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Natural Hedonism: The Invention of Caribbean Islands as Tropical Playgrounds

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Abstract

The familiar palm tree, sun-sea-and-sand, and rainforest imagery used in Caribbean tourism promotion may seem like an endlessly repeated cliché that hardly requires any further analysis. Rather than reading these as empty signifiers that circulate in a global market for tropical-island tourism, we can ask how these iconic images arose, for what purposes, and with what effects. This paper explores the origins of such imagery of the Caribbean in order to consider what lies behind the stereotypes. The Caribbean occupies an ambivalent place in the realm of Western imagined

geographies as both the site of enjoyable tourism and the dangerous terrain of criminals and unstable governments. In tracing how this vision of 'the Caribbean' was invented, I will consider some of the connections between island scenery and the notion of hedonism as touristic experience, which has far-reaching implications for the bodies immersed within this landscape of evocative, seductive transgression. I argue that the Caribbean island has become a global icon (cf. Franklin et al. 2000) which encapsulates a deep history of relations of consumption, luxury, and privilege. The texts and images considered here range from the sixteenth to twentieth centuries, and were produced by French, British, and other European authors. These examples demonstrate the constitution of the Caribbean as a transatlantic field of consumer fantasy and bodily experience.

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The familiar sun-sea-and-sand imagery used in Caribbean tourism promotion may seem like an endlessly repeated cliché that hardly requires any further analysis. Used to promote everything from package holidays and cruises to time-shares and villa purchases all over the world, a more generic, global, and empty signifier of 'the tropical island' could hardly be imagined. Alongside it a slightly different variation draws on an imagery of 'unspoilt' primal rainforests, waterfalls, and lush greenery in those parts of the Caribbean that still have some forest cover (e.g., Tobago, Dominica, and parts of the Greater Antilles and Trinidad). While the requisite imagery springs easily to mind, in this chapter I explore the origins of such imagery of the Caribbean in order to consider what lies behind the stereotypes. Rather than reading these as empty signifiers that circulate in a global market for tropical-island tourism, I want to explore specifically how these iconic images arose, for what purposes, and with what effects. Both kinds of imagery (palm-fringed beach and verdant forest) pick up on longstanding visual and literary themes in Western culture based on the idea of tropical islands as microcosms of earthly Paradise. Yet this tropical Garden of Eden, much like the original, is not without its lurking dangers and sinful temptations.

The Caribbean occupies an ambivalent place in the realm of Western imagined geographies. It is both the site of enjoyable tourism and escapism, and the dangerous terrain of criminals, unstable governments, disease and desperate boat-people. As one recent travel writer describes it: 'The first time I went to Jamaica, I didn't know much about the place beyond a vague impression of pirates, palm trees, Noel Coward, ganja and beneath that a sense of intensity, a lurking voluptuous danger.'¹ In tracing how this vision of 'the Caribbean' was invented, I will consider some of the connections

between island scenery and the notion of hedonism as touristic experience, which has far-reaching implications for the bodies immersed within this landscape of evocative, seductive transgression. As Richard Grove has argued, ‘the commercial and utilitarian purposes of European expansion produced a situation in which the tropical environment was increasingly utilised as the symbolic location for the idealised landscapes and aspirations of the Western imagination’ (Grove 1995: 3). The Caribbean island has become a global icon (cf. Franklin et al. 2000) which encapsulates a deep history of relations of consumption, luxury, and privilege.

There is no ‘primal nature’ in the Caribbean not only because so much of it has been constructed by human intervention,² but also because every aspect of it is dosed with a heavy infusion of symbolic meaning and mythic allusions. Thus I will consider how Europeans moved through the Caribbean, how they removed seeds, plants and fruits from the Caribbean, how they represented Caribbean plants and landscapes verbally and visually for European audiences, and how they displaced existing natural environments through their presence and interventions. The texts and images considered here range from the sixteenth to twentieth centuries, and were produced by French, British, and other European authors. This long temporal framing and diversity of origin allows for an appreciation of the constitution of the Caribbean as a transatlantic field of consumer fantasy and bodily experience. While I will trace some of the striking continuities in representations of the Caribbean, I will also identify some major shifts in the European relation to tropical nature and landscapes. Varied genres of representation of nature, I argue, are inseparable from changing modes of economic enterprise and consumer envelopment in the tropics.

Arrival in the New World

The major hurdle facing all European projects of exploration and colonization in the sixteenth century was the problem of survival once having arrived on the distant shores of the New World. Crucial to survival on these initial voyages was the opportunity to learn from the indigenous inhabitants found in these new lands how to cultivate edible plants, how to hunt, and how to prepare food and shelter from what nature had to offer. As David Watts suggests, Europeans only survived in the West Indies in so far as they adapted Indian techniques and lifestyles, such as ring-barking as a method of land clearance, *conuco* agriculture based on manioc, sweet-potatoes, Indian-style huts and hammocks, and canoes for transportation (Watts 1990: 174).

