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‘In the Compound of their Skins: Island Identities and the Global Market’

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‘It’s a lovely piece of real estate’

US Secretary of State in the Reagan administration, George Schultz, reacting to his first glimpse of Grenada following the US military invasion. (McAfee, 1991:97)

‘They are buying the image. People will buy the fruit thinking, boy, this place is pristine’
Cecil Winsborough, Grenada’s chief agronomist, commenting on Sainsbury’s take-over of the entire agricultural production of the island. (*The Guardian*, January 19 2000)

Overview

This paper is, in many ways, born from an attempt to analyse the ways in which the Caribbean is made knowable to me. During the annual 362 days of rain in Dublin, saying that I am doing research on the Caribbean is often received as a futile yet laudable attempt to escape the inevitabilities of climate. Even academic inquiry can be regarded as an ‘escape from it all’. I say this only half in jest, because a related point of entry has been my own experience of just how durable the cultural stereotyping of the region is. The Caribbean is increasingly defined by tourism; tourism of the all-inclusive variety that has regularly been described as socially unsustainable (Burman, 1999: 161). I am interested in the intercultural consequences of how this kind of tourism structures contact, particularly in a global economy where, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council, the industry is providing one in nine jobs and 80% of travellers come from just twenty countries. In other words, in a changing global economy, tourism is a matter of economic imperative for the Majority World, and privileged mobility for the Minority.

The economic dependency of the Eastern Caribbean on tourism has been well-documented (Ferguson 1997, Lea 1998, Patullo 1996). A large element of its attractiveness depends on its connotations of paradise in the Minority World, and therefore it is an economic necessity that paradise is continually simulatable. The widespread development of all-inclusive resorts, or what Bauman has termed ‘reservation-style experiences’ (1998: 58), organises social space as a simulacra of widely circulated images, and it is a structuration which approaches culture as a factor of risk and uncertainty. Furthermore, not only does a large amount of tourist/host contact take place within this confinement, but it is increasingly the normative setting for representations of the Caribbean in media texts.

In this paper I do not wish to re-examine arguments concerning the social unsustainability of this form of

tourism, as I think that can be taken as read. My focus will be the way in which this kind of tourism provides a framework for imagining and gazing upon the Caribbean, and the problems this presents for island identities. Central to this is the question of identity and globalisation, that nebulous process which drives the increase in the type of tourism which is under discussion. An influential current in global theory is to analyse the way in which processes engendered in the economic sphere result in cultural phenomenon which are delinked from any simplistic notion of economic causality. While this is generally sustainable, I wish to argue that the precise form of tourism which defines the Caribbean's entry into this global market has a structuring influence on the cultural, precisely because it is the cultural which has been fundamentally commodified.

Introduction

In his pre-millennium Reith Lectures, Anthony Giddens suggested that globalisation is creating something that we can as yet only perceive the contours of, but which may respond to the name of the 'global cosmopolitan society' (1999: 19). The argument is an interesting, and by this stage quite familiar one. We may be experiencing processes which are fundamentally powered by capital accumulation, yet the spatial and temporal compressions characteristic of this phase of globalisation create new trajectories and possibilities of contact which have profound impacts on the cultural register. Contrary to various discourses on cultural imperialism (Tomlinson, 1997: 19-28), economic expansionism, while arguably accompanied by supportive cultural artefacts, cannot instructively be thought of in terms of cultural domination. The coming into being of the global brings with it the conscious recognition of the hybrid, the actuality of mediation, an increasingly diverse semiotic environment, and importantly, abundant resources for imagining identity. Despite global economic imbalance, this is regarded to be a shared cultural context for both Majority and Minority worlds, and presumably integral to the emergence of a shared global society. According to Roland Robertson, global economic process should not be regarded as the point of entry for understanding relations in today's world, as it cannot account for cultural pluralism as a constituent factor in contemporary global circumstance (Robertson, 1997: 76). While we may all be fond of portraying ourselves as living on the cusp of unprecedented change, there is nevertheless an unprecedented suggestion here; the kind of contacts we are experiencing suggest the possibility of common society. Structured in inequality, imagined from diverse perspectives, yet nevertheless a common society of sorts.

