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Touring "Cancer Alley," Louisiana: Performances of Community and Memory for Environmental Justice

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The region between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, Louisiana, is known to some as "Cancer Alley." Environmental justice activists provide "toxic tours" through this area to address how racism and classism have created an environmentally unjust climate. Drawing on participant-observation to critically represent one such tour, the author illustrates how toxic tours may function rhetorically as cultural performances to help build communities of resistance through acts of politicizing memory. Examining how chartered buses, tour guides, and "stops" rearticulate what and who should be preserved, the author argues that the tour both enacts what Dean MacCannell calls the tourist practice of "sight sacralization" and contests conventional tourist representations. This essay concludes by underscoring the politically viable relations that exist among tourism, performance, and culture. **Keywords:** toxic tour, environmental justice, community, memory, sight sacralization

> The moment I stepped off the bus (I have allergies) I was hit with a migraine headache and shortness of breath and in real distress. I just started crying for the people that call the community home and must be breathing that toxic air all the time ... . I think the tours are a great idea, even though it made me sick to go on the tour. If the people in power or decision makers would go on a toxic tour I believe they would smell the light as well as see it. (Catherine Murray, personal correspondence subsequent to a toxic tour in "Cancer Alley," Louisiana)

Louisiana—particularly New Orleans—attracts tourists. From Mardi Gras parties and Cajun restaurants to jazz funerals and plantation homes, the area is admired for its promises of fun, culturally diverse experiences, and engaging historical sites. In addition, the region's proximity to several waterways, such as the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico, is inviting to outdoor enthusiasts interested in everything from fishing to swamp boat tours. Central to Louisiana's appeal to most tourists, at least in part, is its rich multi-racial and multi-ethnic history. As I was told on a commercial cemetery tour in New Orleans, for example, among the area's many claims to fame is its role as the grounds for *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Although stories about the impetus for this legal case vary, most accounts generally describe how Homer Plessy, an African American, "passed" as "white" when boarding a train and, after the ride began, stood up to announce his race. Subsequently, Plessy was

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arrested, and the U.S. Supreme Court issued its infamous "separate but equal" ruling.[1] Cultural performances in Louisiana of "slave auctions, Mardi Gras parades, Wild West Shows, and the staging of the Plessy case," Joseph Roach argues, provide opportunities either to accept the historic rationalizations provided for "the bloody frontier of conquest and forced assimilation" of Native Americans and African Americans or, alternatively, to embrace the historical possibilities of "another version of 'Life in Louisiana' " (182).

Louisiana—particularly the area along the Mississippi River from New Orleans to Baton Rouge—also attracts petrochemical industries due to its cheap, accessible, and welcoming reputation since "the collapse of the sugar plantation system after World War II" (Wright, Bryant, and Bullard 111).[2] Today, according to Beverly Wright, Bunyan Bryant, and Robert D. Bullard, this area "accounts for nearly one-fourth of the nation's petrochemical production. Some 125 companies in this corridor manufacture a range of products including fertilizers, gasoline, paints, and plastics… . Residents [. . . , for these reasons,] have also described their environment as a toxic gumbo" (114). Just as Louisiana's multi-cultural history and convenient geographical location for water transportation are inviting to tourists, many argue that these features also are central to attracting polluting industries. In other words, the argument goes, in addition to the practical asset of water routes, petrochemical industries would not have arrived or begun operating as they have if they had not first identified areas where the local population was predominately Native American and African American. In an effort to expose this exploitative relationship between waste and race, often referred to by activists as "environmental racism,"[3] local residents have renamed this industrial corridor "Cancer Alley." In a similarly provocative vein, they have begun to bring together the two businesses for which the area has become so well known, tourism and the petrochemical industry, by organizing what they call "toxic tours."

Toxic tours are non-commercial expeditions organized and facilitated by people who reside in areas that are polluted by poisonous chemicals, places that Bullard has named "human sacrifice zones" (*Confronting* 12). With full appreciation of the irony of inviting people to tour toxic or polluted sites, residents of these areas guide outsiders through where they live, work, play, and pray, providing stops along the way to highlight particular concerns, such as pollution sources, peoples' physical ailments, and related environmental/social problems. Combining the categories of nature and culture tourism, the aim of such tours is to raise awareness and to help mobilize further action for environmental justice (Di Chiro) or, as Catherine Murray describes it in the above epigraph, to encourage people to "smell the light as well as see it."

Increasingly, communication and cultural studies scholars have turned attention towards performances of tourism (Bowman; Desmond; Edensor "Staging," *Tourists*; Fine and Speer), cultural memory sites/museums (Armada; Blair; Blair and Michel; Gallagher; Katriel "Our Future," "Sites"; Patraka; Sturken), and, most recently, souvenirs (Love and Kohn). Following those who argue that tourism is a performance-laden practice, I want to claim that toxic tours work as cultural performances, because they typically function as "active agencies of change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting 'designs for living' " (Turner 24).

Understood as such, I suggest that toxic tours rhetorically invent more livable designs for life. Identifying this process of negotiation *as performance*, I believe, allows us more fully to appreciate the use of toxic tours as a political maneuver, or what Michel de Certeau calls a "tactic," aimed at rearticulating memory and, subsequently, community. Insofar as they combine tourism with toxic pollution, moreover, their ironic playfulness is reflective of Richard Schechner's claim that: "No performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment" (120).

In this essay, I consider how toxic tours as cultural performances help build communities of resistance through acts of politicizing memory. As Fuoss has shown, one potential consequence or outcome of cultural performances is community. I argue that creating cultural performances to politicize memory, or to denaturalize how we recall history for rhetorical purposes, is a process of negotiation constitutive of the building and rebuilding of communities. Though not evoking the language of performance himself, Erik W. Rothenbuhler emphasizes that communities are social constructions:

> The fact that community cannot always, perhaps not even usually, be taken for granted, is evidence enough that even when it can be, it is because community is sustained by intentionality. Community exists where people choose to make it so; making it so is work. That work of community constructs a relation between person and people, and between people and environment. (169)

This labor of building community, I hope to illustrate, is deeply connected to memory. As Barbie Zelizer argues, "community maintenance depends on a constant look backward, to the previous life of the community members, so as to constitute them as a collective in the present day" (187). Community, in this sense, does not evoke what Iris Marion Young criticizes as a privileging of "unity over difference, immediacy over mediation, [and] sympathy over recognition of the limit's of one's understanding of others from their point of view" (300). Rather, grounded in an appreciation for the dynamics of cultural performance in relation to memory, community may be understood best as necessarily heterogeneous, negotiated, and partial.

I particularly am interested in investigating how cultural performances of tourism define and transform communities. "Tourist attractions," as Dean MacCannell observes, "are not merely a collection of random material representations. When they appear in itineraries, they have a moral claim on the tourist and, at the same time, they tend toward universality, incorporating rational, social, historical, and cultural domains in a single representation made possible by the tour" (*Tourist* 45). Identifying the tourist practice of "sight sacralization," or the articulation of sociosymbolic meanings to specific places, MacCannell outlines a five-stage process involving naming, framing/elevation, enshrinement, mechanical reproduction, and social reproduction (*Tourist* 44–5).[4] Elizabeth C. Fine and Jean Haskell Speer further emphasize the particular importance of tour guides' verbal performances to this transformative process. Although tour guides admittedly may have written themselves scripts, I agree that such self-conscious or "staged" performances are constitutive rather than "fake."[5] In my subsequent analysis of a toxic tour in Cancer Alley, I hope to illustrate not only how the guides on the tour construct the area

through a process of sight sacralization, but also how they *contest* more conventional tourist representations of these areas through their performances of reinvention.

