

# WHO KILLED NEW YORK CITY?: IMAGINATION, AUTHENTICITY, AND VIOLENCE IN CITY SOUVENIRS

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**Abstract:** *Despite decreasing crime numbers over the last 30 years, for some, New York City still has a reputation as an inherently violent city. In various souvenir shops across the city, select souvenirs indulge in this reputation by depicting New York City as a place where grittiness, violence, and crime are essential to the experience of “real” New York. This essay meditates on the implications of such souvenirs, as they play on the fears, desires, and imagination of travellers. To illustrate these points, I use a series of black-and-white photos made in December 2020 depicting scenes from a cluster of souvenir shops in Lower Manhattan.*

**Keywords:** *urban anthropology, visual anthropology, tourist imaginaries, place and space, authenticity, violence, New York City*

## Introduction

At the intersection of New York City’s Little Italy and Chinatown is a dense cluster of rival souvenir stores selling identical items: New York snow globes, Statue of Liberty figures, Donald Trump bobbleheads, NYPD hats, “personalized” keychains, and a host of items with the well-known “I love NY” logo. These shops are all brightly lit, tightly packed, and filled floor to ceiling with merchandise that boldly declares “I went to New York and have the objects to



Figure 1. Mulberry and Hester at the intersection of Chinatown and Little in Lower Manhattan. Photo: Ryan Christopher Jones, 2020.

prove it”. One shop plays songs by rappers Post Malone and Lil Nas X, and another shop deploys battery-powered stuffed animals at the store’s entrance, where they bark, chirp, and yap ad nauseam. Somewhere in the distance the first four bars of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” play in constant repetition, and the melody blends with passing sidewalk conversations in a wide variety of languages.

These kinds of souvenir shops are mainstays near Times Square, Broadway, Little Italy, and the neighbourhood around One World Trade Center – iconic areas that have high tourist value but struggle to be seen as the elusive *real New York* by many locals. Over the last ten years, columnists have bemoaned the death of New York City, arguing it has lost its distinct *je ne sais quoi* to corporate interests (Baker 2018; Baker 2017; Moss 2017). It is a sentiment among both New Yorkers and urban scholars that hyper-gentrification and widespread commercialization has stripped New York of its gritty, old-school soul (Zukin 2010, 1). This *new* New York can be seen in the commercial behemoth of Hudson



Figure 2. Stenciled graffiti with “the rich killd [sic] NYC” on a streetlamp in Dumbo, Brooklyn. Photo: Ryan Christopher Jones, 2021.

Yards (Sennett 2020, 12), a “Disneyfied” Times Square, or the capitalist sprawl of Billionaire’s Row<sup>1</sup>. It can be seen in the torrent of new banks and designer stores, some of which occupy the formerly legendary spaces of punk music venue, CBGBs, and East Village dive bar, Mars Bar. Over the last few years, a recurring graffiti tag has appeared throughout the city’s boroughs on building walls, sidewalks, and public fixtures, with stenciled lettering that “the rich killd [sic] NYC” (Figure 2). Although violent crime is down nearly 78% in the last 27 years (NYPD CompStat Unit 2020), some New York City souvenirs – along with popular film and TV – still often play into the idea that New York City is a hard, unforgiving, and inherently dangerous place. New York City’s turn towards neoliberal interests has changed the city into a more commercial and homogenized urban space – and some would argue cleaner and safer – but I will

<sup>1</sup> Billionaire’s Row is a growing group of luxury skyscrapers lining the southern edge of New York’s Central Park.

present here the idea that the imaginaries of a violent New York City still live in both the minds of tourists and in some souvenirs that sell the city as a more dangerous version of its former self.

This project examines a particular subset of souvenirs that tend to exploit urban grittiness and proximity to danger as an authentic New York City experience. Sold at the nexus of Chinatown and Little Italy – two neighbourhoods with deep ethnic histories – these souvenirs contribute to the collective experience of “authenticity” in a dense, urban geography where the streets themselves contribute to the “delicate fabric of social uses and cultural meanings” (Zukin 2010, 219). This photo essay is a microethnography that heavily incorporates photography; while it uses participant observations and brief street interviews, it is not meant to function as an exhaustive ethnography of Lower Manhattan. The use of photography illustrates scenes I observed on three occasions in December 2020 as international travel was limited and no COVID-19 vaccines were available to the public.

