Ana Paulina Lee, the performance is attempting to make sense of 'the incomprehensible [histories] of catastrophic violence' and racism in New Orleans 'as well as [their] intergenerational reverberations'. It does so, not by 'explain[ing], replac[ing], or represent[ing]' the precise events of these histories but by offering a means of 'witnessing that absorbs the body into the vibrations of history that exceed language but resound through us nonetheless' (Lee 2017: 76). Thus, The Stranger Disease makes alive social concerns and structures that can sometimes seem distant from those not normally affected by them, perhaps especially tourists. In this way the performance operates through a complex relationship between how the performance unfolded as a story, in terms of audience's embodied engagement with that story, fragmented structure and repetition, the makeup of the audience and the location and site of the work.

For Miriam Haughton, 'the embodied moment of live performance' disappears the moment it manifests, while the memory of the moment lives on, in flux from the performance environment to the wider public sphere and is thus subject to the socio-economic and cultural conditions that interact there (2018: 3).

Given its investigation of social and political traumas trans-historically, we might argue that The Stranger Disease was precisely concerned to interrogate the relation between that which disappears and that which persists (especially in the context of New Orleans). In pulling the audience in different directions intellectually, physically and through decision-making they are made witness to historical trauma on two counts, disease and violent race politics. This witnessing not only functions to

illuminate pressing contemporary socio-political challenges but also prompts the audience to contemplate their own position in practices and discourses of, for example, the role tourism plays in the city 'falling into the sea', complex race politics and division, huge inequities in housing and social mobility and access to education that play out along racial divides. This work thus attends to trauma via content (narrative and action) and structure (elliptical, fragmented, frustrating, incomplete, recurring) to examine and allegorically make visible contemporary systems that propagate contemporary socio-political wreckage in New Orleans. This is further complicated by the site of the performance insofar as it might be seen to distance those on whom the structures under interrogation have had the most impact. Operating through multiple modes of representation, audience engagement, and fragmented and elliptical narrative, The Stranger Disease is a useful example through which to illuminate the wider capacity of performance to critique and make complex understandings of what it means to be a tourist in a city facing profound race, class and environmental challenges in a way that might otherwise be oversimplified or ignored. In being staged in the Quarter it makes clear the need for tourists, for strangers, to consider the/ir habituated tourist practices and the political, material, environmental impact they (might) have locally.

## **Conclusion**

These performances reframe what it means to be a tourist in the city and thus challenge how dominant tourist paradigms, narratives and advertisements conceptualize the city, and how this permits and encourages certain behaviours of consumption and excess. Moreover, both performances place the spectator into an embodied experience that both structurally and in narrative content, query the idea of New Orleans as a place 'recovered' from wreckage. The tour does so by exposing the ongoing unfolding of physical wreckage in the Lower Ninth Ward, as well as echoing the structural experience of being trapped by the rising waters. The Stranger Disease makes present use of the past, exploring the wreckage of a historic outbreak of yellow fever and the race politics played out in that moment as a result, acting as an allegory to the contemporary moment. At the same time, it inculcates and implicates the audience physically in that history and narrative through semi-immersive and promenade techniques and, crucially, by staging a conversation

about 'strangers' in a venue that is in the heart of the city's tourist district, critiquing the arrival of strangers and the wreckage they potentially bring. Both examples operate in ways we might think of as 'not not' tourism; at once deploying tropes and techniques from tourism—and in different ways profiting from tourism—while at the same time critiquing and questioning dominant paradigms and practices of tourism.

In each instance, the spectator is offered a mirage of autonomy (deciding where to go in the play, paying for the tour and asking questions) that allows for a degree of what Edensor refers to as the 'pre-existing discursive, practical, embodied norms which help to guide their performative orientations and achieve a working consensus about what to do' (2001: 71). On closer reflection, however, these are deeply codified encounters in which the spectator is subject to the performance in a way that seeks precisely to erode and question habitual tourist practices and understandings of the city. In this way, the performances are able to operate against 'consuming [of] a simulacrum' of New Orleans (70) potentially to reveal something new about the city and about the role of tourism within it. This points far beyond Edensor's extended metaphor of 'tourism as performance' to suggest that performance can make radical interventions into tourism. Perhaps especially in the context of crisis or socio-political challenges (to coin a phrase from resilience studies), performances such as those discussed above can destabilize understandings of place and practice in that place. This in turn might be seen dynamically to challenge understandings of a city (internally and externally) and the tourist-outsider's role within that city in the contemporary moment. These, then, are powerfully political encounters that have the potential to rupture dominant paradigms of power, equity, race and environmental change.

## Notes

- 1 For an account of this activity, see Andrews and Duggan (2018, 2019).
- 2 The idea of being 'done with Katrina' came up in a number of the interviews that Andrews and I conducted in March/April 2018 but was first mentioned by Neil Barclay, then CEO of the Contemporary Art Centre, in conversation with us on 27 March 2018 (the day before we did the tour of the Lower Ninth Ward).

- 3 See Frank (2019).
- 4 Robbie's use of 'disaster tourism' emerges from a discussion of 'grief tourism', 'dark tourism' and 'thanatourism' and embeds notions of 'heritage tourism' within the final definition.
- 5 I use scare quotes here because while this is a tour, it isn't a commercial one. Indeed, our guide later tells us that the 'Hurricane Katrina Tour' run by Grey Line (and other commercial tours) is no longer permitted to go into the Lower Ninth and that the only way to see it as a 'tour' is with a non-profit organization like hers.
- 6 'Barge board has a special significance in New Orleans. The boards, usually undesirable, over-sized, roughhewn lumber, were reused from flat boats or barges that carried cargo down the Mississippi River to the port of New Orleans.' (Adamick Architecture 2016)
- 7 For a chart showing common uses of the urban search and rescue cross after Hurricane Katrina, see Wikimedia Commons contributors (2011).
- 8 Accounts of people being trapped in their homes, many eventually drowning, are common in academic and journalistic writing about Katrina but perhaps the most evocative account of the terror of this experience can be seen in the documentary film Trouble the Water (2008). Produced by Carl Deal and Tia Lessin, the film includes first-hand footage of the flooding and storm, much shot by Kimberly Rivers Roberts (the central 'protagonist' of the film) while trapped in her Ninth Ward attic. At one point in the film an image of the rising waters is overlaid with an audio recording of a genuine emergency services call of a woman seeking rescue from her fast flooding attic. The emergency operator tells her that there is no help available in that moment. The woman replies: 'So, I'm going to die?'; there is only silence on the other end of the line.

- 9 In Rebecca Solnit's and Rebecca Snedeker's wonderful book Unfathomable City: A New Orleans atlas, Lydia Pelot-Hobbs presents a short essay entitled 'Of levees and prisons' that outlines the connections and parallels between the history of the development of the levee and penal systems across Louisiana and in New Orleans itself.

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