While European mytho-history emphasizes the goodwill and generosity of the 'Indians', enslavement was the most likely means of knowledge transfer for those who survived the epidemics of smallpox. European explorers in the Caribbean were therefore extremely interested in recording the forms and uses of the plants they found in use by the Arawaks, before they all died off. These could then be made available in Europe to other potential explorers and colonists, giving them handbooks for survival in these unknown wilds. Catalogues of plants were carefully drawn, along with instructions on their cultivation and uses, such as those found in the late sixteenth-century 'Drake Manuscript', or *Histoire Naturelle des Indes: Les Arbres, Plantes, Fruits, Animaux, Coquillages, Reptiles, Insectes, Oiseaux, etc, qui se trouvent dans les Indes*.³

Francis Drake first sailed to the West Indies with John Hawkins on slaving voyages in 1567-68, and returned on several other journeys. Both men were instrumental in advancing English interests in the Caribbean, at the expense of Spain. It was Hawkins who first brought sugar from Saint Domingue back to England, while Drake went on to circumnavigate the world in 1577-1580, thus becoming a popular hero in England.⁴ Drake's voyage 'became especially important in stimulating the entry of images of tropical nature into popular culture in England, particularly in the cheaper street literature' such as P. Brooksby's *The Voyage and Travels of that Renowned Captain Sir Frances Drake* (1683) (Grove 1996: 39). The *Drake Manuscript* was written in French by an anonymous member of Drake's party, who painted close to two hundred naïve watercolor images of West Indian plants and animals, and scenes of the lives of Indian, European, and African inhabitants of the Spanish territories in the New World. Here a catalogue of 'useful' plants are depicted in isolation from their natural setting, against a white background, and accompanied by notes on their indigenous use and cultivation. A palm tree, for example, is depicted along with an accompanying text, which describes how the indigenous people made a palm wine, tasting like sherry (Figure 1/2). The separation of the tree from its surroundings serves to emphasize its form, leaf structure and unusual bark, perhaps to aid in identification. In addition to the form of the plant, it also crucially depicts how the plant was cultivated by clearing surrounding trees, and building a fire around the base to keep out 'poisonous beasts' while the palm juice is tapped into a bowl made from a gourd. The images in this manuscript fit more into the category of instruction manual or colonist's guide, rather than landscape drawing. Its concern is with the ways in which people (both native and European) can make use of the plants depicted, rather than with how nature looks (as in

later romantic scenic genres) or how plants can be ordered (as in later more purely botanical records). These early European views of Caribbean islands presented a fascination with a particular type of tropical landscape and particular kinds of ‘natural’ and ‘cultivated’ scenery, especially the edible kind.

Most noticeable in all the early accounts of the Caribbean is the myth of tropical fecundity and excessive fruitfulness, which conjured up utopian fantasies of sustenance without labour. As Grove and others have convincingly shown, such accounts draw on a range of precedents such as the biblical Garden of Eden, the classical garden of the Hesperides, and the Renaissance botanic garden, which was itself derived from Middle Eastern models. Thus in this early seventeenth century report on the wondrous edible plants of Barbados we meet with familiar tropes of a prelapsarian nature:

A tree like a Pine, beareth a fruit so great as a Muske Melon, which hath alwayes ripe fruit, flowers or greene fruit, which will refresh two or three men, and very comfortable; Plum trees many, the fruit great and yellow, which but strained into water in foure and twenty houres will be very goode drinke; wilde figge trees there are many...all things we there plant doe grow exceedingly, so well as Tobacco; the corne, pease, and beanes, cut but away the stalkes, young sprigs will grow, and so bear fruit for many yeeres together, without any more planting.⁵

Much like the Drake Manuscript, this text mixes together descriptions of plants with instructions on how to cultivate and prepare them. Coming from a land of four seasons, Europeans had never seen plants that flowered and fruited throughout the year, carrying green fruit, ripe fruit, and flowers all at the same time. As Grove notes of such writing, in discovering the tropical island ‘Paradise had become a realisable geographical reality’ (Grove 1996: 51); it was the Garden of Eden before the fall of Man. Such images served in the propaganda campaign by which English adventurers sought financial backing and royal permission for their schemes, as well as potential settlers to join their enterprise.

The consumption of Caribbean environments was gradually systematized through encyclopaedic scientific texts that named and ordered the flora and fauna, along with botanical collections in which specimens were brought back and cultivated in hot-houses in Europe. The ‘natural production’ of the Caribbean became of central interest to Europeans in relation to the developing fields of natural history, botany, medicine, and horticulture. European ‘*hortus botanicus*’ date back to those founded in the city-states of Northern Italy in the mid-sixteenth century (Pisa, 1543; Padua and Florence, 1545), which were derived from Middle Eastern models. They then spread to schools of medicine in Bologna, Leiden, Amsterdam, Montpellier, Oxford and

Edinburgh, as well as being developed by the Dutch at Cape Town by the 1670s and the French in Mauritius in the 1760s (Grove 1996). The Chelsea Physic Garden established a crucial seed exchange with the Leiden botanic garden in 1683.

If the period of plantation development transformed the 'native' environments and sustainable agricultural practices that Columbus and other chroniclers had seen in the 15th and 16th centuries, European environments and attitudes toward nature were also transformed in the process of consuming other places. Most importantly, as Richard Grove has meticulously argued, the European experience in the tropics led to the 'attachment of a new kind of social significance to nature':

The available evidence shows that the seeds of modern conservationism developed as an integral part of the European encounter with the tropics and with local classifications and interpretations of the natural world and its symbolism. As colonial expansion proceeded, the environmental experiences of Europeans and indigenous peoples living at the colonial periphery played a steadily more dominant and dynamic part in the construction of new European evaluations of nature and in the growing awareness of the destructive impact of European economic activity on the peoples and environments of the newly "discovered" and colonised lands (Grove 1996: 24, 2-3).