Despite only displaying its contours, I think it is still possible to attempt to locate the Eastern Caribbean (which I will concentrate on) within this emerging concept. In analysing its global circumstance, it could be argued that its defining role in the global economy, namely that of pre-modern, touristic construct, questions the constituent relations of that cultural pluralism, and that the particularity of its economic relations disavow many of the liberating possibilities suggested by global cultural theory. Given the region's unsustainable dependence on tourism (Ferguson, 1997: 45) its economic survival depends on it being the untouched remnant, an unpeopled space organised and framed by outside desire; in other words, it is regarded as profoundly decultured. The Caribbean, despite its history and diasporic presence in the Minority world, is continually represented in the market as being beyond culture, virgin territory which is fleetingly possessable, a paradisaal counterpoint to post-industrial society. Not only space, but also those that problematically inhabit it, must conform to the paradise paradigm:

"It is the fortune, and the misfortune, of the Caribbean to conjure up the idea of 'heaven on earth' or 'a little bit of paradise' in the collective European imagination...the region, whatever the brutality of its history, kept its reputation as a Garden of Eden before the Fall. The idea of a tropical island was a further seductive image: small, a 'jewel' in a necklace chain, far from centres of industry and pollution, a simple place, straight out of Robinson Crusoe. Not only the place, but the people too, are required to conform to the stereotype. The Caribbean person, from the Amerindians whom Columbus met in that initial encounter to the twentieth-century taxi driver whom tourists meet at the airport, is expected to satisfy those images associated with paradise and Eden". (Patullo, 1996: 142)

Culture, and the cultural subject, are important only in so far as they are assimilatable to simulated nature. I wish to argue that what Pattullo is describing here is the perspectival framework which still informs the circulation of the Caribbean as an image in the global economy. As a code of assumed expectations, it is

materialised in the divisions of social space which delimit the islands tourist zones and resorts. Caribbean space is in part orchestrated by the demands of what John Urry has usefully described as the 'tourist gaze' (1990). The commodification that tourism engenders always involves some element of making desire material. In this instance, given the dependency involved and the nature of the desired image which is sought and sold, that commodification has brought about systems of spatial apartheid, where space is ahistorical and risk for the tourist is minimised to contact with local citizens involved in the performance of circumscribed roles, both formal and informal.

What merits investigation here, then, are the factors which place the Caribbean at odds with the proto-utopian view of a global cosmopolitan society. This needs to be considered both in terms of the economic determinedness at work in the organisation of socio-cultural space, and in the determinacy of the perspectival framework through which the Caribbean is represented, even in the celebrated free flow of a global image-scape.

Globalisation Particularised

I will continue by briefly outlining some contemporary thinking on global processes and cultural pluralism, and suggest why the particularisation of this theory to the Caribbean suggests some disturbing converses.

Compression and Contacts

Globalisation is often theorised in terms of action, and a corresponding realisation of what that action entails. Thus Robertson describes it as '*the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole*' (1997: 4) and Jonathan Friedman employs a similar construction; '*an increase in interdependence and an awareness of that interdependence*' (1995: 70). The temporal and spatial reorganisation of the world, that is powered by the intensification of transport, capital, information, images and people (see Harvey, 1989), is argued to produce a sense of the global itself, and its immanence in contemporary circumstance. This sense of the global, it could be argued, is the emergence of a burgeoning consciousness in this cosmopolitan society. Robertson has termed this *globality* - the awareness that we are all part of something bigger. It is more than an acknowledgement of interdependence, and is not bound to the material. Instead, it is what he describes as '*the extensive diffusion of the idea that there is virtually no limit to difference, uniqueness, otherness*' (1992: 102). Both in terms of physical and virtual mobility, people in 'global cosmopolitan' societies are confronted by what could almost be described as a semeiosis of otherness, unifying in the sense that in this compressed world, '*the bases for doing identity are increasingly and problematically shared*' (1992: 101). Multiple compressions, to some degree universally experienced if not acknowledged, result in creating what can only be described as a new human environment. Mike Featherstone expressed this succinctly:

The flows of information, knowledge, money, commodities, people and images have intensified to the extent that the sense of spatial difference which separated and insulated people from the need to take into account all the other people which make up what has become known as humanity has been eroded. (1995: 87)

The crucial concept here is the idea of insulation. The experience of separateness is unsustainable. This is not a comment on desire, as it must be noted that reactions to the erosion of insulation can range from the celebration of hybridity to the foregrounding of neo-tribal and fundamentalist tendencies (Bauman, 1998: 9). I will comment on the idea of globality at a later point, and deal firstly with the notion of compression itself.