This essay begins by outlining my research methods and my own subject position as an activist and a scholar vis-à-vis this project. Then, I engage writings on performance and memory with the eventual aim of bringing this body of literature to bear in the subsequent pages that focus on tourism's relationship to social change. I spend most of the essay critically representing one toxic tour in "Cancer Alley" in order to identify and examine the ways it both constructs and contests processes of tourist sight sacralization. Finally, I conclude by underscoring the politically viable relations that potentially exist between the cultural politics of community, tourist performance, and memory.

Ethnographic Methods and Activism

In this essay, I draw on my participant observation of a Sierra Club sponsored toxic tour of "Cancer Alley,"[6] which is part of a larger ethnographic project on toxic tours.[7] I have been studying and involving myself in the environmental justice movement since 1995 and participating in toxic tours since 1996. My stay in each tour location has varied from monthly visits over four years to an afternoon excursion. This range of time, I would argue, is more indicative of the experiences of "tourists," than those of the community members who organize and facilitate toxic tours.[8] I joined the Sierra Club as part of its national Environmental Justice Committee in 1999. Demographically, one could say that I represent an "average" Sierra Club volunteer, insofar as I am female, middle class, white, and have a higher education degree.[9]

With respect to the toxic tour that provides the basis for this essay, I have spent three weeks in the region thus far and have conducted multiple interviews with other tour participants and the primary tour guide both prior to and after the tour. Including minimal edits to account for emphasis, pause, and so forth, I have transcribed the oral verbal performances documented from the tour in long-line verse style which, as Pollock notes, "is, in general, intended to convey some sense of the rhythms of the speaking scene" (*Telling* 255, n. 18). Excerpts included from personal correspondences are not portrayed in verse style because they were not oral performances.

During the tour, I used a still camera and a videocamera to assist me in "account[ing] not only for the observable, recordable realities that may be translated into written notes and texts, but also for objects, visual images, the immaterial, and the sensory nature of human experience and knowledge" (Pink 18). For this project, I draw on my experiences as a participant-observer, an interviewer, an activist, and a reader of books, newspapers, and other archival sources. In my critical representation of this toxic tour, therefore, I integrate analysis, theory, videotape transcripts, interview transcripts, a photograph, and field-note excerpts. I have found that utilizing a diversity of recording media assists in bringing "the ethnographic moment back, to resurrect it, to communicate the distance, which too quickly starts to feel like an abyss, between what we saw and heard and our inability, finally, to do justice to it in our representations" (Behar 8–9).

Although I do not dwell heavily on my personal experiences in relation to this

tour, one still might consider this essay a kind of "authoethnography" insofar as it "describes narratives of a culture or ethnic group produced by members of that culture or ethnic group" (Glesne 181) or, in this case, insofar as I describe and discuss a tour in which I both observed as a researcher and participated as an activist. Since my research and activism are dialectically related, it is sometimes difficult and usually undesirable to say when one or the other of these impulses drives my actions and perceptions; however, I believe it is less helpful to try to create some artificial line between the two than it is to ask whether the results of my efforts are viable as one or the other (or both).

Overall, I believe more people should know what toxic tourism is and why it has come about, because I contend it is a provocative response to a disturbing situation. I also presume that people who do organize and participate in toxic tours should record and analyze the purpose, practice, and efficacy of this tactic for the aim of becoming more persuasive since, as opposed to commercial tourism, the goal of toxic tour guides would seem to be putting themselves "out of business," or making their roles unnecessary. Rather than romanticizing "critical distance" as a criterion of academic research, I prefer to adhere to an epistemological stance that aims to achieve what Dwight Conquergood calls "genuine conversation" in a "dialogical performance," a position located somewhere within and between the tensions of detachment and commitment, objectivity and subjectivity ("Performing" 5, 9–11). This perspective also means I am indebted to theory, despite, as D. Soyini Madison attests, its "ancient schizophrenia … between being loved and hated, revered and scorned" (109).

Remembering Performance/Performances of Memory

Existing in the space of both politics and play, cultural performances often attempt to represent evidence of what has and has not been, what could and could not be. As Stuart Hall writes: "Positively marked terms 'signify' because of their position in relation to what is absent, unmarked, the unspoken, the unsayable. Meaning is relational within an ideological system of presences and absences" (109). Presence and absence, thus, dance dialectically in between the gained and the lost, the marked and the unmarked, the spoken and the unspoken. Any discussion of one necessarily implicates the other.

Vivian M. Patraka argues for the importance of performance theory when exploring the desires and the constraints of marking absence. More specifically, Patraka uses the terms "absence" and "goneness" to name the ways in which the Holocaust appears both elusive and inconceivable and, yet, still manages to produce unmistakable symbolic and material effects (4). In other words, despite the massive scale, the irreparable damage, and the horrifying acts that occurred, Patraka notes how people continue to feel compelled to commemorate the profound losses of the Holocaust.

In addition to exploring the specifics of the Holocaust, Patraka's discussion leads her to a broader inquiry of "the relationship between representation and reiteration … as a *risky struggle* (between object and process, between history and memory) that has certain consequences" (5, emphasis added). This "risky struggle," according to Patraka, is embodied through performance. To clarify the stakes of these acts,

she turns to Elin Diamond's distinction between "performance" and "performativity." Performance, for Diamond, is a "risky and dangerous negotiation" between discursive conventions and presentational acts:

> Performance is … precisely the site in which concealed or dissimulated conventions might be investigated. When performativity materializes as performance in that *risky and dangerous negotiation* between a doing (a reiteration of norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretations), between someone's body and the conventions of embodiment, we have access to cultural meanings and critique. Performativity, I would suggest, must be rooted in the materiality and historical density of performance. (5; also qtd. in Patraka 6, emphasis added)

It is out of this synergy between performance and performativity that Diamond imagines the possibility of resistance, manifested in the marking of conventions as such and, thus, the possibility of their destabilization. Performance, in this sense, is risky because it offers the opportunity to expose, question, and challenge our most sacred conventions. "Perhaps there is a key here," Richard Bauman suggests, "to the persistently documented tendency for performers to be both admired and feared—admired for their artistic skills and power and for the enhancement of experience they provide, feared because of the potential they represent for subverting and transforming the status quo" (45). As I hope to illustrate subsequently, the performativity of sight sacralization on more conventional tours in southern Louisiana is contested through the performance of sight sacralization on toxic tours of the same area. This process of destabilization creates opportunities to expose, question, and challenge the status quo, namely, who and what have been sacralized as worthy of preservation by the tourist industry and those who support it.

In this way, performances also can mark the historicity of the world we live in. Emphasizing the importance of history to performance, Pollock writes:

> And without history, there is no action. There is motion and process and change but there is no agency. We are atomized in time, less real than facts, spinning in sound bites, unable to catch onto the scaffolding of sequence. We cannot take directive action because there is no action to take: there are no narrative norms or directives, no plans or visions, no grounds for effectiveness. ("Introduction" 15)

Without history, in other words, there is no place for intervention, no space for agency. History provides means to ground our assessments of the present.