Rather than simply being a relation of unmitigated exploitation, in other words, as early as the seventeenth century the first inklings of the fragility of ecological environments and the recognition of human impacts on nature were already converging. The Caribbean was crucial in this regard, in as much as 'the full impact of the new urban market' demanding sugar, coffee, and tobacco, was 'imposed on the fragile environments of the smaller tropical islands' (Grove 1996: 63). By the 1660s Barbados was already suffering from deforestation, soil erosion, landslides, and loss of fertility. Wood had to be imported from Tobago and as early as the 1760s the British implemented efforts at forest conservation on the recently ceded island of St. Kitts. The first tropical forest reserve in the Western Hemisphere was established in Tobago in 1763, on the advice of Stephen Hales, whose studies of transhumation had shown that forests played an integral part in patterns of rainfall.

Thus the awareness of European ecological impact on the tropics, combined with a growing appreciation of 'the value of indigenous and local medico-botanical knowledge' (Grove 1996: 94) led to new attitudes toward nature in Europe. As Chandra Mukerji has shown, there was in seventeenth-century France, 'tremendous growth in the variety of vegetation (made possible in part through the design of special buildings and techniques devoted to the propagation and cultivation of rare plants and animals)... [C]ollecting a wide range of exotic plants in gardens of the seventeenth

century was part of a larger cultural and economic shift.’⁶ Exotic plants moved from specialist botanical and medical gardens into the kitchen and pleasure gardens of great houses. Nobility sent gardeners on trading voyages to ‘survey the decorative or edible plants from other cultures and collect the best of them’; and in 1672, ‘Colbert wrote to the director of the West India Company asking for his people to bring back unusual fruits and flowers for the royal gardens.’ Thus, she argues,

The resulting gardens can be seen as living maps, marking the capacity of the French state to control territory and manipulate the natural resources within it; in this way they mapped the political agenda of the state. They also traced the international reach of the trading system that revolved around the state.⁷

Not only were new plants introduced into Europe, then, but entirely new conceptions of landscape and territory were also developed out of the taxonomic and spatial ordering of these new materials. The formal collection of exotic plants, and their careful organisation into parterres and bordered beds informed the way in which travelers approached the tropical landscape, as a terrain from which material could be collected and knowledge gathered and systematised.

In contrast to the boundaries and territorial impositions of the French formal garden, Mukerji suggests that English gardens were arranged to open up views to wider landscapes and painterly scenes, which created a sense of limitless landholding and blurred the boundaries between the cultivated and the natural.⁸ In the following section we shall see how this view of landscape informed a new relation to Caribbean landscapes in the eighteenth century. Following the Gulf Stream north, we can also see how the ‘fruits of empire’ planted their seed in new environments, urban architectures, and rural landscapes in Britain. Glasshouses and tropical vegetation swept through landscape design, while major ports involved in the West Indies trade consumed its profits and goods in the Georgian building boom. Planters came back to assert their wealth in ostentatious displays of new country estates that rivalled those of the old landed aristocracy. If the appreciation of Caribbean landscapes began from a pursuit of survival, medicine, and natural science, the flow of tropical flora, fauna, and forms of cultivation across the Atlantic soon fed into a new ‘scenic economy’. I refer to these ways of representing and viewing ‘scenery’ as an economy because they involved modes of accumulation, exchange, and consumption through which landscape was fetishized and turned into a commodity. Such views of nature would later inform the ideals of tropical scenery promoted in the Caribbean tourism market.

Scenic Economies: The Production of Tropical Landscape

The tropical island has played a crucial part in the history of European literature, philosophy, and arts. Richard Grove traces the interest in tropical islands as Edens or Utopias back to Bishop Francis Godwin's *The Man in the Moone* (1638), which was set on the Atlantic island of St. Helena. William Dampier's *A New Voyage Round the World* was also influential, as were the true stories of the survival of Alexander Selkirk who survived alone on Juan Fernandez Island for over four years. The physical setting of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is thought to have been modeled on the Caribbean island of Tobago as described in John Poyntz's *The Present Prospect of the Famous and Fertile Islands of Tobago* (1683), and it led to a cult of 'robinsonnades' throughout Europe (Groves 1996: 225-29). Also crucial, of course, was William Shakespeare's last play, *The Tempest*, with its vaguely Caribbean setting, which fed into what Roland Greene describes as an 'island logic' in European thought (Greene 2000: 140; cf. Hulme and Sherman 2000). All of these works knitted together to make the tropical island into a kind of global icon, condensing all of the material and fantastical processes of production and consumption of new worlds. In attempting to experience, see, touch, smell, taste and represent these iconic island-worlds, new forms of sensing nature and a new relation to landscape developed in Europe.

If many early texts concerning tropical islands were instrumental and practical catalogues of useful plants, animals, and 'natural products', a second major trope in European writing on the region was the envisioning of landscape as scenery. Over the course of the seventeenth century a 'scenic economy' arose in which tropical landscapes came to be viewed through a painterly aesthetic constructed around comparative evaluations of cultivated land versus wild vistas. As Richard Grove has argued, 'the commercial and utilitarian purposes of European expansion produced a situation in which the tropical environment was increasingly utilised as the symbolic location for the idealised landscapes and aspirations of the Western imagination' (Grove 1995: 3). However, I argue that in the seventeenth and eighteenth century there was a preference for cultivated scenery, which gave way in the nineteenth century to a romantic vision of untamed tropical nature as sublime. Here I want to trace how the eighteenth century's rationalist representations of Caribbean nature as triumphs of cultivation shifted to an increasingly emotive and romantic stylization of nature in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. Such shifts in perception and representation of landscapes have been explored more widely in relation to Northern

travelers in Central and South America (Manthorne 1989; Greenblatt 1991; Poole 1998). Deborah Poole, for example, suggests a relation between different representational technologies (oil painting, lithography, daguerrotype, *carte de visite*, stereoscope, studio photography, the Kodak camera) and multiple 'visual regimes coexisting in time and space' which together produced 'the imperial gaze' and its 'imperial subjects' (Poole 1998: 132). Following from this, I will not try to impose a rigid periodization of the shift from one visual regime to another, but will simply indicate the different possibilities that were drawn on in particular periods and contexts.