Inherent in the notion of compression is the way in which speed has reorganised spatial and temporal relations. When this is applied to the relations between the Minority World and the Caribbean facilitated by tourism, it suggests several disjunctures. Contact facilitated by tourism is a process of inter-related choice and constraint; the interaction of what Bauman has called tourists and vagabonds (1998: 167) is the confrontation of actors in differing states of empowerment. While globalisation engenders a quantitative and qualitative leap in human interface, it does so in terms of mobility which is structured in

hierarchy. The economic can never be unpacked from touristic contact, it is the contract and expectation of those involved. More fundamentally, the idea of global speed has to be regarded as having differing gears, as the speed of opportunity is unrelated to the speed which characterises desire. In other words, while the fluid representations and facilitative mobility available characterise elements of western postmodernism, that which is sought in the Caribbean is the lived image of the pre-modern. 'Getting away from it all' has a temporal as well as spatial sense – a trip to paradise involves a global economic architecture which can get you there, and then construct the environment to meet expectations. Therefore the all-inclusive resort is an attempt to bound a territory against the speed which has rendered it attractive and available.

Similarly, it can be argued that there is a paradox related to the conceptualisation of global space. If the end of insulation creates the condition for the constant freeplay of otherness, it is only through a system of insulation that the attractiveness of the other can be guaranteed. Tourism depends on the circulation of a desired image of the Caribbean as untouched yet within reach; the resort, the ultimate fragmentation of the environment, allows for the untouched to be curated and fortified.

Glocalisation and the Division of Space.

To problematise this further, I need to introduce some of the thinking on the linking of the local and the global outside of the paradigmatic relations of nation-states. Underlying this discussion also, is the reality of the disempowerment and weakening of cultural and civil rights that this form of apartheid tourism entails. To quote the Mighty Pep, spatial division involves differing forms of alienation:

All-inclusive tax elusives /and truth is/ they're sucking up we juices / buying up every strip of beach / every treasured spot we reach /for Lucians to enter /for lunch or dinner / we need reservations, passport and visa / and if you sell near the hotel/ I wish you well / they will yell and kick you out to hell. (From the calypso 'Like an Alien in We Own Land', in Patullo, 1996: 80)

To cite another paradox among many, the global moment was meant to offer the locality unprecedented empowerment. In relation to this Robertson has adapted the business term *glocalization* (1995: 35) to describe the way in which compression involves the linking of localities, and not merely the interpolation of the global. Multiple trajectories of contact allow for pan-local relations to develop outside of the established modernist channels; the example of the environmental movement or the international mobilisation of community organisations can be cited here.

The circumscription of the local in the Caribbean would seem to challenge a theory of glocalization on a number of fronts. If, as I have argued, the Caribbean is viewed as an ahistorical space defined by its natural attributes and their mythic resonances, then it could be argued that specific island localities suffer from a lack of differentiation, and that each 'reservationised' locality is unique only in the sense that it contributes to a generic whole. In the interviews with tourists contained in Polly Patullo's book *Last Resorts* (1996), it is interesting that the choice of destination would appear to be based on the success of the promotional material in resembling the desired simulacra, while further differentiation is made according to the perceived cultural exchange value of each island. The entrance of the local to the global, in this particular dynamic, would appear to be characterised by a de-linking or de-localisation. The homogeneity of the controlled environments in which contact takes place results in them being distinguishable only in that some simulate expectations with more random accuracy than others. In other words, the cultural is profoundly disembedded from the local.

Globality and Risk

So far I have argued that the forms of globalisation which cohere in the tourist experience would not seem to suggest processes of cultural pluralism, or what the global cosmopolitan society could look like in the eastern Caribbean islands. With this in mind I would like to revisit the concept of globality, or the idea that there is a consciousness developing which crystallises our awareness of what it is to be globalised.