Questions of memory, however, are constitutive of performances of both oppression and resistance. In sum, though its uses are rich with possibilities, "there is nothing politically prescribed in cultural memory" (Sturken 7). Like the dialectical movement between presence and absence, remembering and forgetting history are interlinked politically. Marita Sturken reminds us: "Forgetting is a necessary component in the construction of memory. Yet the forgetting of the past in a culture is often highly organized and strategic" (7). In his study of circum-Atlantic performances, Roach similarly argues that, historically, processes of remembering and forgetting often have served political ends: "As a Yoruba proverb puts it: 'The white man who made the pencil also made the eraser.' [… Thus,] more obdurate questions persist: Whose forgetting? Whose memory? Whose history?" (6–7).

Similarly, the movement for environmental justice asks "the *ethical* and *political*

questions of 'who gets what, why, and in what amount.' Who pays for, and who benefits from, technological expansion?" (Bullard *Unequal* 11). Toxic tours, therefore, provide a rhetorical forum in which to ask and answer questions such as: Whose evidence is present? Whose evidence is absent? Whose history has been forgotten? And whose memory should be told?

Like Sturken, I am interested in this study less with the related areas of individual memories and official history than I am in cultural memory, "memory that is shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet is entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning" (3). Zelizer further emphasizes the materiality of cultural memory:

> One of the most marked characteristics of collective memory is that it has texture. Memory exists in the world rather than in a person's head, and so is embodied in different cultural forms. We find memory in objects, narratives about the past, even the routines by which we structure our day. No memory is embodied in any of these artifacts, but instead bounces to and fro among all of them, [all along ...] gaining meaning. (232)

In this essay, I identify and examine the potential textures and meanings of performing cultural memory through the practices of one particular toxic tour.

As illustrated below, the narratives shared on toxic tours both draw from and struggle to rearticulate cultural memories by contesting conventional representations, showing the presence—namely, the evidence—of injustice, and highlighting the absence of accountability or justice. Performing memory, in this sense, indicates a longing for social change, particularly in terms of community. "For cultural memory," as J. Robert Cox notes, "may be both a locus of the public's identity (where we 'belong') and also a source of rupture, a critique of things as they are. [... It] assumes that history is open; that aspects of our heritage that have been forgotten can be retrieved; that standing in those places, we rediscover principles for judgment; and that, thus, we also keep alive the promise of what is 'not yet' " (4, 14).

"A Toxic Tour is Not Just About the Chemical Plant"

The toxic tour of Cancer Alley that I focus on in this essay was held on May 12, 2001. It began approximately at 12:45 p.m. in uptown New Orleans at the conference center where the participants were staying and concluded around 9:00 p.m. For obvious reasons, I cannot provide a complete description of the entire tour; rather, I have tried to convey a sense of its overall significance and function by considering, in chronological order, the beginning, the three primary stops, and the end of the tour. The primary tour guide's verbal performance appeared non-linear insofar as he spoke about issues and places as they occurred to him or as they arose geographically. While lacking a single climax, I intend to illustrate how the guide's ongoing verbal performance and the stops on the tour served rhetorical purposes, which both contested and reinvented the area's value as a sacralized sight.

The audience for this toxic tour performance was a group of Sierra Club volunteers, Sierra Club staff organizers, and environmental justice activists from

across the US who had been working with the Sierra Club.[10] As one Sierra Club publication noted when describing the gathering:

> Sammy James, a Navajo medicine man, prayed aloud in his native tongue, weeping through his words at times. Elaine Purkie strummed her guitar and sang a from-the-gut Appalachian fight song about coal mining and union might. Balinda Moore, an African-American pastor from Tennessee, shared [… a] story of [racism …]. This was a Sierra Club Meeting. (Coyle 4)

Politically, it is important to recognize the diversity of this constituency and the Sierra Club's own belief that this diversity is "newsworthy," because it symbolizes a shift or, at minimum, a perception of a shift, in the work of a more traditional environmental organization such as the Sierra Club in relation to the relatively younger environmental justice movement.[11] That this diversity is not taken for granted also reminds us of the rhetorical work involved in building community across cultures and geographical regions for the environmental justice movement, which ideally aims to expand both its sense of community and the issues that warrant attention from that community.

Since the tour began when the bus pulled up and people walked on, it seems worthwhile to consider the space in which most of the tour took place. Buses themselves have served repeatedly as focal points for the US civil rights movement. Recall: the bus boycotts in cities such as Montgomery and Tallahassee during the late 1950s; the 1956 Supreme Court ruling on bus desegregation; the Freedom Rides in the Summer of 1961. These struggles have been memorialized repeatedly in popular culture, and even the most traditional history books today remember Rosa Parks.[12] Buses, in these moments, represent public spaces in which people may come together. As such, buses offer opportunities for engagement. Buses aid us in traveling not only physical but also cultural distances and, therefore, provide a public space in which cultural obstacles may be negotiated and transformed.

Robin D. G. Kelley suggests that further exploration of public forums such as buses may help to open up our assumptions about what "black working class" struggles have been and to be more inclusive than traditional civil rights histories of resistance. Kelley thus argues for the usefulness of imagining the spaces within buses and other forms of public transportation as arenas for negotiating power, control, and community: "In some ways, the design and function of the busses and streetcars rendered them unique sites of contestation. An especially apt metaphor for understanding the character of domination and resistance on public transportation might be to view the interior spaces as '*moving theaters*' " (57, emphasis added).

When provided on a bus, of course, toxic tours are intended to be a different kind of theater, at least in part, because they are not for public transportation. The toxic tour bus is privately chartered and, therefore, purposefully predetermines who gets on the bus and where the bus stops. Further, as a cliché of mass commercial tourism, the chartered bus marks participants as visitors in a way that physically can exaggerate the distance between the tourists and the toured. Yet, in both instances, the bus is transformed into a "moving theater," a space for addressing issues of collective concern, forging connections between people and places, and (re)building communities. The bus, in these instances, takes us places and is a place, or destination, itself.

Introductions

Standing at the front of the inside of the bus with a microphone in hand, our guide, Darryl Malek-Wiley, was a middle-aged man of European descent with a big, white, wiry beard. As a potentially useful resource for social change, toxic tour guides frequently invoke cultural memories as a rhetorical tactic to influence which memories are made to feel present and which memories are not. "The discourse between the tour guide and tourists," according to Fine and Speer, "varies among expressive, referential, conative, poetic, metalingual, and phatic functions" (77). Erik Cohen suggests that the principal components of the tour guide's role are: (1) instrumental (e.g., providing direction, access, and control); (2) social (e.g., offering tension-management, integration, morale, and animation); (3) interactionary (e.g., as a "middle man" who both integrates and insulates the tour group and a logistical coordinator); and (4) communicative (e.g., selecting "points of interest," sharing information, interpreting, and "fabricating"). Rather than a one-dimensional act, therefore, the tour guide is charged with coordinating a complicated series of interactive performance events both backstage and onstage, usually with the added responsibility of attempting to make this complex of performances appear effortless or "natural."

When Malek-Wiley began speaking, his voice was deep, yet playful.

