



# War-Zone Tourism: Thinking Beyond Voyeurism and Danger

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## Abstract

Tourism to active war-zones appears to be growing in popularity. Internet searches on the topic indicate that two main issues about this trend have captured the public imaginary: (1) debates about its voyeuristic aspects, and, (2) concerns about the dangers it presents for tourists. In this commentary I suggest that these two preoccupations, in fact, distract us from more disconcerting and complex power dynamics at play in war-zone tourism and propose a reframing of the types of public debates and discussions the topic has provoked. Borrowing from the work of Debbie Lisle (2000), I suggest that more pertinent and productive questions to contemplate pertain to why this tourism trend is growing in popularity at this point in history as well as what subjects are made possible through war-zone tourism encounters. Focusing on media representations of one U.S. based specialized tour operator called War Zone Tours, I argue that what we ought to be concerned with are the ways in which these touristic practices promote a culture of comfort with militarization and privatization of security services, as well as the demarcation practices between Global North tourists and Global South “locals” that are naturalized and perpetuated through them.

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In June 2014, I came upon an article with the title “The rise of dark tourism: When war-zones become travel destinations”. Written by journalist Deborah Kamin and published by the political magazine *The Atlantic*, it focused on what was described as a growing niche tourism market whereby people voluntarily travel to geopolitical areas/zones where military conflicts are active. Given the regular news reports of people risking their lives to flee from war-torn countries, I was initially taken aback with the thought that some willingly venture into these areas. As a researcher who has examined the racialized power dynamics within various forms of humanitarian/activist political travel to war and conflict zones (Mahrouse, 2014; 2011), I was especially intrigued with the fact that now one can simply “tour” war-zones. That is, unlike other ventures into war-zones undertaken with the intention of helping, I was curious about how such tours are being offered as a type of thrill-seeking adventure travel. Wanting to know more, I began gathering a loose collection of materials from Internet searches using the terms “war tourism” and “danger tourism.”

My searches readily turned up myriad guidebooks, films, and websites of tour operators that promote or sell travel to some of the most troubled places in the world. Examples ranged from articles with the heading “10 Most Dangerous Places You Should Definitely Visit” (Bryant, 2009) to excerpts from the familiar *Lonely Planet* budget-travel guidebooks – which in a 2007 edition for Afghanistan suggested activities such as patrolling with the Afghan army, clearing land mines, and meeting warlords and rebel leaders (Warner, 2008). Other examples included *The World's Most Dangerous Places* (Pelton, 2003) – a book now in its 5th edition – or the popular *VICE* Magazine Travel Guides and films about dramatic journeys to places such as Liberia and North Korea.

I also found a number of reports from media outlets that have focused on the growing popularity of this trend. One was a 2013 feature in *The Guardian* entitled “Holidays in danger zones,” which glamorized journeys to countries that most travel advisories warn against (e.g. Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Pakistan). It also listed specialized tour operators that go to these regions. Similarly, another article published in the *Daily Mail* under the headline “See where the fighting is actually taking place,” focused on tours through the conflicted areas of the Ukraine, which provided tourists flak jackets and armed guards (Driver, 2014). Some ran under sensationalist headlines such as “Rather chat up a warlord than lie on a beach? Try a dangerous-places tour” (Clark, 2010). Others were presented as “human interest” types of stories about individuals. These included a report in the *New York Times* on a tourist from Japan who went to Syria from where he posted graphic dispatches of the battle to Facebook (Somaiya, 2013). Another focused on a Swedish father who, concerned about his sons’ attraction to violent video games like “Call of Duty,” sought to show them the actual impacts of war by taking them to witness the conflict in Israel/Palestine (Rundquist, 2014). More recently, CNN reported on Andrew Drury, a husband, father and the owner of a successful construction company from Surrey in the UK

who has for twenty years “led a double life” by visiting the world's most dangerous destinations including “the insurgent heartlands of Afghanistan” (Monks, 2016).