Regarding the term *imaginary*, Claudia Strauss (2006) writes that it is primarily understood as an anthropological concept from three theoretical models: Cornelius Castoriadis’s interpretation that an imaginary is the cultural ethos of a place and “the central world view associated with a particular group” (ibid., 329); the Jacques Lacan viewpoint that “imaginary” is an individual person’s fantasy built on illusion emerging from psychological need (ibid., 328); or philosopher Charles Taylor’s definition that the “modern social imaginary” is the way we imagine our society based off deeply held and widely shared cultural and symbolic models (Strauss 2006, 329, 331). Considering the few examples here and the many more omitted, the term *imaginary* has become obfuscated by ambiguity and inconsistent usage (Stankiewicz 2016) and in the realm of tourism, Michael Di Giovine writes that “there are as many tourist imaginaries as tourists” (2014, 436).

While these many interpretations are all relevant to the discussion of the imaginary in the anthropological sense, Noel Salazar merges “tourism imaginaries” into a definition of “socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people’s personal imaginings and are used as world-making and world-shaping devices” (Salazar 2012, 864). This definition encompasses both Lacan’s definition of an individual set of beliefs and expectations with Castoriadis and Taylor’s definitions, which are more broadly societal and cultural. Salazar’s definition is rooted in the imaginary of place, as imaginaries often manifest outside of the mind and in the material world, where they make

tangible abstract narratives of places and ideas (Di Giovine 2014). In a similar vein, B. D. Wortham-Galvin (2008, 32) writes that “places are both real and imagined: they depend on mental association as well as physical shape and character”. Tourism is an act comprised of both myth and materiality, so place becomes the theatre in which tourists perform their imaginaries (Baerenholdt 2017) and turn their ideas into lived experiences.

Two imaginaries must be considered in relation to this article: those that are both produced by souvenir manufacturers and peddled by the souvenir shops, and also the imaginaries of the individual tourists and the expectations they import from their pre-constructed understanding (Leite 2014, 436) of New York City. Here I will consider the ways that tourists broadly imagine New York, Chinatown, and Little Italy, though some of these imaginaries will extend to how visitors imagine the United States. “New York” is both a city and a state, but “New York City” and “New York” will be used interchangeably here, as the context here is entirely about the city of New York.

For many, New York is an urban imaginary that indulges us to be the fantasy versions of ourselves: New York allows us to say what we want to say, wear what we want to wear, or be as loud, abrasive, and bold as we can be. In this tourist bubble (Salazar and Graburn 2014, 93) of chaos and imagination also exists a paradox of anonymity: it is easy to blend into a vast sea of humans and buildings in New York City, as it provides an anonymous social canopy that may not be possible in smaller towns across the country and world (Annes and Redlin 2012, 257). Freedom of identity thrives in places where a person is no longer tethered to their quotidian or normative obligations, and New York City – even for a brief vacation – can cultivate this newfound sense of self-expression as part of an “identity quest ... to a place whose physical and/or social qualities are consonant with his or her inner proclivities” (Zelinsky 2001, 139).

## **Black and White Photography**

The photographs presented here are solely in black and white. Aesthetically, these souvenir shops are filled with thousands of mostly small objects fighting for limited physical and visual space. While colour photos would show the colour and hue of these many objects, for our purposes here the colour of a souvenir is ultimately not as important as the social and symbolic space it occupies. So instead, these black-and-white photos ease the viewer’s gaze of chaotic scenes by



Figure 3. An American flag is used as a brand logo for a piece of luggage sold in a Lower Manhattan souvenir shop. Photo: Ryan Christopher Jones, 2020.

removing colour from an already chaotic setting – this choice allows the viewer to meditate on the quantitative elements of *form* and *shape*.