MALEK-WILEY: Do you know the person you're sitting next to?
TOURISTS: Yes.
MALEK-WILEY: Do you know them well?
TOURISTS: Yesss—
MALEK-WILEY: [*Disapprovingly shaking his head back and forth.*]
If you know somebody you've met before,
you're supposed to sit next to somebody you've never met before—
you're supposed to sit next to somebody else.
The idea of this tour is to meet new people.
Larry and Shelia know each other, I think.
[*The crowd laughs, because Larry and Shelia are married.*]
But, the idea is
that every time we get off the bus
or get back on the bus,
you sit down beside somebody different.
That's part of the idea.
[*He pauses as some people on the bus begin switching seats.*]
Rule Two: Anybody got a cell phone?
Turn it off.
We're not listening to nobody outside the bus
until we get to where we're going.
So—
[*The guide briefly pauses again, looking around the bus.*]
My name is Darryl Malek-Wiley.
I'm the Group Chair of the New Orleans Group.
I've been involved with the Sierra Club since 1972
and have been doing toxic tours
here in Louisiana
since about 1983.
So, we're going to take a road up the river
and we're going to see things
and talk about the whole concept of toxic tours

and how they can be used in your community.
And my view is:
a toxic tour is not just about the chemical plant, it's about the history, the culture, everything that goes on …

Malek-Wiley's introduction immediately marks off the space of the bus in a way that is both material and symbolic: we are instructed to be engaged, attentive, and open to what we were about to witness. This introduction also establishes Malek-Wiley's credibility as a guide by highlighting his experience in providing toxic tours and his involvement in local environmental activism.

As is often the case in social movements, I had heard of Malek-Wiley before I met him. A carpenter by trade, he has been involved in environmental, labor, and social justice activism since the early 1970s. His story is the type of story that is often lost in official versions of history, the Left, and even in environmental justice literature. It speaks to diverse coalitions and to his personal dedication to the interconnected struggles of environmental, racial, and economic justice. I believe it is important that the tour begins with and continues to highlight his story not because it is necessarily typical or completely unique, but because it is an exemplary story, one "*worth* saving, *worth* repeating" (Sayre 125).

As the following excerpt from the tour illustrates, Malek-Wiley persists in weaving his own performance of self with narratives about the history of the area.

MALEK-WILEY: The real levee system got started in the 1930s and '40s.
But, we have to think about New Orleans going back before that, before the levees, before the Europeans got here,
and back to the Native culture
that was very active in this area.
[*Brief pause to offer driver some directions.*]
We have to understand some things
that we were taught in History
are not necessarily true.
I don't know if that'll shock anybody here—
VOICE FROM BUS: Get outta here!—
MALEK-WILEY:—Yeah, I know, it's hard to believe that.
But, I learned early.
My family traveled.
I learned History in Ohio, US History.
Then, we moved to West Virginia,
and I learned US History in West Virginia.
Then, we moved to North Carolina,
where I learned about the *real* US History.
[*He smiles.*]
So, it's different.
But, all of those places didn't talk about
the *vast* cultures of Native Americans that was here.
There's a whole vast culture of Native people
throughout the Mississippi-Ohio river system
for hundreds of thousands of years
before the Europeans came.
… They estimate that there were 9 billion Native Americans throughout the United States—
about 3 billion in the Mississippi-Ohio region [sic].
What happened?

… Being an environmentalist,
I like to ask questions.
That's what I do.

Remembering history with such broad brushstrokes is an explicit theme of Malek-Wiley's performance. Rather than being caught up in details, his performance rhetorically challenges any commonsense understanding of a singular "true" version of history and illustrates how history shifts depending on one's perspective, just as our perspectives promised to shift as we searched for and found different seats on the bus in between stops. At this point in the tour, therefore, the "facts" perhaps are less important than the rhetorical invitation to becoming open to alternative perspectives.

What I find most interesting in this excerpt is the emphasis of the last four lines: "What happened? … Being an environmentalist, I like to ask questions—that's what I do." In these initial moments and throughout the tour, Malek-Wiley builds his ethos as an environmentalist amongst environmentalists. In many ways, he looks like a stereotypical environmental movement leader: European American, male, and bearded. The social memories of his political credentials not only build his credibility as an expert on Cancer Alley, but also offer a role model for the rest of the participants on the tour, all activists invested in the difficult work of coalition politics among environmentalists, labor advocates, and civil rights activists. Malek-Wiley's assertion invites all on the bus to do the same as he: ask questions. This ethic of critical inquiry, when applied to environmentalism, opens the possibility for political dialogue in which a variety of voices are encouraged to speak, but judgments are still made. What did happen to the Native Americans who live(d) in this region? Why aren't all of us taught that history? Which questions have we not asked? Which questions should we ask? How can a sense of historical absence become present in our lives and move us to action?

First Stop: Norco

Approximately two hours into the tour, after having shared a series of stories about the history of Cancer Alley, Malek-Wiley directs the bus driver to turn into a predominantly African American town in St. Charles Parish called Norco, which he explains claims roots that extend much farther back than the arrival of the surrounding chemical industries.[13] There, the bus driver parks, and Malek-Wiley invites us to step out. The road we walk down is lined with houses on one side and a metal fence on the other, officially marking off the property of a Shell Company chemical plant. At the end of the road, we meet a group of people.

One person we encounter is a well-known African American environmental justice organizer who worked for Greenpeace at the time, Damu Smith. He spontaneously begins providing a brief history of the community, and notes that we just have missed a community meeting discussing the advantages and disadvantages of Shell paying for relocation of local residents. To his credit, Smith gives the floor over to Miss Margaret Evans, a local African American community member. This gesture exemplifies how both national environmental groups and local environmental justice groups can speak and work together towards a common goal without the

larger institutions necessarily smothering the smaller ones. It also enables those of us on the tour to hear a remarkable impromptu speech.

> EVANS: Also, what I wanted to say
> is what Shell has done:
> they've wanted to be clever.
> What they have done
> is that they're saying
> when the people here move out,
> they're going to have a nice *green* area for a walkway …
> Also, saying in a subtle way:
> "There's nothing wrong with living here."
> They're saying they're having a "voluntary move."
> And they're not saying it's a buffer zone,
> They're saying "a *green* belt."—
> And my mother's tree is dying—
> There's nothing green about that beltway!
> So, their terminology and their *wording* is *saying*:
> "There's nothing wrong."
> And I tell you:
> if they want to volunteer,
> they can buy *your* property—
> *if* they want to "volunteer" …
> —that's the word or terminology they use
> for *not* showing responsibility—
> They're saying that
> they're willing to work with
> anybody who wants to sell their property:
> "They're welcome to come."
> They're not taking actual responsibility, saying:
> "*Yes*, we have done wrong to you.
> *Yes*, we have hurt you.
> *Yes*, we have damaged everything
> and we're going to buy you out."
> *No*.
> They are saying:
> "vol-un-tary programs."
> So, that shows the cut off of the word "responsibility."

Evans's speech critically interrupts Shell's corporate rhetoric in powerful ways.[14] More specifically, Evans evidences the *performative* power of language. It is not merely that Shell uses language she wouldn't choose. Her point is that by choosing particular words, Shell articulates specific behaviors and (un)ethics that harm her community. In other words, Shell's rhetoric performs a lack of responsibility and accountability, disavowing the connection between itself and local residents. Evans contests Shell's official framing of her community and environment as disconnected from what happens on the other side of the fence.