Combing through these materials, I noticed that the same two themes kept coming up. The first was debates about the educational virtues versus the harms of voyeurism in war-zone tourism. Some reporters – such as the one who wrote about the father who took his sons to Israel/Palestine – raised questions about the potential to educate and sensitize people by showing them the effects of war up-close. Similarly, the message that comes through the aforementioned CNN article is that seeing is learning. In it, James Wilcox, founder of British tour company Untamed Borders, is quoted stating: “We take people to places that are difficult to access and give them a variety of experiences – the geopolitical stories... the culture and history.... We try to see countries for the complex places they are and not a broad stereotype” (Monks, 2016). Other reports prompt readers to reflect on the ethics of the voyeuristic practices that war zone tourism entails more generally (see Peisner, 2012; Freedman, 2010). The latter was perhaps most vivid in a description in *The Atlantic* feature article which described people “armed with binoculars and cameras, eager for a glimpse of smoke and even carnage” (Kamin, 2014).

The second theme that permeated media reports on war-zone tourism was, predictably, danger. The issue of danger typically emerged through commentators speculating about why some tourists willingly place themselves in harm's way by opting to go into war and conflict zones. Also commonly invoked were tourists' first-person accounts of how they boldly came close to danger. For example, an article published in *The Telegraph* (2009) focused on Gordon Moore, “a great grandfather from the UK who ignored warnings from the Foreign Office and went to Iraq as part of the first tour to enter the country since the war broke out in 2003.” The article goes on to state that Moore was “greeted by the sound of a bomb blast within minutes of arriving”. This growing attraction to “hostile environments” is explained by the president of the Adventure Travel Trade Association, who states: “All the buzz is for destinations that have some sort of edge” (Monks, 2016).

Indeed, while there seems to be a general consensus that there is a striking exponential increase in both the supply and demand of war-zone tourism as a niche market, the popular culture reports indicate that it is questions of voyeurism and danger that have captured the public imaginary. In this piece, I wish to encourage critical examination of the topic by reframing the types of public debates and discussions it has provoked. I want to suggest that to better understand the production and consumption of war-zone tourism one must employ an analytical lens comprised of critical studies on tourism that privilege questions of racialized relations of power, privilege, mobility and space within past and present global relations (Ateljevic, Pritchard and Morgan, 2007; Coles and Church, 2007; Clifford, 1997; Enloe, 1990; Kaplan, 1996). Specifically, I suggest that more generative questions pertain to why this tourism trend is gaining popularity at this point in history, as well as how selling tourism to war-zones furthers what has been

called a “politics of life” which presupposes who can and cannot purchase controlled levels of risk (Fassin, 2007, 500-501).<sup>1</sup> Specifically, my commentary posits that what begs questioning is how this phenomenon is shaped through the co-constitutive systems of class and race within neoliberal globalization.

In what follows, I apply these questions to the media representations of one US-based specialized tour operator called War Zone Tours (herein referred to as WZT). As a commentary piece, rather than making definitive claims, the points I raise merely seek to inform further studies by drawing attention to the lesser examined concerns of this tourism trend. As I will demonstrate, WZT lends itself well as an example because it has received a significant amount of media attention. Focusing on WZT, I aim to show that a particular analytical approach is needed to reveal additional concerns about power within such touristic practices.

### ***Part 1 – What is known about tourism in war-zones?***

Scholarship on the relationship between war/political conflict and tourism has mainly focused on battlefield or remembrance tourism where wars or conflicts took place in the past (Butler and Suntikul, 2013). When tourism studies have focused on tourism during war or active conflict it has been mainly through political economy frameworks that examine how the tourism industry is impacted when conditions of peace and security are threatened. Other studies examine state/government efforts to continue tourism in the face of war and how the tourism industry is detrimentally affected by military conflicts (Isaac, 2013; Krakover, 2012), or have quantified the losses of tourism revenues caused by escalations in violence (Larsen, 2011). Others have examined specific nation-states’ attempts to draw tourists after conflict ends, for example Northern Ireland (Boyd, 2012), Egypt (Vick, 2013), or Israel and Palestine (Cohen-Hattab and Shoal, 2007; Issac, 2013). In sum, as Butler and Suntikul’s (2013) comprehensive edited collection on the topic reveals, most studies tend to concentrate on how tourism is often a catalyst for political strife, and/or how tourism can be used as a political propaganda tool in territorial conflicts.