Sir Richard Dutton said of Barbados in 1681, that the dense population and intensive cultivation made it 'one great City adorned with gardens and a most delightful place'.⁹ In the eighteenth century the predominant theme in descriptions of the West Indian colonies remained the beauty of cultivated areas set within the tropical landscape. The French writer Father Charlevoix, for example, indicates this high appreciation of cultivated landscape in his descriptions of Barbados in the mid-eighteenth century:

The country of Barbados has a most beautiful appearance, swelling here and there into gentle hills; shining by the cultivation of every part, by the verdure of the sugar canes, the bloom and fragrance of the number of orange, lemon, lime and citron trees, the guavas, papas, aloes, and a vast multitude of other elegant and useful plants, that rise intermixed with the houses of the gentlemen which are sown thickly on every part of the island. Even the negro huts, tho' mean, contribute to the beauty of the country; for they shade them with plantain trees, which give their villages the appearance of so many beautiful groves.¹⁰

Here we see the 'useful plants' still recognized, but notable for their elegance and appearance in making up a complete scene, rather than simply for their use or taste. Also notable is Charlevoix's failure to see the ecological degradation that had already taken place on Barbados by this time, denuding it of forest cover. Eighteenth century depictions of the Caribbean often give a celebratory overview of a plantation, showing not only its main crops, but also the 'negro huts' to one side, and the mountains or hills rising in the background. They often contain labeled areas with a list of the various features, buildings, and planted areas, and highly romantic imagery of happy peasant-like workers (see Figure 3 -- Canne da Zucchero scene from *Il Gazzetteire Americano*, Lovernò, 1763, v.2). While a single plant might be foregrounded, as in the earlier natural catalogues, a theatrical sense of the overall scene predominates.

So common were these images that most visitors to the West Indies came with preconceived images of the landscape, based on books they had read and paintings or engravings they had seen. While some may have brushed up on their destination during

the long sea voyage, many seemed to carry an image of the Caribbean from their reading in youth. Daniel McKinnen, for example, cited the writings of Richard Ligon and Pere Labat on Barbados, before describing his own impressions in 1804:

At a distance the land appeared extremely bare; but as we approached it more nearly the rich and curious tropical productions captivated our eyes. On the hills the stately cabbage-trees, and on the beach the cocoanuts spreading their feathered branches, afforded a picture of which I had not formed too lively a conception from the representation of others, and to which the painter only can do adequate justice... [In the Negro villages the] paths and by-lanes in which their huts are intermingled with plantains, oranges, and jessemines, and the occasional papaw, cocoa-nut, and tamarind-trees that overshadowed this odoriferous and rural scene, formed a picture enchanting by its novelty, which seemed to realize the youthful visions of imagination.¹¹

It is through the eyes of painters and ‘youthful visions’ from illustrated books that McKinnen gazes upon the Bajan landscape. ‘Guided by the representations of others’, his writing style also cribs from those same books, with their lists of fruit trees and narrator moving through the landscape. He sees before him a picture, which is not so much an experience of novelty as a realization of childhood enchantment, the very emotional investments that had already brought him to travel to this far-away place.

Viewing the Barbados scenery with an eye trained in viewing landscape paintings, he continues to describe it as if it were already a picture:

Along the shore to the north of Bridge Town I found the road extremely picturesque. It leads through a long avenue of shady cocoa-nut trees, over-arched by their palmated and spacious leaves, and fenced on each side by prickly pears, or the blades of aloes. In occasional openings, or through the stems of the trees, you behold the masters’ dwelling-houses with the negro-huts adjoining; and over a rich vale, abounding with cotton shrubs and maize, the hills at a small distance spotted with wind-mills, sugar-works, and a few lofty cabbage-trees, or cocoa-nuts. At times the road approaches the sea and leads along the beach.... It then winds into the plantations, where the cultivated parterres of cotton and tropical plants are often relieved by groups of cocoa-nuts and plantains, the leaves of which, in the form of squares or quadrangular figures, have a singular effect in the landscape.¹²

Rather than the author appearing as a moving agent in this excerpt, it is the road that is given agency: it ‘leads’ through, ‘approaches’, ‘winds into’. He moves as if in a dream, the scene changing before him. Furthermore, rather than an ‘I’ beholding the scene, the text interpellates the reader, ‘you behold’, linked significantly to the moment of mentioning mastery and dwelling. As Mary Louise Pratt suggests in her study of imperial travel writing, relations of such writers to the landscape are expressed through the relation of a viewer to a painting. Gazing through his ‘imperial eyes’, such landscapes are aesthetically imbued, attributed with a density of meaning, and fixed by

the mastery of the seer over the seen. Such a 'monarch-of-all-I-survey scene', Pratt argues, 'involve[s] particularly explicit interaction between esthetics and ideology, in what one might call a rhetoric of presence' (Pratt 1992: 204-5). Through the rhetoric of presence the scene is not only recorded but also ordered and made present to the reader, who also masters it.