Furthermore, this photo essay is about the way people imagine a store, a city, and a country. It reflects the ways that tourists balance fantasy and reality in a fantastical city. To remove colour and keep these photos in black and white is to conceptually invite a viewer to use their own imagination to colour the city. It is not a didactic declaration of an objective reality, but a request to experience New York City as a tourist and subjective observer. The visual language of black-and-white imagery has a long history in the documentation of war and conflict. As Susan Sontag writes, “There is something predatory in the act of taking a picture” (Sontag 1977, 10). I do not have the space here to pontificate on the philosophy of aesthetics, but I will note that despite the topic of violence in this essay, the photos contained therein have no depiction of violence or suffering. I challenge the viewer to observe and consider the more imaginative qualities of black and white over the “dark vision of humanity” (Duncombe 2016, 49)



Figure 4. A man walks in front of Jay's closed souvenir shop in December 2020. Photo: Ryan Christopher Jones, 2020.

that black and white documentary photos often project. So while the photos presented here are not violent themselves, they function as representations of sometimes violent imaginaries of New York City.

### T-Shirt as Symbolic Capital

On a cold Sunday afternoon in December 2020, a young woman walked into a souvenir shop in Lower Manhattan and casually asked, “Do you have a ‘Fuck you, you fucking fuck’ T-shirt?” Without missing a beat, the store’s proprietor said plainly, “Yeah, they’re right over here” and he walked the woman over to the small corner in the front of the store consisting mostly of garish and crude shirts. The woman was a New York local and not a tourist, though she said she always wanted this shirt. She asked her partner if she should get a larger size so that it drapes, or a smaller size that is more form-fitting. She opted for the larger version and paid \$10 cash.

The shop is named Cool T-Shirts, Inc., and it is one of two adjacent stores co-owned by Jay and his father, Makesh, who immigrated to New York City over 40 years ago from Afghanistan (see Figure 5). The shops are at 185 and 187 Hester Street between Mott Street and Mulberry Street, near the diverse intersection of Manhattan's Chinatown and Little Italy. Jay says the “fuck you you fuckin’ fuck” shirt is the best-selling item at the store. He points to the six different spots where the shirt hangs on the store’s exterior alone. He says it catches people’s attention and often makes them laugh, but laughable kitsch and good location is not enough to withstand the pandemic economy: the \$10 “fuck you” shirt was one of the store’s only six sales for the whole day – a total of \$136.93 and a meagre dent in the business’s \$7,500 monthly rent (temporarily down from \$15,000/month). Sales are so bad that he only opens the shop Friday to Sunday, as poor weekday sales don’t recoup the money he spends on gas to drive in from Long Island or the hard costs to turn the shop’s lights on.

At a shop across the street from Jay’s, a vendor paces around inside, then outside, looking for people to walk along the uncrowded sidewalks. Someone stops, fingers through some shirts, and asks for a certain size of a particular shirt. Pictured clockwise from bottom left (see Figure 6) are T-shirts depicting Jimi Hendrix (Seattle guitarist), Nipsey Hussle (slain Los Angeles rapper), Pablo Escobar (Colombian drug lord), and Bruce Lee (Hong Kong–American martial artist and actor). The Bangladeshi merchant is touching a T-shirt that says “Brooklyn” yet the shop is located in Manhattan. It is important to note that none of the men pictured here (including the merchant) are originally from New York or even the East Coast, yet they still live in tourist spaces as an active part of the New York imagination.

All of the people depicted in these T-shirts are men and people of colour who suffered tragic deaths before they reached the age of 45. As entertainers, actors, and even a drug lord, they are seen in some capacity as folk heroes, or in Escobar’s case, a folk villain. Hasan El-Shamy writes that folk figures are “depicted as the center of action in real or fictitious accounts of life and living” (El-Shamy 2011, 650–656) and the characteristics embodied by these heroes and villains function as “the marketing of identity traits as commodities for sale” within a tourist landscape (Swain 2014, 186). These T-shirts reinforce the idea that New York City is an experiential place where personal and existential transformation can occur, where people can evolve from ordinary to extra-ordinary and move from safe spaces to violent ones. Souvenirs such as these T-shirts are especially powerful mechanisms for reifying the intangible, as tourists are

constantly finding the proof or evidence that their imaginaries about New York City turn into experiences of urban authenticity (Salazar and Graburn 2014, 31). That all these shirts depict only men subtly implies that New York City is an exciting yet sometimes violent playground for the masculine.