The work of International Relations scholar Debbie Lisle (2000) – one of the first to explore the complex connections between war and tourism – offered an important shift in thinking on the topic. Rather than assume a dissonant relationship between tourism and political conflict, Lisle focused on how danger and threat are increasingly being packaged as commodities for tourist consumption. She also challenged the bifurcation of danger and safety as diametrically opposed to instead

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<sup>1</sup> Though writing about humanitarian interventions, Fassin’s theoretical concept is highly relevant to this discussion. He examines a debate about whether a team of French medical professionals would remain in Iraq at the start of the 2003 war, given the dangers that were present at the time. According to Fassin, the debate both avoided and revealed the radical inequality in human lives. He contends that such considerations – how to ensure the safety of the French humanitarians (westerners) while it was taken as granted that their Iraqi counterparts (non-western) would continue to face danger shows the ways human lives are imbued with racialized value and meaning – an inequality that Fassin describes with the phrase ‘a politics of life’ (p.514).

expose what she referred to as “the curious combination of danger, seduction, aesthetics and the secure” that exists on such tours (p. 110). Adam Weaver’s (2010) more recent work on the association between the tourism and military industries has similarly argued that their coming together is an expected outcome of late capitalism. He writes: “Military enterprise, and not simply war, has shaped the contours of modern-day tourism. The tourism industry and this [military-industrial] complex are not mutually opposed; they do not only coexist but are complementary” (p. 685).

A number of studies have also focused on motivation to consider why some see danger, violence, disaster, or other forms of political strife not as deterrents but as attractions. These mainly fall under the rubrics of “extreme”, “dark” and/or “adventure” tourism (Ferguson and Todd, 2005/2011; Kang and Lee, 2013; Lennon and Foley, 2000; Sharpley and Stone, 2009; White and Frew, 2013). Sharpley (2005; 2011) uses a typology that identifies several types of dark tourism with varying degrees of intensity. An important point he makes is that it is a misnomer to assume that “dark tourism” is propelled by an attraction to death and violence (see also Butler and Suntikul, 2013, p. 292). In other words, one cannot simply accept that those who choose to tour a war-zone are drawn to violence. In fact, some innovative recent research on the emotive and affective experience of war-zone tourism has shown that tourists describe their experiences as an “intermingling” of fear, fun, danger, safety, conflict and peace (Buda, d’Hauteserre and Johnston, 2014, p. 110). This is consistent with studies on adventure tourism that have noted that since it is difficult, if not impossible, to measure actual levels of potential danger, it is the tourists’ *perception* of risk that is key. Indeed, in their broad review of existing literature on risk, safety, and security in tourism, Yang and Vikneswaran (2014) point out that the most successful tourism operators are those “who manage to reduce actual risk and increase the level of fear and thrill which are the subjective emotional responses to perceived risk” (p. 253).

A small body of literature on unconventional types of tourism such as war-zone tourism shows that a desire to set oneself apart from other tourists by seeking “authentic” encounters is a significant motivating factor (Laderman, 2013; Phipps, 1999). This line of thought echoes and extends the notion that tourism is primarily a marker of socio-economic status. For instance, Munt (1994) and Mowforth and Munt (1998) have argued that when tourism became more affordable to lower classes, the middle classes would embrace *new* forms of tourism to establish class distinction and status. Kathleen Adams’s (2006) has applied this notion of class distinction to danger-zone tourism in South America. She argued that people are drawn to such places and experiences because it creates class and social distinction from their tourist peers who cannot take part in it.

While scholarship on the topic of tourism to war-zones, like Adams’s, has considered socio-economic class, it has neglected questions of gender and race. One exception regarding gender is Graham Huggan’s (2009) work on contemporary travel writing. He posits that the very notion of “the risk-taking

traveler” is a highly gendered one that emerges out of the historical foundation of colonial “exploration” (p.102). He is careful to note that this is not to suggest that contemporary risk-takers are all men. Rather, that “signs of a male backlash can also be seen in the pursuit of re-intensified ambitions: in high-risk endurance travel” (p. 103). With respect to race, although it has yet to be addressed directly, an emerging group of scholars that are considering the links between dark tourism and postcolonial studies appear to be paving the way. For instance, a special themed issue of the journal *Postcolonial Studies* entitled “Shadow Zones: Dark travel and postcolonial cultures” reminds us that travel and violence are two central themes of imperialism and colonial history in ways that create an opening for interrogations of race (Clarke, Dutton, and Johnston, 2014). An important point raised in this subset of writing is how this form of tourism intersects with broader postcolonial critiques of globalized consumption (Carrigan, 2014, p. 237-238).

