

**Lynnell Thomas, *Desire & Disaster in New Orleans: Tourism, Race, and Historical Memory*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. 272pp.**

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In *Desire & Disaster in New Orleans*, Lynnell Thomas presents an unflinching critique of the racialisation of the city's tourism industry. The familiar presentation of New Orleans as a place of sensual indulgence and racial harmony is so ingrained in popular culture that it needs little introduction. New Orleans, we have traditionally been told, is a cultural "melting pot," defined by its vibrant cuisine, music and nightlife, as well as by its southern hospitality and its racial diversity. The aim of Thomas's book is to unpack these traditional tropes and show how they are often false, racially charged, and socially damaging and, furthermore, how they are often used in an attempt to "erode the gains of the civil rights movement" (3).

Thomas, a New Orleans native, has undertaken a close examination of the tourist literature produced by the city's various tourism agencies and of the narratives presented by several of the tour companies who guide visitors around the city. According to Thomas, visitors to the city tend to come with a desire to experience "blackness" in terms of cultural expressions such as black music, food and hospitality. This "desire" is juxtaposed with the perceived "disaster" of decline, poverty and crime amongst the African-American population, a situation which results in the perpetuation of urban segregation and unequal opportunities. The concept at the heart of *Desire & Disaster in New Orleans*, therefore, is that tourists come to the city wanting to experience black cultural productions like music and food, but do not want to be presented with the area's troubling racial past. Instead, a romanticised, harmonious vision is usually presented which allows visitors, particularly white visitors, to avoid confrontations with the reality of past injustices and present inequalities.

The author's main point of contention with New Orleans' tourism message is the presentation of the city's supposed "racial exceptionalism" - the idea that New Orleans' racial history is in some way more "liberal" than that of the rest of the South. Thomas argues that "strikingly, the image of New Orleans in the twenty first century differed very little from the mythologized South that had attracted northern tourists in the decades following the Civil War", and that the city was popular precisely because its mythology of racial harmony offered an escape from the "class uncertainties and racial problems" of the times (33). In this way, the

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modern New Orleans tourism rhetoric continues to highlight the supposedly more liberal environment which could be found in the city in the colonial and antebellum periods, while ignoring the troubled Jim Crow and civil rights eras. Both the tourism and academic literature comes in for sharp criticism on this front. Thomas argues that the notion of New Orleans' "racial exceptionalism" is a predominantly white trope which relies on "constructions of Old World and Old South memories and identities at the expense of the city's African-American history and legacy" (31). This was the case in the immediate post-bellum period and generally continues to be so today.

Thomas goes on to argue that the economic slump of the 1980s, during which the port of New Orleans began to decline, saw the city authorities focus more directly on the tourism industry and consciously attempt to update the city's tourism message to include black counter-narratives which reflected the changing national civil rights discourse. The author sees the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe of 2005 as being of huge significance to the way in which the city has been viewed in subsequent years, both by outsiders and by New Orleans residents themselves. The aftermath of Katrina showcased a racial disaster which meant that the reality of African-American poverty in the city could no longer be ignored. This new climate gave rise to a further-adapted tourism narrative which could be termed "multiculturalism." Although the multicultural message attempted to be more inclusive of African-American stories and history, according to Thomas it predominantly did so only on the grounds that the history was one of inter-racial harmony and cooperation. Thomas argues that even the tour companies who seek to highlight the black experience in the city still struggle to break away from the traditional mythology of the romance of the Old South and of New Orleans' racial exceptionalism.

Importantly, Thomas's analysis makes the case for why the tourism rhetoric matters to the lives of New Orleans residents. For example, she explains how the city's white-centred tourism trope resulted in the French Quarter being enshrined as an officially sanctioned "site of black desire," while the once-vibrant African-American neighbourhood of Faubourg Tremé was simultaneously devastated by the construction of Interstate 10. Furthermore, the post-civil rights rhetoric of colour-blindness and social harmony meant that, after Katrina, the city's recovery as a whole was conflated with the recovery of its tourist industry. New Orleans' reconstruction therefore reflected the "ambivalence of the city's neoliberal tourism initiatives by substituting postracial romanticism for political, economic, and social recovery in the city" (172-3).

Ultimately, the book questions the ability of tourism to remedy inequalities through storytelling and economic development. This point is highlighted by Hurricane Katrina's exposure of how superficial any previous strides forward had actually been. Although Thomas's analysis is very effective at unpicking the myth of

New Orleans' racial exceptionalism, the author could perhaps have contextualised New Orleans in the broader scholarship on southern exceptionalism. Nevertheless, *Desire & Disaster in New Orleans* is an innovative, incisive critique of the racialisation of New Orleans' tourism industry and, furthermore, an important appeal as to why this issue continues to have a lasting impact on the lives of the people of New Orleans.