These representations of popular culture sell the idea that life is an active performance to be consumed – one that is risky, dangerous, exhilarating, outward, and transformative. These factors contribute to the ethos of New York as a place where people can indulge in fantasy versions of their lives, and the images of the depicted T-shirt icons can subconsciously reinforce that imaginary to visiting tourists. It makes no difference that these people are not New Yorkers: their imagery and legacy transcends geography. These powerful imaginings of a fluid identity move even more freely than people do, as Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson write, “in a world of diaspora, transnational culture flows, and ... old-fashioned attempts to map the globe as set of culture regions or homelands are bewildered by a dazzling array of postcolonial simulacra, doublings and redoublings” (1992, 10).

In describing the fetishist fantasies by white Western woman of Black Masai men in Kenya, Jonathan Skinner and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos write of George Paul Meiu’s research where “the bodies of exotic men can be transformed into value-laden objects of desire that incorporate Western stereotypes about beauty and cruelty, pleasure and danger” (Skinner and Theodossopoulos 2011, 16). Though the explicit connotations of colonial sexualization are not the same here, the visualizations of “exotic” men in the T-shirts represent some element of desire for the purchaser and wearer of the shirt. By wearing the value-laden image of an icon like Hendrix or Lee, the tourist is seen by others as sharing the same physical space with someone from a public mythology; someone who is a cultural icon. This proximity to fame and fantasy boosts the tourist’s personality – a geographically centred experience that accumulates “symbolic capital” by ways of ego and personality enhancement (Salazar and Graburn 2014, 17). Kirsten Adkins cites Barbara Bolt, who asks us to consider that imagery has the power to transcend mere representation into performance: “We are asked not simply to experience the image, but to live the image, perhaps

Figure 5 (next two pages). Makesh (lower right), rearranges souvenirs at Cool T-Shirts Inc., the souvenir shop in Lower Manhattan he owns with his son.  
Photo: Ryan Christopher Jones, 2020.







Figure 6. A shop owner looks through T-shirts for a potential customer. Photo: Ryan Christopher Jones, 2020.

to be the image” (Adkins 2014, 332). As part of the escapist allure of visiting New York City, the shirt becomes a proxy for the power these icons represent, and the person wearing the shirt becomes a vessel for transmitting that power to the people around them.

Some of the suggestive T-shirts found in many NYC souvenir shops (Figure 7) are not specific to New York and would likely be found in many souvenir shops across the country. In addition to incorporating cultural icons, many of these T-shirts depict aggressive language, sexuality, and drug and alcohol consumption, and taken as a whole, they sustain the New York tourist imaginary as a place to be experienced with rebellion and risk (Figure 7).<sup>2</sup> They

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<sup>2</sup> These T-shirts (seen in Figure 7) also suggest other meanings that contribute to a more complex but still stereotypical understanding of New York and the US, for example, liberal values (marijuana), and political progressive movements and ideas (Black Lives Matter), mixed with right-wing slogans (Make America Great Again).



Figure 7. T-shirts at a souvenir shop in Lower Manhattan. Photo: Ryan Christopher Jones, 2020.

communicate the idea that New York is where you can be the version of yourself you can't be anywhere else, and that you can express yourself freely in public without condemnation from local neighbours, friends, parishioners, schoolmates, or co-workers. The souvenirs become an extension or a multiplication of identity, and as Naomi Leite writes, these purchases indulge imaginaries and “continually crystallize in material form” (Leite 2014, 447).

### Chinatown vs Little Italy: “Ethnic Theme Park”

The biggest point of neighbourhood tension was observed when groups of Chinese-American merchants showed up on the streets to sell knockoff handbags and watches (Figure 8) – a practice well known and documented in Chinatown (Guest 2011). Jay and his father say that these merchants are the biggest threat to the neighbourhood’s tourist economy. Jays tells me these mobile merchants clutter the street and deter customers from walking into his store:

By the time a tourist gets to our shop in the middle of the street, they already spent all their money on those bags. Those vendors sell illegally but they scatter before the cops can issue them tickets, and as soon as the cops leave, they're back on the corner in two minutes. They have no overhead like we do. I once got a fine for having the door open while the heater was on inside, and these guys [*points to the handbag sellers*] don't have to deal with any of that bullshit. It's crazy that we are getting punished for trying to do the right thing (personal communication, 6 December 2020)

Jan Lin echoes the same sentiment: "The City of New York has historically been antagonistic toward the ethnic street trader. Mobile vendors and peddlers were perceived to cause street congestion and to compete directly with retail stores occupying private property" (1998, 159). Lin writes that Chinatown experienced an economic downturn in the early 1990s that inspired some Chinatown residents to begin street trading, yet a public suspicion that many street vendors were undocumented immigrants increased negative public perception and discrimination against the group (*ibid.*, 160).