### ***Part 2- War-zone tours – A cursory look***

The website of War Zone Tours (WZT) indicates that the company is “the original high risk tour operator” and that its founders have been travelling to “more than 50 high threat regions and areas of conflict throughout the world since 1993.” Upon landing on its homepage, one is exposed to images of a car engulfed in smoke and flames, and soldiers in combat uniforms along with accompanying sounds of low-flying planes, machine gunfire and explosions.<sup>2</sup> Next to the images and sounds of warfare the following statement appears:

Despite the seemingly politically incorrect name, War Zone Tours offers a unique and surprisingly PC [politically correct] experience. Our main goal at WZT is to show you what is really going on in the places you had previously just seen on the televised news and print media. Etc. (sic).

In interviews, the company founder Rick Sweeney has consistently claimed that his tours do not offer gratuitous glimpses of violence:

If someone were to go with us on a tour, they would see that we're not sitting on a hillside watching missiles rain down onto villages. ...What we're doing is trying to get individuals into conflict areas or near conflict areas, and actually interact with the people, talk to families that are living through this (Chattopadhyay, 2014).

Reacting to the claim that the tours are exploitative and that the company profits from the suffering of others, Sweeney has indicated that he is not in it for the money, explaining to one journalist that his main income is derived from security work and that WZT is therefore a sideline for him (Jacobs, 2013). This, he states, allows him to decline the tourists whom he believes to have “suspect motivations”,

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<sup>2</sup> This and all subsequent references to the WZT website were retrieved from <http://www.warzonetours.com/> on August 19, 2015.

especially those drawn to the tours because of an attraction to violence. He explains, “We weed out the customers who want to be given an AK-47. We think the guns should be in the hands of the security professionals not the customers” (Jacobs 2013; Peisner, 2012). Sweeney also implies that the tours are educational insofar as they help people shift their thinking, presumably becoming more accepting and compassionate. He explains, “Quite often individuals will go into a region having one sort of opinion, and come out with a completely different opinion. And if we've done that, I think we've succeeded” (Chattopadhyay, 2014). Sweeney told one reporter that he came up with the idea of offering the tours while working overseas in conflict zones: “I spent time in Bosnia and Iraq and there were lots of locals I wanted to talk to and cultural sites I was not able to see” (Jacobs, 2013). Like many others, he argued, he wanted to see for himself what is portrayed on the nightly news.

Since the trips are customized, there is little information on the website about the actual logistics, including the costs. Those who are interested are asked to contact the company for more information. However, a few general ideas about the practical aspects of the tours can be gleaned from various reports about WZT. One report indicates that the tours typically last up to two weeks and allow up to four people on a trip (Peisner, 2012). In another report, Sweeney described the typical WZT customer as “middle-aged businessmen” (Litovkin, 2013). In another still, it was stated that a custom-made trip to Baghdad can cost up to \$40,000 because, Sweeney explains, the provision of safety and putting a security plan in place drives up the price of the tours (Jacobs, 2013). Moreover, with respect to putting a security plan in place, Sweeney explains that WTZ staff who are former military special operations personnel go in advance to “hire trusted local guards” (Gilad, 2014).

Although the possibility of “locations” to which one can travel is described as “limitless,” the website offers short descriptions of four of the more popular tours that they offer: “Iraq, Beirut, Mexico and Africa”. Many invocations of risk and danger can be found in the descriptions of each of these locations. Under the description of the Mexico tours, for example, one finds references to “kidnapping epidemics,” “criminal cartels,” and a description of the city of Juarez as being “the world’s murder capital in 2010.” The description for Beirut similarly invokes “terror groups,” and a “Hezbollah rally”.

Regarding the level of danger on the tours, Sweeney has explained:

We want clients to feel like they’re on the edge of a very dangerous situation....There’s definitely risk and a lot of waivers involved, but it must be very manageable for us. You’re trying to get somebody on that edge, but we know, because of the infrastructure we have in place, that it’s actually not nearly as dangerous as it may seem” (Gilad, 2014).