Again, though, the trees and vistas in this image serve to frame the man-made elements of cultivated ground, windmills, sugar-works, and 'negro-huts'. In describing Antigua, McKinnen not only highlights his preference for cultivated scenery, which informed many European views of the Caribbean in this period, but also comments *negatively* upon the scenes of untouched woods and mountains, 'unrelieved' by human intervention, in other less developed colonies. Again it is the 'garden-like' imagery, and the romantic domesticity of the 'negro huts', which draw 'the eye':

the eye traverses a view of one of the fairest and best cultivated tracts of country in the windward islands. It is highly pleasing to a person who has recently come from the woods and mountains of the more southern colonies, to behold so extensive a scene of cleared land.... Nothing appears more completely like a garden than the sugar plantation under good cultivation.... The green fields of cane...were intermixed with provision grounds of yams and eddoes, or the dark and regular parterres of holed land prepared for the reception of the succeeding year's plant-canes. A large windmill on each estate; the planter's dwelling-house and sugar-works, with the negro huts, in their beautiful groves of oranges, plantains, and cocoanut trees, completed a landscape that continually recurred in passing over the island.¹³

So too does it recur in his narrative, as he returns again and again to this point of view as he moves through various places. In contrast to this scene of cultivation in Antigua was the more intimidating scenery of Jamaica, where cultivated country could be left behind:

On quitting the [Ligane] plain you quit also the cultivated country; and although on the first risings you may now and then catch a glance at the vivid cane fields beneath, yet, as you advance, one desert hill clothed in woods succeeds another, leaving dark, wild, and romantic vales between them. But the scenes after a first impression have little novelty to excite surprise, or variety to enliven their beauty... The prospect before me affording nothing for the most part but a scene of wild woods and bleak uninhabited mountains, I turned towards the south, and beheld Kingston in a most majestic and expanded view below me. A beautiful enclosed plain, enlivened by cultivation, occupied the intermediate and spacious landscape; beyond it appeared the ocean, glistening to an immeasurable extent, while the brown inaccessible mountains darkened the foreground of the picture.¹⁴

Cultivation, here, is vivid and enlivened, while woods and mountains are desert, wild and bleak. Yet what is it that enlivens the scene of cultivation? Implicit in this

description is the idea that cultivation of the West Indies is owed to European introduction of slavery. Ignoring the ugliness of the slave labor that went into making these 'beautiful' scenes of well-cultivated land becomes a justification for slavery. The perception of slave's villages as in some sense scenic adds to the implicit anti-abolitionist message, while any idea of the abolition of slavery would threaten to return such lovely scenes of cultivation to 'waste' or what in Jamaica was called 'ruinate'.

Many travelers echoed this emotive and implicitly ideological vision of landscape shaped by cultivation, formed into groves and domestic enclaves set amongst natural splendor. Captain Alexander described the landscape of coffee plantations around Georgetown in Granada, on the eve of emancipation in 1833, as if it were the kind of map found in eighteenth-century engravings of well-ordered slave plantations:

From the parterre before this charming dwelling a beautiful map was spread out before us. A succession of hill and dale descended to the sea-shore; there were cultivated fields bright with the sugar-cane; verdant slopes studded with orange trees, with fruit yellow and golden, like that of the Hesperides, whilst bananas, shaddocks, guava, and mangoe trees were equally abundant. White houses were to be seen here and there among the woodland scenery, and in the far distance were the sails of the coasting vessels.¹⁵

Here again a kind of rhetoric of presence informs a mastery of the landscape, with the coasting vessels hinting at the circuits of trade which maintain this productive capacity of the land.

These visions of cultivation as a kind of mastery were wedded to discourses about the 'natural fertility' of tropical lands, and the need for European capability to make productive use of it. In the context of debates over Britain's abolition of slavery and transition to the use of free labor, the myth of the tropical garden continued to inform European writing on the West Indies. Sir Andrew Halliday, the British Deputy Inspector General of Army Hospitals, published in 1837 an account of the natural history of the West Indies reinforcing the image of tropical fecundity:

The rapidity and luxuriance of vegetation require to be witnessed in this colony to enable the naturalist to appreciate to their full extent the influences of light, heat, and moisture, acting upon a rich virgin soil. The quantity of vegetable matter elaborated from a very limited quantity of earth, in some of the plantain-walks, is not to be described. The height and circumference of the trees, the enormous load of fruit, and the number of trees that have evidently sprung from the same root, appeared to me more wonderful than any other fact I had witnesses in the West Indies.¹⁶

Any failure to harness such natural vigour was interpreted as a human failing and lack of mastery. As his mention of 'virgin soil' indicates, however, that fecundity could be rapidly depleted without care. Sugar cane is an extremely demanding plant, which

quickly exhausts the soil on which it is grown. Planters used heavy fertilisation of the land, as well as rotation of fields out of production, to maintain output, but older sugar estates always faced declining fertility and could not compete with new territories. Thus planters opened up more and more ‘virgin’ land, creating an ever-extending ‘sugar frontier’, which moved from Barbados to the Leewards in the seventeenth century, then to Jamaica and Saint Domingue in the eighteenth century, and by the nineteenth century to Guyana and Cuba. Wood clearance and exhaustive monocrop agriculture swept through a series of Caribbean islands and coastal mainland regions on the crest of the ‘sugar frontier’.