The COVID-19 pandemic has put much of the world's economy into a recession that borders on a depression. In New York City, the confluence of exorbitant city rent prices and widespread unemployment could potentially contribute to an increase of street vendors operating under the informal economy in the near future. But recent reporting by the *New York Times* has shown that even street vendors – under the threat of precarious immigration statuses and a city strapped for cash – cannot escape the dire economy either (Arrendondo and Gonzalez 2020).

It is easy to understand the resentment that Jay and the other shop owners feel: the Chinese-American handbag dealers are much busier and they sell their merchandise at a far higher rate than Jay does. The selling of these bags was the only illegal activity I observed in the area, yet no one can deny their incredible popularity. Tripadvisor and internet forums describe the best ways to obtain counterfeit bags, and for many, getting a Chinatown knockoff is a tourist badge of honour: something that adds to a tourist's experience of the authentic, gritty, and somewhat dangerous New York City experience (Deener 2017, 364). It is an active participation in luxury, illegality, consumerism, and ethnic trade: a perfect encapsulation of a New York fantasy for visitors unaccustomed to any or all of those ideas in their everyday lives.

Tensions between the Chinese-American and Italian-American communities in Lower Manhattan have been long simmering, as various waves of immigration throughout the 20th century pushed and pulled neighbourhood boundaries at various times (Conforti 1996, 834; Krase 2017, 201). Though both Chinatown and Little Italy have become dominated by mainstream commercialization in the last two decades, Little Italy was toured as an authentic New York “ghetto” as recently as the mid-nineties (Conforti 1996). These tours played up derogatory stereotypes of Italians, where the exotic “Other” could be observed and “a lurking danger (as the home of the Mafia) can be sensed” (ibid., 831).

Even today, the souvenirs sold in Little Italy often invoke Italian tropes largely related to *The Godfather*, *The Sopranos*, or a general mafia presence. Kenneth A. Ciongoli and Jay Parini claim that *The Godfather* seems to have held up an image of Italian-American life that has obliterated the reality” (Ciongoli and Parini 1998, xiii), and the movie’s lasting legacy has mythologized how people imagine Italian-Americans in New York, both in the past and present. These forces of mythic fantasy are so powerful that Italian-Americans must constantly defend themselves against the cultural assumption that the overarching culture of Italian-Americans “is in its essence criminal” (Gambino 1997, 274). Italian restaurants and pizza places all over New York City are filled with images of *The Godfather*, *Scarface*, *The Sopranos*. These images and souvenirs that glorify organized crime perpetuate the cultural bias against Italian-Americans, which implies “the Mafia myth found in so many films and TV shows about Italian-Americans is taken as history” (Gambino 1997, 272).

As the boundaries between Chinatown and Little Italy ebbed and flowed with much conflict throughout the 19th century, Jerome Krase writes that the ethnic exclusivity of a truly Italian Little Italy ultimately succumbed to the commercial dominance of big-city tourism (2004, 202). The visual collision of Chinese-Americans and Italian-Americans in these neighbourhoods created what Krase damningly defines as “Ethnic Theme Parks”, which are performative spaces “preserved as spectacles for the appreciation of tourists” (2004, 36). These spaces maintain the optics of an ethnic enclave without any of its function as a real neighbourhood for and by local Italian-Americans. Within the context of the tourist gaze, these commodified “Ethnic Theme Parks” function as “human zoos” where “the subjects of curiosity are maintained in their live state” (ibid.), and tourists can fulfil the experiential obligation of witnessing so-called “authentic” people in their natural surroundings. Souvenirs that depict



Figure 8. Chinese-American merchants sell knock-off handbags at Mulberry and Hester. Photo: Ryan Christopher Jones, 2020.