In another report he is quoted as follows: “It probably feels more dangerous to the tourists than it actually is” and described tours he had conducted in which there was a “shooting nearby or a car bomb,” adding “Nothing at us” (Jacobs, 2013). Furthermore, in the “About” section of the WZT website, Sweeney has pointed out that not all of the tours happen in active war-zones but also include “areas that could be perceived as being higher than average level of risk.”

What does *not* appear on the WZT website or in the media reports about the tours is as noteworthy as what does. Despite the highly politically charged term “war-zone” in the name of the company, there is no indication of how the conflicts in the toured areas are contextualized or understood. One presumes that WZT guides do offer some kind of political narrative on the tours but how this is presented is not specified. Instead the tours are promoted in terms of “risk”, “adventure”, and “action.” This is especially evident in some inspirational quotes by celebrated authors sprinkled throughout the website such as “You have to take risks” by Paulo Coelho, or one by Charlotte Brontë which states: “It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility; they must have action; and they will make if they cannot find it.” These quotes, presumably meant to inspire people to reject the mundane for more daring experiences, combined with the absence of context regarding the conflicts indicate that the tours are being sold as apolitical or non-partisan.

### ***Part 3 – The consumption of “safe” tourism in “dangerous” war-zones***

While it goes without saying that this small sample of material does not constitute an empirical base, these media excerpts and the WZT website do provoke thought. Specifically, the information on the WZT website and in the media reports point to the two popular concerns about tourism to war-zones noted at the outset of this paper: the harms of voyeurism and the level of danger confronting those who go on the tours. This can be seen in Sweeney’s repeated efforts to frame the company’s approach as “politically correct” and the tours they offer as “safe.” My discussion aims to extend beyond these two concerns, not because they are unimportant, but because they take for granted tourists’ mobility, choice and safe access. To simply engage the topic of war zone tourism on these terms would exemplify what Coles and Church (2007) have identified as one of the most remarkable features of accounts in tourism – “the degree to which constructs of power are accepted practically as given” (p. 3). Indeed, given the obvious implications of making war-zones the objects of “tourist gazes” (Urry, 1990), it is to be expected that Sweeney would refute criticisms that the tours he offers are unethical and exploitative and present them as creating opportunities for people to bear witness and make connections. This depiction of the tours as a means for authentic communicative practices (Taylor, 2001) reinstates the idea that tourism blurs boundaries and helps produce compassionate cosmopolitan citizens and aligns easily with and reinforces the widely accepted liberal view of tourism as a means towards “the creation of a lasting world peace”, a belief that Lisle is critical

of (2000, p. 93). In contrast, I argue that the focus on voyeurism and danger in fact distract us from more disconcerting and complex economic and racialized power dynamics at play. Namely, that such tours promote a culture of comfort with militarization and contribute to the growing privatization of security services and further a demarcation between the Global North tourists who can choose to safely go in and out of the war-zone and the Global South “locals” who cannot.

### *Depoliticizing war and sensationalizing danger*

As a trend, the consumption of tourism in warzones must be understood relationally within the political, economic, and racialized neocolonial conditions. As Lisle’s important work reminds us, leisure and tourism experiences that seek out danger such as those offered by WZT demand critical inquiry. Far more compelling than the media framing of the concerns of voyeurism and danger in war-zone tourism, then, are the ways in which such tours depoliticize war and sensationalize danger. Moreover, the attraction of war-zone tours needs to be examined in terms of socio-economic status and class distinction. As noted earlier, scholars have keenly observed that one of the main attractions of unconventional types of tourism experiences and destinations is that they allow those who take part in them to stand apart from the masses of tourists (Munt, 1994; Mowforth and Munt, 1998; Adams, 2006). Given the high costs of going on a trip with WZT, one can see that class/status distinction is an important factor for understanding this trend. Building from this premise, I argue that the distinction produced through war-zone tourism is racialized as well as socio-economic. Moreover, whereas studies have shown that tourists seek social distinction from other tourists, we must especially consider how this particular tourism practice creates a distinction between those visiting and those who live in the war-zones who in most cases are stuck or have to risk their livelihoods, if not their lives, by moving. This suggests that to examine the phenomena purely through a socio-political-economy lens is insufficient. Instead, what are needed are analytical frameworks that can illustrate how questions of social/status distinction dovetail into questions of race.