The global cosmopolitan society must at least in part depend on the processes whereby members perceive and evaluate themselves and others as being part of that society, or at least as being within the emerging

contours. The erosion of insulation creates the conditions for the 'bases of doing identity being increasingly and problematically shared'. The articulation of cultural identity present in tourist/host interfaces, particularly in a developmental framework, sensitises us not only to the question of power, but also to the structure provided by the context for that articulation. While it can be maintained that all such encounters involve an element of performance, in terms of a dialogue of expectation and satisfaction, in Caribbean terms, I contend that the structuration of locality prescribes the locals who can move within it, and that the terms of entry necessitate the performance of mythic stereotypes resonant of colonial ciphers. And this, in turn, is intimately bound up with the management of risk.

Risk, as the vogue term of the moment, is clearly central not only to the microcosm of the all-inclusive resort, but also to the way in which cultural contact is framed by tourism. Given that Caribbean tourism is often based on satisfying the assumed desire for an untouched remnant, the canvas of which can be artificially designated, the interpolation of local culture involves a disjuncture which admits risk. I am not talking here about the question of security and perceived physical risk, which has been dealt with elsewhere (Ferguson 1997, Pattullo 1996, Taylor 1993). And neither is this merely the idea of risk as unpredictability which has been a structuring concern of the tourist industry since the creation of the modern format by John and Thomas Cook (Cronin, 2000: 121). Risk in this context involves exposure to the ambiguities and uncertainties involved in the experience of travel in general, but more particularly to the uncomfortable experience of leisure in areas dependent on that leisure for their livelihood. The 'us visiting them' dynamic of global tourism is characterised by 'unequal and unbalanced relationships' with 'widespread disparities and levels of satisfaction' (Lea, 1998: 64).

This is no more than a statement of degree zero, as the complexities of role, status and identity negotiation are ever present in these contexts. Yet these complexities must belong to the fabric of anything as fanciful as globality, as they focus starkly on the decentering of self which it is argued is a central experience of intercultural contact (Guirdham, 1999: 213). As noted by Bourricaud, the increase in global interdependencies has resulted in people facing each other in an 'open ensemble of interlocutors and partners' (Robertson, 1992: 101), yet presence alone is obviously not enough to suggest the development of even a problematically shared consciousness. The tourist-local encounter, as a moment epitomising the shared problematics of identity in a global process, contains the potential to disturb and question Minority world orthodoxies. Edward Said has articulated this in terms of a postcolonial reading, where he states that:

The cultural interpenetration that globalisation brings implies a collapse of both the physical and the cultural 'distance' necessary to sustain the myths of Western identity and superiority established via the binary oppositions and imaginary geographies of the high colonial era (Said, 1993: 370)

It seems to me however, that Caribbean tourism is structured to cushion contact from precisely the kinds of encounters which these writers detail. For the Caribbean as immutable product, culture and its agents introduce ambiguities and disjunctures to the carefully simulated stasis. Any random contact, or open ensemble, admits the risk that consumer satisfaction may be confronted by uncertainty. The idea of consumer satisfaction at work here is the assumption that pleasure lies solely in the accuracy with which the physical environment can represent representations of itself. The de-limiting of social space can be seen as the attempt to force the referent to second-guess the interpretant.

The management of risk which is imbricated in the sociology of this form of tourism mocks the notion that a global cosmopolitan society can emerge from the structured inequalities of compression. Once again, the situation is paradoxical in that it is only through the erection of barriers that the world can be offered as being without frontiers for those privileged enough to undertake the journey. Trinh T. Minh-ha has observed that voyages involve the re-siting of boundaries for the '*self that embarks on an undetermined journeying practice, having constantly to negotiate between home and abroad, native culture and adopted culture, or more creatively speaking, between a here, a there, and a elsewhere*' (Minh-ha, 1994: 9). The elsewhere that she speaks of begins to reflect the contours of the global cosmopolitan society, in that encounter and change present mediated, 'third culture' possibilities. In the context under discussion, the negotiation presented is between the desire and the experience, the re-sited

boundaries are those which preserve the notional adventure. Without doubt there are many kinds of tourists and modes of touristic experience, capable of a complex variety of interactions, even in this context. Yet the spatial organisation of experience signifies a limit to possibility, and the confinement and separation of difference. The limit mark a further dislocation of the local; it is important only in so far as it can reify images of western desire legitimised by a notion of globality that is unilateral in its generation.