Italian-American culture as essentially criminal (Figures 9 and 11) actively contribute to the notion of Little Italy as an “Ethnic Theme Park” by commodifying ethnic culture. Through this experience of placemaking and mythologizing stereotyped Italian-American culture, tourists use souvenir-buying as a form of entertainment much like watching *The Godfather* or *Goodfellas*.

### **Violence as Urban Authenticity**

In a 1995 episode of the TV sitcom *Seinfeld*, Kramer sees a bus of German tourists on a local street where he walks with George. He quickly fashions his hand into a gun, presses it into his jacket and forces the “gun” into George’s chest, saying “for these German tourists, pretend that I’m robbing you”. “Why?” George asks. Kramer replies, “So these people can go home and tell their friends they saw a real New York mugging” (Ackerman 1995). It’s a somewhat silly, anecdotal pop-culture reference, but it speaks directly to the idea that the



Figure 9. A mafia-themed souvenir license plate at a souvenir shop on Hester Street.  
Photo: Ryan Christopher Jones, 2020.

authentic experience of New York is one that includes brushes with violence. We can assume no visitor eagerly wants to be the victim of assault in New York City as evidence of some dark tourist experience, which I explain below. However, objects like violent T-shirts and scenarios like the *Seinfeld* episode indicate that the witnessing of some theoretical urban violence would indeed contribute to an “authentically” New York experience.

Ning Wang argues that tourism is a vehicle for people to escape their inauthentic daily lives (1999, 353) “not because they find the toured objects are authentic but simply because they are engaging in non-ordinary activities, free from the constraints of the daily” (ibid., 353). If New York City is a prime destination for fantasy as previously noted, then even extreme, possibly violent departures from the tourist’s normalcy could be seen not as a qualitatively good experience, but an *authentic* one, which confirms the participatory realness of the urban experience that stands in direct opposition to the tourist’s quotidian lives (Bunten 2014, 150). Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin argue through



Figure 10. A T-shirt perpetuates the idea that New York is still a violent city. Photo: Ryan Christopher Jones, 2020.

a Marxist perspective that desire for authenticity in tourism is a “reaction to the alienation felt in everyday modern life” (Handler and Linnekin, in Salazar and Graburn 2014, 151). This desire for authentic experiences is an attempt for tourists to not just witness realness in a new place but to feel authentic themselves (Bunten 2014, 150). To break out of the tourist bubble and into the lived, local environment is what André Jansson describes as “authenticity feel” (2021, 47): interacting with the textures of urban life in a way that makes the tourist “lose oneself” in authentic experience (ibid., 40). Dean MacCannell writes that this “chance to glimpse the real” (2001, 36) is the primary driver for tourism’s never-ending quest for authenticity, and it is a focus that both host destinations and traveling visitors actively pursue (Robb 2009, 55).

Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman write that “images of trauma are part of our political economy” (1997, 8), which inevitably influence the ways that tourists will imagine and create narratives about people and places, both local and foreign. Traumatic images subconsciously produce fantasies “about



Figure 11. The T-shirt in the centre depicts the scope of a rifle or gun, with the word *mafia* in its bullseye. The shirt also locates Little Italy. Photo: Ryan Christopher Jones, 2020.

what places of violence might smell or feel like” (Robb 2009, 53) and these sentiments are at the heart of dark tourism, which is a growing industry in which tourists travel to destinations where violence and suffering are the main attractions. Dark tourism locations can represent past traumas like the gas chambers at Auschwitz or Alabama’s lynching memorial, or present ones, like the witnessing of current suffering on favela tourism tours in Rio or the thousands of tourists who gazed upon New Orleans as it still suffered from Hurricane Katrina (Robb 2009, 57). Both MacCannell (2001) and Wang (1999) claim that society’s increasing desire for authenticity stems from the alienation produced by late-capitalism (Olsen 2002, 160), which allows dark tourism to push the boundaries of social and ethical boundaries in search of something that is unmanufactured by the existing commercial culture.

In New York City, the 9/11 Memorial has turned Lower Manhattan into one of the world’s most visited dark tourist sites. Twenty years later, millions of yearly visitors tour Ground Zero and its surrounding areas, which include



Figure 12. A group of people walk down Mulberry Street in December 2020. Photo: Ryan Christopher Jones, 2020.