As J. L. Austin first theorized, the performative "enacts or produces that to which it refers" (Diamond 4). By denying their actions and, instead, by claiming the potential relocation of the Norco community is "voluntary," Shell is transforming the situation into one of choice and consent, instead of one that honestly admits abuse and coercion, argues Evans. While Shell does "buy people's houses, with a going rate about $10,000 to $15,000 for a trailer and $45,000 for brick homes [… ,

t]he company says these purchases have nothing to do with dangers from the plant, but are to help it build a 'green belt' " (Motavalli 34). By reclaiming the performative force of language, although admittedly not with those words, Evans struggles to contest Shell's power to name and frame her community's conditions. In a sense, she echoes the question that Malek-Wiley posed earlier: what happened?

One reason that "community" has received attention from local grassroots activists to internationally known scholars (and those that fall under both categories) is its promise as a potentially powerful trope for building political alliances.[15] James Baldwin, for example, argues:

> In the twentieth century, and in the modern State, the idea—the sense—of community has been submerged for a very long time. In the United States, the idea of community scarcely means anything anymore, as far as I can tell, except among the submerged, the "lowly": the Native American, the Mexican, the Puerto Rican, the Black. These can be called communities because they are informed by their knowledge that only they of the community can sustain and re-create each other. (123–24)

Community, in this passage from Baldwin, is linked to survival (presumably, both cultural and physical) and to a sense of interconnectedness among those who feel endangered or threatened by dominant culture. While Baldwin's writings tend to focus on marginalized voices, I would argue that any social movement, counter-hegemonic or otherwise, requires a sense of "community" marking *us* versus *them*, the inside versus the outside. Without becoming caught up in that discussion, however, for purposes of this essay, I believe it is useful to recognize that Baldwin defines community *as a site of collective hope and resistance*. With this definition, the goal of environmental justice activists may be understood as an attempt to broaden the collective sense of "community" such that more and more people will appreciate our interconnected fates and abilities to "sustain and re-create each other." A successful toxic tour, therefore, invites its participants to feel a sense of community with the communities toured.

In her speech, Evan questions the "clever" privileging of corporations and capitalism over people and community. By using the term "voluntary programs," Evans argues that Shell cuts off the recognition that they "have done wrong," "hurt," and "damaged everything." In other words, there is no acknowledgment that her community is worthy of being preserved. There is a lack, in a sense, of what MacCannell identifies as the first stage of sight sacralization, the process of naming "when the sight is marked off from similar objects as worthy of preservation" (*Tourist* 44). Put differently, throughout this toxic tour, the logic of what or who has been considered expendable is subverted insofar as the tour both marks what/who is traditionally preserved in a culture *and* contests the choice to continue preserving those traditions over others.

Subsequently, Evans lists the illnesses that threaten the people in her neighborhood, including respiratory problems, cancer, and learning disabilities. In order to track the air contaminants that she and others say are responsible for these maladies, she informs us, the community had become part of what is called the "Bucket Brigade." In brief, the Bucket Brigade offers a means by which people without formal technical education can test their air by collecting samples and sending them off to an Environmental Protection Agency approved laboratory for

results. Prior to and after the tour, the Sierra Club had donated money to the community to help them have access to this expensive process, which costs approximately $500 a sample. A community member provides a demonstration for those of us on the tour with an unspoken acknowledgment of who was paying the bill. Such gestures can have cyclical effects. For example, Sue Williams, a Sierra Club volunteer, writes: "The information about the bucket brigade which was presented at the church on the tour I took has stayed with me … . That was the first time I'd heard about it and I realized how badly we need it in Memphis." Williams' words are interesting because they remind us that even though a Sierra Club group or program is sponsoring Bucket Brigades in one location, it doesn't necessarily follow that another Sierra Club group or program would know about it because of the size of the organization and the number of issues, people, and places that are involved in it. By offering an occasion for activists to exchange ideas and practices that help achieve common or, at least, related goals, toxic tours help strengthen community.[16] In this sense, the toxic tour provides opportunities not just to learn about the people and places toured, but also those touring.

When heading back to the bus, the following exchange occurs between myself and another tour participant:

> [She] asked: "Do you smell that?" Feeling a bit guilty for not having smelled anything noticeable—after all, I was on a mission to record everything—I replied, "No—but, I think some people are naturally more sensitive to smells—just like some people are more apt to have cancer." She looked me directly in the eyes and said: "Well, I can smell it and feel it—my eyes are irritated and, earlier, I felt my throat tighten up. That's why I've got to get back on the bus. I'm finding it hard to breathe." She paused and then added: "But, I also have cancer—"and launched into her own community's struggle against toxic pollution. (Field Notes)

Again, the space of the toxic tour provides opportunities to negotiate a sense of community with those being toured and between those on the tour itself. Spontaneous conversations such as this one are constitutive of the tour's value. They illustrate the possibility for moments of solidarity among those facing common struggles, and the ways in which a toxic tour is a multi-sensory, embodied experience for those touring. Spontaneous conversations also suggest the opportunity to create further distinctions, such as those who can or cannot appreciate a particular facet of the tour and those who do or do not belong to a particular identity (e.g., people with cancer). This marking of difference, I would argue, highlights the heterogeneity inherent in any community.

Moving to the Second Stop: Holy Rosary Cemetery

After gathering on the bus, Malek-Wiley begins to describe the landscape we are moving through.

> MALEK-WILEY: So, we're now on top of the levee.
> And you can see Shell behind us,
> Union Carbide over here,
> you go up beyond Union Carbide,
> it's Occidental Chemical.
> Next to them it's Becker.

> And in this dome right in front of us is a nuclear power plant.
> And beyond the nuclear power plant,
> Those are two gas-fired energy plants on that side of the river.
> And two gas-fired plants on this side of the river … .
> This plant moved in on top of this community.
> And this happens time and time again.
> And people ask: why did this happen? …
> Why are they here? …
> It goes back to French Louisiana …
> What happened after the U.S. Civil War,
> changed that system somewhat.
> After the Civil War,
> all of the African Americans who had lived on plantations
> were given land.
> Now, it wasn't forty acres and a mule.
> They didn't get that.
> They got a small plot of land,
> and most of that
> was immediately adjacent to the plantation land … .

Moving figuratively between the present and the past, Malek-Wiley's performance on the bus pushes the audience to remember the relationships between cause and effect, past and present, and to question the establishment of official boundaries that supposedly "protect" the communities in this area from the abundance of industries we saw. Just as former slaves lived on small plots of land adjacent to the sources of their oppression, so, too, do their descendents live on land connected to the industries that both demean the value of their lives and jeopardize their survival.

The next stop after Norco is a place called the Holy Rosary Cemetery. The Church previously adjacent to the cemetery was bought and moved by Union Carbide. Noting the symbolic visual value of this place, Malek-Wiley stops the bus so that we can take pictures (see Figure 1). This is an environmental justice equivalent of the more traditional scenic vista. According to the dictionary, a *vista* is: "(1) a view or prospect … ; (2) such an avenue or passage, esp. when formally planned; and (3) a far-reaching mental view: *vistas of the future*" (*Random House Webster's* 2127). Since the towers of the industrial building in the background are so clearly mirrored in the religious icons of the graveyard that are positioned in the foreground, this tour stop rhetorically represents a symbolic elevation of environmental injustice by juxtaposing the sacred and the profane, the "progress" promised by corporate development and the incommensurable vulnerability of humans.