Cultural Identity, Performance and the Gaze.

Service demands that locals be allowed entry into this carefully managed construction. In a place displaced from surrounding communities, entry is limited to service and performance. Yet this entails contact - as Michael Cronin has pointed out, any tourist/tourist worker encounter is highly personalised, and the '*personality of the tourist worker is an integral part of the tourism product*' (Cronin, 2000: 122). Those transient in paradise surely have a right to expect friendliness from those blessed enough to inhabit; locals are part of the product, and as such have very definite and circumscribed roles thrust upon them. Discrepancies are opened up by a refusal to perform, or at least to maintain a level of presumably manic happiness. This is a common problematic; countries which have employed tourism as a development strategy often rely on their citizen's ability to stage a foisted notion of tradition and collective psychology. The tyranny of constant happiness is by no means singular to the Caribbean, though it has been historically a constant feature of how island life has been observed from the outside (Pattullo, 1996: 142).

In this way, the kind of tourism which the Minority world undertakes in the Majority can be seen as a search for authenticity, a projected definition onto the other which details a sense of loss and a timeout from modernity. And there is a particular kind of authenticity which is sought, and simulated in the Caribbean: it is the search for a pre-cultural space. Those who must move within the compounds are therefore twice fetishized; as objects of discovery, and also as beings so close to nature that their dispositions are derived directly from the climate. It seems that the colonial binaries which Said spoke of are here compounded, in both senses of the term. Cultural negotiation, that ubiquitous challenge of compression, can only take place if both parties regard each other as cultural. In this context, the romantic construction of the land and environment dictates a performance of culture which is holistic to that construction. It should not go unremarked that there are uncomfortable echoes in this of the natural mythology surrounding American and Australian first nation people, not to mention the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean (Ryan, 1994: 117. Hulme, 1995: 366)

Service can never be regarded as simply that – it always involves performance. In an environment constructed for consumption, those who work within it must be coded appropriately, and local cultural identities must learn to negotiate the constructions of ethnic identities which render them recognisable to the tourist. As McCannell has pointed out, tourism as a ritual involves '*reconstructed ethnicity, a generalised other within a white cultural frame*' (1992: 168). Diverse cultural phenomenon which have come to signify *caribbean-ness* - reggae, voodoo, stylised Rastafarianism, elements of carnival - are reconstituted in this frame which provides the frisson of the exotic with the certainty of recognition. There are undoubtedly issues here concerning the transgression of cultural significances, which this paper cannot hope to deal with. A salutary parallel may be drawn with a study of native women's performances for the Ecuadorian tourist market, where Quimsena women were required to wear traditional outfits, normally reserved for special occasions, while serving in a Quito hotel which thrived on their thematised difference (Crain, 1996:128). The substantive point however, is that tourism places its workers under the sign of authenticity. Locals in their fragmented space, cannot, it seems, expect to be recognised as a member of the global community unless they step into the perspectival framework which sees the Caribbean in a very particular way. It seems difficult to sustain the idea that global trajectories of contact increasingly involve the mediation of identities, if a feature of the economic contract which brings people together is the immutability of homogenous Caribbean types.

The idea of global cosmopolitanism is not limited to production through contact. As I have alluded to, this environment is characterised by a rapid circulation of signs and images. I do not have the space here to offer full scale textual analyses, yet even to depend on the empirical position I stated in opening, of how the Caribbean is regularly made knowable, we can see several examples of a fluid continuity between space and representation. The gaze upon Caribbean space is one of possibility, the return to nature