Chinatown and Little Italy, memorializing and grieving the nearly 3,000 New Yorkers who died on September 11, 2001. These visitors have “responded [to 9/11] in ways that evoked both mourning and tourism – they looked shocked, they cried, and they took photographs of what they saw” (Dalton 2015, 153). While admittedly on the distant fringes of dark tourism, the T-shirts sold in New York souvenir shops that play into violent imaginaries still exploit the urban expectations of visitors touring New York City. As powerful carriers of material culture (Graburn and Salazar 2014, 31), these souvenirs “capture and confirm the essence of the imaginary that [the tourists] brought with them” (ibid., 31). When considering the element of violence in the discussion of what is *real* New York versus what is not, tourists must be careful, as Kjell Olsen deftly observes that “when atrocity becomes a recreational attraction, visitors are themselves inflicting further violence as they search out unique and ‘authentic’ experiences” (Olsen 2002, 54).



Figure 13. Jay watches the security cameras in his shop, hoping for customers to walk in. Photo: Ryan Christopher Jones, 2020.

## COVID-19

Jay constantly watches the security cameras, his head bobbing between his phone and the TV. The dire conditions for the tourism industry during the COVID-19 pandemic makes Jay obsess about every potential customer. A group of four male tourists walk by the shop, and one briefly stops to rub the fabric of a white sweatshirt with “New York City” embroidered on the chest. Jay sees the group and he bolts outside. The tourists ask Jay how much for the sweatshirt. \$24.99, Jay says, and the man scoffs and walks away while saying “it was twenty over there” and walks in the opposite direction of ‘over there.’

“That’s what it’s like all day, every day”, he says in December 2020. Jay gave me permission to photograph the souvenir shop over the course of two full days in December; I had permission to observe and interview customers so long as I did not interfere with a sale. When customers were present I observed from a distance and approached Jay after they left the store. I spoke with Jay



Figure 14. A for-sale souvenir shop on Mulberry Street in December 2020. Photo: Ryan Christopher Jones, 2020.

throughout the day as he waited for approaching customers; through casual, recorded interviews Jay spoke candidly to me about his experience as a souvenir merchant.

In a different interaction with another group of prospective customers, two Spanish-speaking women sneer at a blue hoodie when Jay says he could sell it to them for \$7. When they walk out of the shop Jay tells me that \$7 is less than his cost for the hoodie, but he's at a point where he simply needs to get rid of merchandise. "Right now I'm not looking to profit, I'm looking for money to pay rent", he says.

The pandemic has brutalized Jay's business and every month he goes deeper into debt because he and his father must pay rent from their own pockets. At an average of \$70 to \$100 in sales per day they are open (Friday through Sunday), they now average \$1,000 a month in sales. Jay and every other souvenir merchant I observed at Hester Street and Mulberry Street all hustle at every remote chance to make even a small sale. Jay said that at the end of December 2020 he and



Figure 15. A man carries balloons down Hester Street. Photo: Ryan Christopher Jones, 2020.

his father would reassess the shop’s viability – if they determine that the shop could not survive the winter, they will close down and put their merchandise into storage with the hope of opening a new store when the pandemic subsides and tourism recovers. On the second weekend I went to visit Jay, both of the shops were closed without any sign to indicate when they would re-open.

In a brief phone interview with Jay in April 2021, he says that they are still technically in business, but barely hanging on. His father opens the shop only on occasion and with no consistency: “Sometimes on a Friday, sometimes on a Saturday, but I don’t even go there anymore. There’s no tourists: who’s gonna buy New York stuff now?” He says they are still paying upwards to \$7,500 a month in rent and the few days the store is open, they make “not even \$100” in sales” per day even after the weather is starting to get nicer and the city is slowly starting to open up. He now works for someone else, picking up shifts as a cashier at a local liquor store on Long Island. He and his father have still not decided whether or not they will close for good.



Figure 16. Jay waits for customers outside his souvenir shop on Hester Street. Photo: Ryan Christopher Jones, 2020.

## Conclusion

I observed two tourists scoop random handfuls of keychains into buckets, and between the two of them they bought 40 for \$40. I observed a family look through a shelf of T-shirts, then briskly walk away, annoyed, when they discovered they couldn't be purchased for \$2 each. I watched three young women haggle with Jay for two minutes over sweatpants, and after he offered them for 50% off they walked away and said "we'll be back", but never did return. From what I observed, customers and potential customers showed they simply did not value the objects in these shops beyond them being low-cost commodities. Shops like Cool T-Shirts prompt cheap and easy spending, and for the most part, the souvenir purchases made at these shops never seem to be considered with careful intention.