Stuart Hall (1997) reminds us that racial knowledge is formed through discourse and representations that inscribe and mark particular bodies and spaces as “Other” to the “normal”. His work also suggests that the statements produce meaning through the specific language that is used. Borrowing from Hall, it is curious to interrogate the term “war-zones” as it is used by WZT. To begin, the four locations of Beirut, Mexico, Iraq and Africa that WZT designates as “high-risk” are telling. The unevenness of presenting a city, a continent and two countries alongside one another notwithstanding, one has to question the racial knowledges that are being appealed to, for instance, by representing a continent as large and diverse as Africa as a “war-zone”. A similar argument could be made about Mexico, a country with a thriving tourism industry. Since the war in Mexico is widely understood to be a “war on drugs”, the inclusion of Mexico reveals that WZT defines “war-zone” rather broadly. By invoking this term, WZT sets Mexico

apart as an abject space. Moreover, as Boullosa and Wallace (2015) have argued, the prevalent use of the term “Mexican drug war” is misleading because it implies that “the violence that has ensued is an internal Mexican affair, thereby diverting attention from the U.S. role in creating and sustaining the carnage.”

The overt decontextualization of political conflicts, along with the invocation of the term “war-zone” results in what, Kellee Caton (2012) has referred to as the “essentializing/naturalizing/normalizing” that occurs in tourism to reproduce mythologies about spaces and cultures (p. 121). The transnational and interlocking histories of the places being toured and how imperialism continues to structure and prop up many of these political conflicts are completely omitted. While the destinations are marked as “dangerous war-zones”, in contrast, politically neutral terms of “risk” “adventure”, and “action,” are attributed to the tourists (the majority of whom are citizens of Western countries) thereby rendering them curious and politically neutral bystanders vis-à-vis the conflicts they tour (Phipps, 1999).

The second issue that gets elided in the media focus on voyeurism and danger or war tourism is the larger question about its growing appeal. To what can we attribute the growing current interest in tourism to war-zones? Certainly, it is not incidental that we live in a time in which themes related to combat and military violence can be found in all manner of leisure production from television programming to children’s toys. As Adam Weaver (2010) observes, the ubiquitous presence of combat and militarism in Western popular culture has resulted in war being regarded as a type of entertainment. Within such a cultural climate, it stands to reason that a war-zone could appeal as a travel destination and can be considered an extension of how military-themed entertainment has become intertwined within daily lives rendering it pleasurable. What is perhaps more interesting is not why such trips might have appeal, but what type of emotional comfort they provide. Marita Sturken’s (2007) reflections on what she describes as the particularly charged period in American history in the period from 1990s to the present offers some additional insights into this point. She argues that in the context of such widespread US-led global militarized violence, one way in which Americans assuage their fears and anxieties is through what Sturken refers to as “security consumerism” (6). Building on this argument, one can see that at a psychosocial level, the ability to purchase safety in areas perceived as dangerous can bring a deep sense of comfort and reassurance. In fact, Sweeney and his “high risk environment guides” are described as “experienced security professionals,” many of whom “are former military special operations personnel.” Simply put, the company is run by men with military/security backgrounds who function more as private bodyguards than tour guides. This begins to hint at the extent to which these tours are rooted in imperialist masculine military systems. Moreover, by Sweeney’s own admission, the element of danger and risk is very controlled and it is the tourists’ *perception* of danger and risk that the company attempts to create. This corroborates Adams’s (2007) observations that what matters to danger-zone

tourists is “the partly fantasized opportunity to involve themselves in a site of ongoing political instability... where there is at least an imagined potential of violent eruptions” (p. 211). This reveals a profound paradox in the security consumerism purchased through WZT. That is, although WZT traffics in notions of danger and risk, what they sell is safety and racialized/class distinction.

In this commentary I have been arguing that the two main preoccupations of voyeurism and danger in public debates about war zone tourism, in fact, distract us from more disconcerting and complex power dynamics at play. If one were to reframe the discussions to instead contemplate why this tourism trend is currently growing in popularity and the subject-making practices that are made possible through war-zone tourism encounters, one can better see that they promote a culture of comfort with militarization and privatization of security services, and further demarcate Global North tourists from Global South “locals”. In short, companies like WZT appear to cater to economically privileged subjects from the Global North who can purchase and consume safety in places where racialized *Others* are imperilled.

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