Tourist Economies: Entering Tropical Paradise

In contrast to the eighteenth-century depictions of the Caribbean as a highly cultivated landscape, with a multitude of plantations and horticultural development, in the nineteenth century another image began to re-assert itself, one that re-valorised the desert isle vision of *Robinson Crusoe*. An emerging artistic appreciation of the sublime allowed for a reinvention of tropical nature in a more romantic genre, particularly in post-emancipation contexts. While scenes of cultivation still remained, by the mid-century a new vision of the sublime landscape becomes increasingly noticeable. The English novelist Charles Kingsley popularized this style of romantic tropical scenery in books such as *At Last* (1873). Here mechanically reproduced engraved images such as ‘A Tropic Beach’ (Figure 4), and ‘The High Woods’ (Figure 5) codified a genre of tropical drawing of remote places thick with trees and festooned with epiphytes, lianas, palms, and ferns. In the play of light and dark, foreground and distance, each of the images contains a small human figure, usually engaged in an adventure activity such as stalking or fishing, and often a wild animal such as the tortoise in the beach image, and the monkey in the forest image. The text describes the author’s arrival in each of these romantic places:

The cliffs, some thirty feet high where we stood, rose to some hundred at the mouth, in intense black and copper and olive shadows, with one bright green tree in front of the cave’s mouth, on which, it seemed, the sun had never shone; while a thousand feet overhead were glimpses of the wooded mountain-tops, with tender slanting lights, for the sun was growing low, through blue-gray mist on copse and lawn high above. A huge dark-headed Balata, like a storm-torn Scotch pine, crowned the left-hand cliff; two or three young Fan-palms, just ready to topple headlong, the right-one; and beyond all, through the great gateway gleamed, as elsewhere, the foam-flecked hazy blue of the Caribbean Sea.¹⁷

The author here becomes a romantic action-hero who can translate the Caribbean in terms of the reader's known world (copse, lawn, Scotch pine) as he moves through scenes that come out of his childhood experience of earlier literature of exploration and travel. The 'armchair tourist' is invited to join in the heavily illustrated adventure, which found a general readership in outlets like the *London Illustrated News*. In contrast to McKinnen's feelings of monotony when viewing (or moving through) uncultivated land and wild woods, here such scenes become the attraction of romantic escape and adventure travel.

By the late-nineteenth-century tourism had developed as a mode of moving through tropical landscapes and of experiencing bodily what was already known imaginatively through literature and art. The viewer's relation to this scenery changed over time, with an early emotive tie to cultivated scenes later replaced by an affective response to 'wild' and sublime landscapes, which 'moved' the viewer through the very experience of moving through the land. The late nineteenth-century saw a revival of piratical tales and 'Boys own' style adventure stories. *Robinson Crusoe* was reprinted in numerous illustrated versions, and the tale of survival on a desert isle took hold on the tropical imagination, replacing the eighteenth-century vision of cultivation.

Following in the footsteps of the explorers, the planters, and the armed forces, the tropical 'holiday in the sun' became a safe new means of consuming the Caribbean environment. While tourists had long visited the Caribbean, new networks of tourism developed in the late nineteenth-century, as fast steam shipping lines originally developed for the fruit trade significantly cut journey times (see Chapter Four on the development of the banana industry). The traditional inns and guesthouses of the main towns, with their bawdy reputation (many famed as brothels), were now joined by more 'respectable' large hotels built especially for the new tourist trade, such as the Myrtle Bank Hotel in Jamaica. The Caribbean voyage was promoted as picturesque, healthful, and an escape from winter weather in the North. Now the literature of descriptive travel was joined by a new genre, which was written specifically by tourists for the tourist market (rather than by someone framed as an explorer, adventurer, or naturalist).

William Agnew Paton wrote an account of his 'Voyage to the Caribbees' in 1888, travelling by steamer from New York for a winter cruise through the Lesser Antilles. The ships would usually spend less than a day in port, but arrangements could be made to spend a few days in one island, and then rejoin the cruise. With little knowledge of the various islands, and dropping in on them for just a few days, or hours,

North Americans brought their own racist views. Arriving in Antigua, for example, Paton travelled along the roads of the island to see the scenery:

At intervals along the road we passed darkies of every age, of both sexes, on their way to or from town, carrying baskets of fruits and vegetables; we heard some them singing, but as we approached they stepped aside to make way for us, and watched us in silence, always ready and delighted to return our greetings. Close to some of the negro shanties were little gardens planted with potatoes, yams, pea-bushes, arrowroot, and the like. These picturesque hovels, in appearance little better than New England chicken-houses...have no chimneys, for all cooking is done in the open air, over charcoal fires.¹⁸

As in earlier travel literature the scenery is narrated in terms of the author's movement through it; he too comments on the local dwellings as picturesque, even though their poverty is made apparent. His racist terminology reflects the everyday racism of the northern United States, while his idea of going 'down the islands' and viewing the friendly 'darkies' suggests a sense of proprietorship and being at home as he moves through this landscape.

Contrary to the vast efforts that went into making these Caribbean landscapes hospitable to man, now they were again envisioned as natural Edens. As one American described Dominica in typical racist fashion in 1888: 'Food is abundant, living is cheap, the island is not overcrowded; therefore the darkies have an easy time, as no one needs go hungry at any time of the year – no one, at least, who will walk into the woods, where are wild fruits and vegetables to be had at no more trouble to the would-be eater than to put forth his hand and pluck.'¹⁹ While some celebrated this potential for escape from industrial civilization, many more saw it as a descent into barbarism. The post-emancipation decline of plantations in the old colonies was coded as the fall of civilization and regression into barbarism through these racist visions of lazy 'darkies' and unmanaged nature crowding in on once cultivated places. The imagery of sublime primitive nature and accounts of European adventure in the island wilds served as pleas for renewed European intervention in its economically and socially decayed colonies.