The power of this vista is not lost on the tour group, as many walk out of the bus to take pictures. Perhaps this is because the interconnected relationship between survival and community (named by concepts such as "ecology") has inspired many people to join the environmental movement. What an ecological definition of "community" offers politically, I would argue, is a sense of *place*, where diverse populations coexist.[17] Laurie Anne Whitt and Jennifer Darryl Slack note:

> If the concept of community evokes nothing else, it evokes images of connection. It is our contention that what needs re-examination … are the kinds of connection through which we understand the relations between the human and the other-than-human world. By contextualizing communities, by probing the manner and significance of their situatedness in the material world (whether the immediate landscape be "natural" or "urban"),

FIGURE 1
Holy Rosary Cemetery. Photo: Phaedra C. Pezzullo.

> we hope to demonstrate how the other than human is a vital player in the construction of community. Geographical and ecological features of community are rarely incidental to political and cultural struggle: they contextualize—enable and constrain—relations of power. (6)

Community, therefore, also suggests a sense of belonging and identification for people, where feelings of connection are favored deliberately over patterns of domination and alienation. In addition, for environmentalists, "community" implies a less anthropocentric perspective through which we can account for "the other-than-human world" and a material context for everyday life (Whitt and Slack 6).[18] A vista such as Holy Rosary Cemetery provides a striking articulation of the environmental and human costs potentially incurred if a community of resistance does not mobilize in response.

After the Cemetery, Malek-Wiley shares why the area is named "Cancer Alley."

> MALEK-WILEY: This idea of "Cancer Alley"-
> that you're in now—
> that *term* was created
> by a gentleman by the name of Richard Miller[19]
> and myself … .
> And we just started putting our press releases out.
> This is when we were involved in the BASF fight[20] … .
> We termed it "Cancer Alley"
> and started sending our press releases out:
> "From Cancer Alley";
> "From Cancer Alley";
> "From Cancer Alley."
> You know, and all of a sudden,

> it caught on.
> And the media caught on.
> The *term* set the terms of the debate.
> The debate was:
> "Is this a Cancer Alley? Is it not a Cancer Alley? If so, why?"
> If, you know, it wasn't an "industrial corridor,"
> like the industry likes to talk about it.
> It was a Cancer Alley.
> And the latest data that came out
> from the Tumor Registry … last year said
> that we don't live in Cancer Alley,
> meaning we don't have a higher cancer incident rate
> than the rest of the country,
> statistically speaking,
> quote unquote.
> But, we do have a higher cancer death rate
> than the rest of the country.
> So, I've updated my schpiel:
> We don't live in Cancer Alley anymore.
> We live in Cancer Death Alley.
> So, you know, when you tell people—
> you weren't in Cancer Alley—
> you were in Cancer Death Alley.

Understood as what MacCannell describes as the first stage of sight sacralization, "the naming phase" involves a "great deal of work into the authentication of the candidate for sacralization" (*Tourist* 44). By setting the terms of the debate in the region, the name "Cancer Alley" has provoked at least one study to assess this claim. Ironically, as Malek-Wiley points out, the "more accurate" description of the area sounds even more frightening: "Cancer Death Alley." Clearly, naming the region has become a powerful rhetorical tactic for environmental justice activists. This tactic has helped them to reframe public debate by foregrounding the deadly health effects produced by what industrial officials would otherwise describe innocuously as an "industrial corridor."

Third Stop: The Ashland Estate

Bringing the writings of Erving Goffman to bear on tourist practices, MacCannell argues: "The touristic way of getting in with the natives is to enter into a quest for authentic experiences, perceptions and insights. The quest for authenticity is marked off in stages in the passages from front to back. Movement from stage to stage corresponds to growing touristic understanding" (*Tourist* 105). Reflecting this pattern, the third stop on the tour provides, I would argue, a backstage look at the frontstage. It enables tour participants to see how far we've come on our journey by visiting a more traditional tourist sightseeing location: the historic preservation of a plantation. It both elevates and frames the ideology embedded in the region or, as MacCannell describes, "the putting on of display of an object [… and] the placement of an official boundary around the object" (*Tourist* 44).

The following description of this part of the tour is excerpted from my field notes:

> About two and a half hours into the tour, Darryl began saying: "For people who

> remember Gone With the Wind: Tara. We're going to go by it. It's now owned by Shell Chemical. This is the plantation that was used … ." And I lost track of his voice. I was engrossed with the signs that stood below me on the ground:
> (FIRST SIGN) Ashland, built in 1841. Welcome to Ashland, which is being preserved by Shell Chemical Company. Although it is closed, please enjoy the view of the home and grounds. For information or if you have comments, please phone (225) 201–0550.
> (SECOND SIGN) The 2001 Ascension Parish Pilgrimage has been cancelled by the Ascension Parish Tourist Commission. For information please call 675–6550.
> (THIRD SIGN) Private Property Shell Chemical Company No Trespassing.
> A car was parked in front of the signs and estate gates with the driver sitting inside—a tourist of another kind … . I began registering Darryl's voice again …
>
> MALEK-WILEY: Shell has done some exterior renovations … .
> So, it's plantation culture that has continued on
> from the slave days
> now to the chemical plantations,
> who are the masters.
> And I mean that in a political sense also,
> because they are the major donors to
> all the campaigns around here … .
> PEZZULLO: What a trip—that Shell is preserving that.
> I can't believe they're preserving that.
> VAN DAM: Shell is preserving that whole plantation way of life.
> Just expanding [the] base of the servitude.
>
> Shirley Van Dam recently had boarded the bus. She is a local labor organizer. Her reference to servitude resounded with me. Of course, I was wondering if this was another "yankee moment," as my University of North Carolina students sometimes call it. Perhaps I was not supposed to believe that Shell's preservation of a plantation home was ironic, a bad public relations move that too easily led critics to the same conclusions we seemed to be making on the bus. Perhaps I was supposed to appreciate historical preservation in much the same way that I often support environmental preservation.[21] But, to be honest, I was simply horrified … . (Field Notes, supplemented by direct quotes from videotaping)

My subsequent research on Ashland uncovered a newspaper article that describes the estate as follows:

> The fact that Ashland-Belle Home Plantation is standing is a little miracle.[22] … The home, one of the grandest and largest plantation homes ever built in the state, was purchased by Shell Chemical Co. in 1992. "It was in terrible condition," said Winnie Byrd, a preservationist … . "When Shell expressed an interest in acquiring the property for their operations and indicated they would take over stewardship, it was looked to by preservationists *as a lifesaver*." (Martin, emphasis added)

By leaving this stop for the latter half of the tour and, thus, offering a chance to witness the quality of life experienced next to Shell's plant, the toxic tour inverts this sociosymbolic "lifesaver." Marking the choice to establish this commercial tourist site as sacred, the toxic tour invites us to consider an interpretation of this "authentic" historical marker of heritage from the perhaps more "authentic" backstage. In a sense, contesting this official tourist site ironically marks what MacCannell calls the stage of "enshrinement" in sight sacralization, insofar as Speer and Fine note that "enshrinement is as much a movement through verbal doorways as physical ones" (*Tourist* 86). Rather than passing by local communities to stop at

this tourist site, we visit surrounding local communities along the way so that we might appreciate how the historical enshrinement of this more traditional tourist site is sustained performatively.