legitimises and provokes reactions and behaviours constrained in 'the real world'. Last year's box office success, *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer*, is an interesting example. The plot is simple enough; a group of college students are lured to a large anonymous Caribbean island by a radio contest staged by their prospective killer. When they arrive there is a hurricane warning, a hotel with the mandatory faulty wiring, and to introduce our cast, a drug guy and a voodoo guy. It is approaching the end of the tourist season, and luckily for the slasher, the island is deserted apart from the stock characters that provide the decontextualised ciphers of Caribbeanness in the market imaginary. As there are no consumers, there is no service and hence no need for a local population. The notional roles are so heavily circumscribed that there is no ambiguity to this absence, presence is purely functional to the romantic vision. What are important are the cultural connotations of the empty space and the proximity to nature, where the film's protagonists are free to act without social constraint. In these terms, the island acts within a historical narrative of place-myths, where the host culture is somehow responsible for the exoticisation of the normal. Yet place-myths usually involves the fetishization of culture itself, whereas the elements of culture which creep into the gaze on the Caribbean are those which can be absorbed into nature, the authenticised cast and their practices.

An interesting example of this is the most recent film version of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, where the filmic language is a montage between the unsettled natural environment and the increasingly intense behaviour of those who occupy it. Rochester's cultural certitude is seduced by the barbarous sensuality of the tropics, and Jamaica is a magical environment which teeters on the brink, as the magic can elicit passion and provoke tragedy. For Rochester, Antoinette is an intrinsic element of this beguiling environment, as are the drumming slaves in the yard whose rhythm constantly accompanies the release of the primitive within him. The storm clouds gather and roll on the night that Rochester rapes Antoinette, the dark side of nature has been released and he finds himself culpable only to the extent that his dalliance with this dangerously exotic atmosphere has led to immersion. In Hollywood film behaviour in the Caribbean space is licensed by the struggle of culture in the natural world, and the perversity unleashed by the interaction with its embodiments.

The congruency in fictional representations is striking, and to take a programme like *Caribbean Uncovered* is to see image and experience converge. The BSB programme is structured like a fly-on-the-wall documentary, and within the confines of the compound the tourists are licensed by the same pervasive nature that infects the fictional characters. The controlled environment allows for an abdication of control; as Pattullo has pointed out, there is a strong continuity to the general mythology of blackness and partying in general, and to indolence and abandon in the Caribbean in particular (1996: 142). What is interesting about the programme, especially in Britain, is that this is presented as the essence of contact with the Caribbean, it is an available experience of desire, where expectation and environment can be made to cohere.

Conclusion

I would contend that there are few widely circulating images which contest this gaze upon the Caribbean. The postmodern consumption of images problematises the relationship between a social reality and its representations, particularly when, as in the exclusionary Caribbean space, that reality is intimately bound up with and shaped by the representations which popularise it. The rapid circulation of signs which is so characteristic of globalisation is often explained by metaphors of travel, many of which are now routinely familiar. John Urry suggests that, in fact, contemporary experience can be seen as that of the continual tourist, as he puts it: *People are tourists most of the time whether they are literally mobile or only experience simulated mobility through the incredible fluidity of multiple signs and electronic images* (1990: 17). This experience is one which should contain discontinuities, the kinds of negotiations which, it is argued, make a notion like *globality* theorisable at the very least. It signifies the terrain around which Giddens' emerging contours may begin to incorporate the social.

Visitors to the Caribbean may be tourists in both senses as well; in this case however, it is because the imagined geography which has become an economic necessity is mapped both onto the local and the represented space. This reality is one, which is obviously contested; in terms of rethinking sustainable economic policy, and structuring and providing ethical and heritage tourism in conjunction with local

communities. What needs emphasising here, in a theoretical framework, is that rethinking globalisation and cultural identity needs to recognise that admitting the influence of the economic over lived relations is not a form of crude determinacy. In many situations of global domination, the fact of mediation and subversion is often celebrated as a strategy rather than recognised as a necessity or fact of life. Consumption and reception may be secondary production, people may evolve their ways of negotiating satisfaction from structural inequalities, but as an observed phenomenon it does nothing to suggest how we can imagine the social and cultural rights of members of a brave, new, cosmopolitan collective. If we do not articulate the inequalities which any such concept must engage with, then the contours become very clear. It is just like the nationally contoured societies that we are used to, with classes simplified to tourists and those that seem to be permanently happy.

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