E.A. Hastings Jay, wrote of his 'Four Months Cruising in the West Indies' in 1900 in terms of the scenery's relation to earlier literary representations of the tropics, such as Kingsley's:

four of us hired a buggy and went for a drive round the suburbs of Bridgetown and past the Savannah to Hastings, returning by the sea-coast... on first landing from England every object is strange and new, and the whole drive was a series of surprises... Here, for the first time, was the tropical beach! How often, from childhood, I had tried to picture it from Kingsley's vivid descriptions or the histories of the early explorers. There were the cocoa-nut palms, with clusters of green cocoa-nuts growing all along the sea-line out of the soft white sand, with

beautiful rainbow colours in the water as it moved lazily backwards and forwards, glittering in the brilliant sunlight. Interspersed with the palms were bushes of sea-grape, a shrub with colossal leaves resembling magnified geranium leaves delicately streaked with red. And so we drove back to Bridgetown, feeling we had “seen strange things to-day”.²⁰

For such travelers the entire archive of travel writing that we have considered thus far informed their experience of the Caribbean. Even as they engaged in the ‘real’ experience of the tropics it was always just a reflection of the vivid Caribbean in their imaginations. Again he quotes Kingsley:

I looked out and was astonished to see the dark mountains of St Vincent looming up before me...and looking very grand and mysterious in the grey dawn. As the daylight increased, one could see that every peak was clothed to its very summit with thick forest. The colouring was exquisite, the rising sun just illuminating the forests with a soft glow. Before us was a lovely crescent-shaped bay... But the forests! As I gazed upon them I felt that here, indeed, were the tropics in all their splendour. My whole soul seemed to form the words “At Last!” as I felt, like Kingsley, a deep sense of thankfulness that it had fallen to my lot to see them.²¹

Susan de Forest Day, another visitor from New York, in 1897, had similar motives of rediscovering a childhood fantasy, though sometimes reality did not live up to expectations:

We were going to the West Indies, for that best of all reasons, simply because we wanted to. We longed to see the palm trees and sugar cane, to eat the luscious fruits and to float over summer seas, basking in the warm tropical sun, while the trade wind softly fanned our brows...Without any real reason we at first find St. Thomas a trifle disappointing... Perhaps those bare, barren, rugged mountains, whose counterparts we had seen time and again in our own everyday America, did not come up to the ideal we had formed of the wealth and luxuriance of tropical vegetation – an ideal almost unconsciously derived from the old geographies of our childish days in which the picture of a dense jungle, with serpents gracefully festooned from tree to tree and a monkey in one corner, always was the symbol of the torrid zone.²²

Thus these literary and visual representations of the Caribbean deeply informed Euro-American desires to visit and emotional engagement with the Caribbean, which was already mapped in their ‘unconscious’ before ever setting foot there. While they generally noted the name of each place they visited, and the differences between them, they blurred together into a general idea of ‘the’ Caribbean as a singular entity. It is this fantasy ‘torrid zone’ that was unceasingly packaged and sold for northern consumers, and which continues to inform tourist fantasies of the Caribbean.

Conclusion

Although 'the modern traveller still perceives the landscape as bearing the imprint of bounteous serendipity', David Watts argues, 'the senses deceive' because the Caribbean has suffered major species loss and habitat degradation, including unabated faunal destruction over the last century (Watts 1990: 3, 40). How is it that the massive introduction of alien species, forest clearance, stripping of plant cover, soil erosion, and reef destruction in the Caribbean remain invisible in the global tourist economy where the Caribbean is packaged and sold as 'pristine' beaches and verdant rainforest? I have argued that contemporary views of tropical island landscapes are highly over-determined by a long history of literary and visual representations of the island as Paradise. The island imagination today draws on these earlier precedents, making certain kinds of movement through the Caribbean viable.

I have identified three major ways of seeing or imaging the Caribbean within Northern Atlantic representational practices.²³ The first concerned 'the productions of nature' as living substances with particular kinds of utilitarian value. From the original European 'discovery' of a botanical cornucopia in the tropics (heavily indebted to indigenous knowledge) to its collection, ordering, and study, botanical collection and pharmaceutical testing of tropical flora have re-shaped Europe's relation to 'nature', scientific knowledge, and conservation. Secondly I turned to the seventeenth century 'scenic economy' in which tropical landscapes came to be viewed through a painterly aesthetic constructed around comparative evaluations of cultivated land versus wild vistas. This form of visual consumption often utilised a 'rhetoric of presence' (Pratt 1992) which offered an implicit ideological legitimization of slavery. And thirdly, in the nineteenth century there was a renewed emphasis on 'wild' nature and the bodily experience of immersion in it. This Romantic vision of untamed tropical nature was constructed around experiences of moving through tropical landscapes and of experiencing bodily what was already known imaginatively through literature and art.