From this alternative perspective, environmental justice activists argue that, in addition to polluting the environment where people live, the industries in Cancer Alley practice "economic blackmail" where people work. Bullard explains how economic blackmail haunts the region:

> The plantation owner in the rural parishes was replaced by the petrochemical industry executive as the new "master" and "overseer." Petrochemical colonialism mirrors the system of domination typical of the Old South. In addition to poisoning the people, this new master is robbing many of the local residents (many of whom are descendents of slaves) of their ancestral homes. Environmental racism is now turning century-old African-American communities into ghost towns. (*Confronting* 12–13)

In short, corporations keep racism alive by asserting: "you can get a job, but only if you are willing to do work that will harm you, your families, and your neighbors" (23).

As quoted above, therefore, a local labor organizer implies that by simultaneously polluting the area and preserving the Ashland estate Shell is "just expanding the base of servitude," both physically and ideologically. In addition to increasing the number of people exploited, MacCannell writes how the broader practice of placing a people and their culture on tour also may expand the number of people capable of acting as exploiters: "As the rhetoric of hostility toward minorities [sic] is replaced with a rhetoric of appreciation, the circle of their potential exploiters is dramatically expanded" (*Empty* 179). Of course, as Michael S. Bowman reminds us in his study of antebellum home tour guide performances, "tourism also permits the possibility of rejecting what is seen; it includes moments of skeptical assessment as well as wide-eyed wonder" (155). Thus, while the toxic tour tactically invites what MacCannell calls "the rhetoric of moral superiority," through which is expressed, ironically, how "tourists dislike tourists" (*Tourist* 9, 10), it seems more useful to recognize this moment as an opportunity to mark tourist conventions as such and to explore what alternatives might be realized through this process of destabilization.

The End of the Tour

After Ashland, we stop at a locally owned restaurant for dinner. There, local environmental justice activist Juanita Stewart briefly speaks to us about her community's struggles, during which time we have more time to socialize in our newly constituted "backstage." When we return to the bus, the sky is dark. Malek-Wiley concludes by offering an upbeat speech about the range of political opportunities that are available to us, including reading political books, buying T-shirts satirizing the state of politics, writing letters to the editor, getting involved in local and national political elections and legislation. To conclude, he states: "But, what the environmental community has got to do is get outside ourselves and into the communities more. And really build our coalition with labor … in the 70s, we got involved in labor, in the 80s, race. But, right now, we're losing the war on the

environment … . It's time to get up and get moving. And it's tough." Here, again, Malek-Wiley reiterates the theme of increased personal empowerment and community building as his explicit desire of our response to the tour.

Before allowing us simply to talk amongst ourselves (or rest) for the remaining bus ride back to New Orleans, Malek-Wiley ends his role as a tour guide by introducing and playing a forty-seven minute film directed by Laura Dunn, *Green: A Film about Environmental Injustice*. The video, interestingly, is a documentary version of a toxic tour of Cancer Alley. We are seeing the tour again, in a sense, from another perspective. In the process of tourist sight sacralization, sharing such a film resonates with what MacCannell calls the stage of "mechanical reproduction," when the tourist is set "in motion on his [or her] journey to find the true object. And he [or she] is not disappointed. Alongside the copies of it, it has to be The Real Thing" (45). On this toxic tour of Cancer Alley, the videotape provides a map of the area we have visited, interviews with people affirming the stories we have been told, and visual depictions of the places where we have been. Shown once the sun has gone down, these confirmations of our experience that day enshrine the tour as something worth documenting, worth touring, worth remembering. Furthermore, it portrays stops we had not visited, people we had not met, and sights we did not see. In other words, the film rhetorically performs as a reminder that our journey, though valuable, had been incomplete. As we are being transported out of the area, back towards the frontstage of New Orleans, we are reminded that we have only experienced a glimpse of this "Life in Louisiana."

Conclusions

> You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our "flooding." (Morrison 305)

At minimum, a toxic tour of "Cancer Alley" publicizes the environmental injustices occurring in the region. I have attempted to illustrate how, along the Mississippi River, on the roads between Baton Rouge and New Orleans known as "Cancer Alley" (or "Cancer Death Alley"), toxic tours illuminate environmental justice struggles through cultural performances of memory within the forum enabled by chartered buses. By remembering histories along with Malek-Wiley, listening to Evans' analysis of corporate rhetoric, visiting the Holy Rosary Cemetery and the Ashland Estate, watching *Green*, and interacting amongst ourselves, the specter of environmental racism's historical and contemporary effects is made more present and significant through the tour. These cultural memories, voices, and sites perform as affective reminders of "what happened" and continues to happen in our environmentally unjust world. Drawing on the words of Morrison, the toxic tour is designed to "flood" our nerves and skin.

As cultural performances, not only are toxic tours produced by communities, but they also produce both intrinsic and extrinsic communities. The bus itself, a moving theater, enables contact among those on the bus and among those on the bus and locals. As Malek-Wiley indicates at the end of the tour, this growing sense of community is designed to enable an increased feeling of agency, a desire to act responsibly towards others within one's hopefully enlarged sense of community. Marking and reinventing sacralized sites in communities that would otherwise be sacrificed has not and will not be an easy endeavor; however, I hope the environmental justice and environmental movements are at the point that—in addition to our canon of cynical tales that remind us of how far we have left to go—we can begin to include more hopeful stories of collaboration. "The challenge to the new [and, I would add, the older] movement remains," as Jim Schwab explains, because they both have "a chance to contribute a perspective both new and very old that the world, in its current environmental crisis, solely needs. If we listen to each other, we may once again learn to listen to the earth" (419).

This essay has explored toxic tours as cultural performances negotiating the politics of memory, of presence and absence, of play and politics, and of remembering and forgetting. Within specific spatial and temporal frames, those who construct toxic tour performances ask those of us who tour to consider: What or who has been lost? What or who can we not represent? Which evidence has been presented or marked as absent? Whose history has been forgotten? Whose memory must be told? And, ultimately, what are we, the co-authors of these performances, going to do about environmental injustices?

By bringing writings on memory to bear on tourist performances, this essay has illustrated how a particular toxic tour draws on history and remembering as tropes to contest official tourist discourses and to sacralize its own version of "Life in Louisiana." Although the tour itself minimally cited examples of social reproduction (when we were informed of previous and subsequent toxic tours in the region), it extensively reflected the remaining four stages of sight sacralization outlined by MacCannell and extended by Fine and Speer. Naming—of the region (from "industrial corridor" to "Cancer Alley" to "Cancer Death Alley"), of Shell's relationship to Norco, and of what was worth preserving—was repeatedly highlighted on the tour. Framing and elevation—of the Norco community, of the lives of those who have passed, of the importance of toxic touring itself—was negotiated explicitly and implicitly as a vital means of contesting worth, what is sacred, and which histories should be told. The process of enshrinement on a toxic tour, as I have illustrated with the example of the Ashland estate, is transformed into an occasion to question authenticity, particularly of commonsense assumptions about tourist value itself. Finally, the photographs taken by participants during the tour, the film played at the end of the tour, and even this article published in *Text and Performance Quarterly*, suggest at least some of the forms of mechanical reproduction that reify the value of the tour experience.