The objects here rely on easily reducible notions of New York that don't challenge the city's stereotypes. Based on the observed purchasing behaviour and my brief interviews at the point of sale, these souvenirs were not found to



Figure 17. A Statue of Liberty figure in the window of a closed souvenir shop in Little Italy.  
 Photo: Ryan Christopher Jones, 2020.

be, as Kristen K. Swanson and Dallen J. Timothy argue, “memento[s]...with heightened meaning and symbolic transcendence” (2012, 491). Tiny Statues of Liberty, vulgar T-shirts, plastic keychains, Trump bubbleheads, and personalized license plates are unlikely to be the kinds of sentimental souvenirs that will live forever on a family’s storied walls or cherished shelves, but instead will end up in drawers or boxes of accumulated clutter. In these souvenir shops, tourists appear to favour convenience and speed over ritual (Salazar and Graburn 2014, 11) and meaning-making (Swanson and Timothy 2012, 490), as these objects represent the part of American culture that is mass produced, cheaply sourced and quickly forgettable. They represent apathetic impulse buys over thoughtful memory building, and fast tourism – like fast food – is a quick fix when you need something now.

Souvenir shops like Cool T-Shirts are ubiquitous and repeatable spaces that cater to the transient visitor. They do not make tourists feel like their

experience of New York was special or custom, because if someone doesn't purchase a "I Love NY" shirt at Jay's shop, they can do that at another twenty shops in the vicinity that sell the exact same one. In Marc Augé's terms (1995, 86) these souvenir shops are the archetype of "non-places": supermodern spaces born of late-capitalist consumption; "banal utopia[s]" (ibid., 95) that "are there to be passed through" (ibid., 104). They sell commodities with "few emotional attachments" (Swanson and Timothy 2012, 490), and while there has historically been a great need for mass-produced souvenirs, one must wonder how shops that primarily sell them will survive in the wake of COVID-19.

The September 11 terrorist attacks forever changed the way that both New Yorkers and the rest of the world imagine New York City: the resilient and intractable city of dreams was dealt an incalculable nightmare that forced the city to consider its vulnerabilities. In this meditation on violence and imagination, I'm left to wonder how the COVID-19 pandemic will affect the way New York City is imagined in the future. As of late July 2021, over 33,000 people died from COVID-19 in New York City – over ten times the number of deaths from 9/11. Will Elmhurst Hospital or city morgues become new, unsettling destinations for future dark tourists to New York City? Will there be COVID-19 memorials in the city for tourists to mourn and grieve, and will there be souvenirs sold? What will authentic experiences look like after much of our social world has collapsed under the weight of a global pandemic? Will there still be an appetite for mass-produced souvenirs, or will travel-hungry tourists be more focused on more meaningful or experiential remembrances? Conversely, will New York become more a place of pure play disconnected from the trauma much of the world shared throughout the pandemic? How has the pandemic changed our concepts of travel, exploration, and foreignness when much of the world continues to find itself in various states of social suffering? New York City was the first and hardest hit city in the world to experience widespread devastation from COVID-19 – for people who will soon be traveling to New York again, how will evolving notions of authenticity, fantasy, risk, and danger live in the imagination of a New York tourist in a post-pandemic world?

Crude T-shirts and kitsch souvenirs may seem like unconventional objects to investigate complex social themes, but they are material extensions of the ways that we make meaning in new places. Augé's earlier declaration that modernity produces objects of little emotional value is challenged by Jane Bennett, who argues that things – even cheap, tacky things like souvenirs – are vibrant and vivid entities. As was demonstrated through examples of T-shirts in

this essay, these inexpensive and man-made items can “exceed their status as objects” and even “manifest traces of independence or aliveness” (2010). Cheap T-shirts are seemingly simple objects, but once bought and worn, are given new life and transport ideas about one location back to a tourist’s home, where their physical presence will continue to both challenge and reinforce how the tourist imagines New York as lived experience (Swanson and Timothy 2012, 490).

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