In touring 'through' the islands, moving from one to another, the ideas of ease, luxury and relaxation were crucial. The tourist immersed his or her body in a tropical experience of sights, scents, and tastes in which nature was understood to be more bountiful, more colorful, with more flowers, exotic fruits, and leafy greenery. At the same time, it was a place where labor was done by others, and for the traveler living would be easy. It was also a place where tourists engaged in sensuous abandon, indulging in over-eating and enjoying substances like alcohol, tobacco and later ganja. Thus the fantasies of tropical nature came to be closely allied with experiences of

transgression and intoxication, often linked with sexual encounters with the exotic 'others' who inhabited these island worlds-apart. The Caribbean as a whole has become a carnivalesque site for hedonistic consumption of illicit substances (raunchy dancing, sex with 'black' or 'mulatto' others, smoking of 'ganja'). These 'hedonistic' holiday practices of abandon today serve to mark 'the islands' as different kinds of place than the tourists' point of origin, while reinscribing them as 'resorts' beyond civilization, places where rules of civility can be suspended. I suggest that such practices of touristic hedonism are inseparable from the ways in which the Caribbean landscape has been viewed, represented, and used as the backdrop for Euro-American fantasies of the tropics as both a place of plenty and a place of danger. This invention of Caribbean nature has in turn been read onto the bodies of Caribbean peoples, implicating them in a sexualised scenic economy in which their bodies are objectified, commodified, and dehumanised.

NOTES

¹ Amy Jenkins, 'Lust for Life', *The Guardian* Travel Section, 17 February 2001, p.6.

² In fact any effort to naturalise the Caribbean immediately comes up against the thoroughly cultural remaking of its human, floral, and faunal populations. Introduced plants include many mainstays, e.g., coffee trees, sugar cane, mangoes, bananas, citrus fruit trees, the cannabis plant, and the famous breadfruit trees brought back from Tahiti by Captain Bligh. Introduced animals include cattle, sheep, goats, horses, cats, dogs, rats, mongoose, etc. People, of course, have come from almost every part of the world.

³ On the very curious loss of this manuscript, its rediscovery in 1983, and publication by the Pierpont Morgan Library in 1996, see the foreword by Charles E. Pierce Jr. and introduction by Verlyn Klinkenborg to *The Drake Manuscript in the Pierpont Morgan Library: Histoire Naturelle des Indes* (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1996). The remarkably naïve introduction states that 'All early visions of the New World have the power to haunt us. We search them for signs of innocence, for an Edenic imagining of a world we know too well, just as we continue to consult mirrors for lingering traces of our childhood. This trait is less a measure of nostalgia for a lost world, a time when several continents remained undiscovered, than it is a measure of faith that when Europeans first saw the New World they responded as we imagine ourselves responding – with aesthetic joy and a sense of moral promise' (p. xvii). Klinkenborg seems almost apologetic that we will not find 'virginal' New World scenes within the

manuscript, but far more brutal scenes of economic exploitation, enslavement, and invasion of indigenous lands.

⁴ William Reed, *The History of Sugar and Sugar Yielding Plants* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1866), p. 8. For a good brief history of English entrance into the Americas see Anthony McFarlane, *The British in the Americas, 1480-1815* (London and New York: Longman, 1994).

⁵ ‘The beginning and Proceedings of the new plantation of St. Christopher by Captain Warner’ in *The True Travels, Adventures and Observations of Captain John Smith in Europe, Asia, Africke and America, beginning about the yeere 1593, and continued to this present 1629*. 2 Vols., Reprint from the London edition of 1629 (Richmond, VA: Franklin Press, 1819), p. 273.

⁶ Chandra Mukerji, ‘Reading and writing with nature: a materialist approach to French formal gardens’ in Brewer and Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods*, p. 441.

⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 442-43.

⁸ See also Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). A crucial influence on English conceptions of landscape were the writings of William Gilpin, e.g., *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty, On Picturesque Travel, and On Sketching Landscape* (London, 1803).

⁹ Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, p. 28, also cited in McFarlane, *British in the Americas*, p. 128.

¹⁰ Charlevoix, *A Voyage to North America*, p.319.

¹¹ Daniel McKinnen, *A Tour Through the British West Indies in the Years 1802 and 1803, giving a particular account of the Bahama Islands* (London: J. White; R. Taylor, 1804), pp. 6, 16.

¹² *Ibid*, p.18-19.

¹³ *Ibid*, pp. 56-7.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 88-9.

¹⁵ Captain J.E. Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches, comprising visits to the most interesting scenes in North and South America and the West Indies, With notes on Negro slavery and Canadian emigration, 2 Vols.* (London: Richard Bentley, 1833), Vol. I, p. 244.

¹⁶ Sir Andrew Halliday, *The West Indies: The Natural and Physical History of the Windward and Leeward Colonies; with some account of the moral, social, and political condition of their inhabitants, immediately before and after the abolition of negro slavery* (London: John William Parker, 1837), p. 217.

¹⁷ Charles Kingsley, *At Last!* (London, 1873), p. 143.

¹⁸ Paton, *Down the Islands*, p. 66.

¹⁹ William Agnew Paton, *Down the Islands: A Voyage to the Caribbees* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 1888), p. 95.

²⁰ E.A. Hastings Jay, LL. B., F.R.G.S., *A Glimpse of the Tropics, Or, Four Months Cruising in the West Indies*. London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1900, pp. 34-5.

²¹ *Ibid*, pp. 63-4.

²² Susan de Forest Day, *The Cruise of the Scythian in the West Indies* (London, NY, Chicago: F. Tennyson Neely, 1899), pp. 8, 28-29.

²³ It is imperative to point out that people from various locations within the Caribbean have their own ways of seeing the places they inhabit, which draw on quite different visual traditions and cultural schemas. It is beyond the scope of this work to track Caribbean literary and artistic depictions of their native lands, but it is a project that would necessarily complement and amplify by contrasts the work undertaken here.

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