This essay aimed to illustrate how drawing on theories and practices of performance may enable one to appreciate more fully the inventional possibilities of resistance. Since memory is not politically prescribed, contesting accounts of history with cultural performances, as was done on this toxic tour, is a risky process that is vital to those who are seeking social change. Indeed, the dialectical relationship

of performance with community suggests a need within specific contexts to consider who is *accountable* with respect to making a difference in and for toxically assaulted communities. " 'Accountability'," as Wright et al. argue, "has to become a key word in the environmental justice movement" (126–27). Yet, as Patraka notes: "Accountability is not the same as reverentiality: accountability leaves room for critical inquiry, for debate, and risks being more invitational" (8). We must persist, therefore, in asking questions of accountability in this more critical vein. Malek-Wiley seizes the opportunity to perform as a tour guide to construct his own public persona and to recall memories that may have been forgotten, both as a locus for constructing a collective identity and as a way of contesting currently oppressive practices. It would be interesting for future studies to compare how different toxic tours, or tours more broadly, rhetorically negotiate environmental accountability through performance.

This one toxic tour does not resolve the questions that trouble what work needs to be done, by whom, when, where, and how. Yet, I believe it does illustrate how toxic tours in general can move activists both on and off the bus closer together, flooding our cultural memories with what is left to be done when we (re)build our communities, contest official tourist histories, and recognize the worth of joining the movement for environmental justice.

Notes

[1] Many have argued how the 1896 "separate but equal" ruling reinscribed racist sanctions. For a compelling analysis on the performative and political dimensions of this case, see Robinson.

[2] "Even though Louisiana is a poor state, many of the giant corporations get special tax breaks. For example, thirty large corporations, many of which are major polluters, received $2.5 billion in Louisiana property tax exemptions in the 1980s. Only a few permanent new jobs resulted from these exemptions" (Wright et al. 113).

[3] Benjamin Chavis defines environmental racism as "racial discrimination in environmental policymaking, the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our [people of color] communities, and the history of excluding people of color from leadership of the environmental movement" (qtd. in Grossman 278). For further evidence, see Bullard, *Confronting*; Bullard, *Unequal*; Bullard and Wright; Lavelle and Coyle; United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice; United States.

[4] *Sight* sacralization may be more fully appreciated in the less ocularcentric sense of *site* sacralization, a process involving an entire space and not just what the eyes can see. Out of respect for MacCannell's initial writings on tourism and to avoid confusion, however, I retain the original wording of this phrase.

[5] Reflecting on Richard Schechner's company, The Performance Group, Turner writes: "Schechner aims at *poiesis*, rather than *mimesis*: making, not faking" (93). Conquergood explains the importance of this perspective to performance studies by stating that Turner "inspired a large number of able scholars to rethink the construction of culture and identity in terms of performance. Far from frills and fakery, performance events and processes, according to Turner, are the very stuff and heart of culture. After Turner, it is difficult for anyone to hold uncritically a 'mere sham and show' view of performance" ("Ethnography" 84).

[6] The Sierra Club is the oldest grassroots environmental organization in the United States, currently representing approximately 700,000 members (Sierra Club).

[7] I share Glesne's stance in adopting "a broad interpretation of ethnography … from the anthropological tradition of illuminating patterns of culture through long-term immersion in the field, collecting data primarily by participant-observation and interviewing. Analysis of this data focuses on description and interpretation of what people say and do" (5, 9). Since I am following the practice of toxic tours rather than focusing on one community, my larger project has warranted a "multi-sited ethnography" (Marcus 79–80).

[8] On the similarities of ethnographers and tourists, see: Edensor "Staging," *Tourists*; and MacCannell, *Empty*. As Clifford notes, "Ethnographic truths are … inherently *partial*—committed and incomplete" (7).

[9] Whiteness is a social construction that often consolidates power for those who are assumed "white" and obscures more complex ethnic histories (e.g., my ancestors were at least Italian, German, Cherokee, French, Swiss, Welsh, and Irish). A large body of literature on "whiteness" and "white privilege" exists, including Allen; Frankenberg; Ignatiev; Roediger; Segrest.

[10] Those attending primarily represented the initial six Sierra Club Environmental Justice Grassroots Organizing Program sites: Memphis, TN; Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles, CA; Detroit, MI; Arizona/New Mexico; and Central Appalachia.

[11] For more on the tensions and overlap between the environmental movement and the environmental justice movement, see Bullard, *Unequal*; Bullard and Wright; Cole and Foster; Ferris; Gottlieb; Lavelle and Coyle; Lawson.

[12] Perhaps the most popular referent is Spike Lee's film about the Million Man March, *Get On The Bus*, in which the bus line was named "The Spotted Owl." The film repeatedly cuts to the side of the bus, panning its logo as an apparent means of articulating the "endangered" state of black men with the high profile Pacific Northwest environmental controversy. Interestingly, Benjamin Chavis has served both as a pivotal leader of the environmental justice movement and as Louis Farrakhan's second in command at the Million Man March.

[13] Norco is an acronym for the New Orleans Refinery Company, which purchased a plant in 1916 located in the town, which was named Sellers at the time. Eventually, the town changed its name.

[14] On the rhetorical function of critical interruptions, see Pezzullo.

[15] For a summary of Western theories of community, see Depew and Peters, who argue that "the basic idea that communities are welded together by communication goes back as far as Aristotle's *Politics* [… in which he writes] that every state is a community (*koinonia*), which 'makes something one and common (*koinon*)' …" (3).

[16] Smith also handed out fliers for a local toxic tour that he was organizing one month later, a Celebrity Toxic Tour, including famous public figures such as writer Alice Walker, actor Mike Farrell, and Congresswoman Maxine Waters. On the Greenpeace website, an on-line version of this tour itinerary also is provided (*Celebrities*).

[17] This is not to dispute Massey's observation that "communities can exist without being in the same place" (153); rather, it is to acknowledge that sometimes "community" is articulated to a particular place. In this sense, as Massey notes, place is a "*meeting* place … areas with boundaries around, … articulated moments in networks of social relations and understanding, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent" (154).

[18] Relatedly, environmental communication scholars have developed arguments for the critical worth of "community" in their research; see, e.g., Cantrill; Peterson.

[19] Miller was a labor organizer for Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers (OCAW).

[20] In the early 1980s, "BASF Corporation, the U.S. subsidiary of the German multinational BASF, was on a union-busting spree across the country" (Schwab, 234). The BASF lockout of workers in Geismer, a town downriver from Baton Rouge, lasted three years and, in that time, brought together workers, environmentalists, and civil rights activists. It was the longest "lock-out" in US labor history (Wilson).

[21] For a fascinating series of articles on historical preservation and waste, see the special issue of *The Public Historian* entitled: "Junk It, or Junket?: Tourism and Historical Preservation in the Postindustrial World."

[22] "The plantation was built by Duncan Kenner in 1840 for his new bride, Anne Guillelimine Nanine Bringer … . Kenner named his home 'Ashland' after Henry Clay's Kentucky home … . In addition to preserving the 'great house,' archaeological digs have been conducted on the sites of the sugarhouse and two of the 30 slave cabins that once stood … . 'The Ashland-Belle Helene archaeological project … provides insight into the processing of cane in the sugarhouse and about the life of African Americans who toiled and lived on the plantation,' state archaeologist Thomas H. Eubanks writes" (Martin).

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