

Opiniones y ensayos

Tourism, Digital Presence and Becoming Virtual: The Caribbean

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In the movie *Shall We Dance* John Clark, the character played by Richard Gere, expresses the fantasy of going to the islands² On the website of the extra-regionally owned tourist liner Royal Caribbean International the white corporate leadership of the company declares: “No one knows the Caribbean better than we do”³ Potential tourists are offered the dream of a lifetime in the Caribbean. Cyberculture and the hard world of reality are not disconnected experiences. But part of the intrigue of digital space is that its existence both complements and challenges what we know about the real world. Given the fact that more and more people are experiencing foreign cultures as digital moments, digital presence threatens to supplant that which it simulates, the real.

Theories of tourism and development have undergone alterations over the decades. The two schools of modernization and dependency have contested their positions over the years⁴. In tourism studies modernization theories have proposed that the economic wealth from tourism will permeate throughout the entire society, the real hindrance to this trickle down are internal factors. Dependency theories have posited that the unequal economic relations that exist between the North and South are

responsible for the current status quo and this system will continue to impact negatively on the modernization project. These theories and their approaches represent the dominant sites of discourse throughout the 1960, 1970's and 1980's. Arguably, more recent approaches to the tourism phenomenon tend to deemphasize economic considerations while privileging the role of culture in the industry. Cultural critics like Jean Baudrillard have discussed the strategies by which some powerful corporate entities (like Disney) have gone about capturing the real world to incorporate it into the synthetic universe⁵. Military and discursive strategies have been deployed over the centuries to seize, manipulate, fashion and redeploy copies of Caribbean society for wider consumption. The fossilization of Caribbean culture through the perpetuation of stereotypes and iconic motifs is an even more potent

While digital media provide countless opportunities for the creation and dissemination of diverse cultural tropes, these media are more widely used by corporate entrepreneurial interests to streamline and stereotype. Caribbean culture has repeatedly caught the gaze of wealthy transnational agents and agencies, there is an ongoing fixation. These agencies have often

used their tools and leading-edge state-of-the-art technologies to try to fix, reconfigure and redeploy what is “Caribbean culture”. But Caribbean interests are also accomplices in the process and practice of fossilizing their very culture. Caribbean governments and private sector interests have used tourism as a tool of economic development; this strategy has had the indirect effect of streamlining perceptions of the region. Promotions and marketing advertisements have foregrounded a limited set of cultural metaphors. In the age of the machines the Caribbean’s digital presence continues to be subjected to tight industry compression. As a consequence the “Caribbean” exists as a set of stereotypes and tropes in the consciousness of the wider world. Western mainstream film and Caribbean tourism marketing are but two areas in which notions of Caribbeanness are refashioned, represented and simulated for popular consumption.

Too few academic studies engage with actual instances of this digital simulation. Too few academic studies concern themselves with Caribbean digital culture. While this essay is not exhaustive, it nonetheless wants to contribute to what will eventually be an area of expansive debate within Caribbean digital popular culture.

Earlier studies of Caribbean tourism have mapped out important practices and behaviours, but relatively few have taken into account the current advances in digital culture⁶. Graham Dann’s work *The Language of Tourism* was published before the digital culture revolution spread throughout all facets of Caribbean society, but even more recent works tend to concentrate on theory and theories of tourism, sometimes at the expense of engaging with the frontier sites of cultural transaction⁷. Given its longer history Western mainstream film has been the most potent medium for the perpetuation of stereotypes of the Caribbean. Web marketing marks the frontier site of fantasy imaging of the region. The cruise industry and boards of tourism across the region have turned to technology for economic salvation. But what is the nature of this cooptation of technology by the tourism industry? Is the technology passive in the whole exercise? Does technology come away from the association

with anything of its own? If the Internet is the new frontier site, what does Western mainstream film contribute to the process of regional compression?⁸ My intention here is not to develop a full blown discussion about the Caribbean in Western mainstream film, but rather to hint at how that sector has invested heavily in conjuring up simulated copies of the “Caribbean”.

References, references

Some of the recent films which make some reference to the Caribbean include the 1990s *Confined* which stars Michael Ironside, in which a minor character and his wife suddenly reveal that they are going to the Caribbean for vacation. This is a bland reference. But the absence of further detail permits the viewer to fall back on already established ideas and suspicions. In the movie *Thursday* (1998) a black man with an exaggerated Jamaican accent pretends to be a pizza man. When he gets to the door of a leading white character *this* man asks of him a favour: ‘A little ganja?’ In *Shattered Image* (1998) the female protagonist with a split personality meets a man who befriends her and they go on a vacation to the Caribbean where much of the movie is set. They go away in order to get away from a mysterious stalker who torments her psyche. The Caribbean is a fitting location for the playing out of scenes of suppressed fears and desires. In the Caribbean setting some locals do speak but they are peripheral. More substantial speakers are the card box cast taxi driver, and the all-knowing native witch. *Kidnapped in Paradise* (1999) explores the tensions between two estranged sisters who are reunited in the corrupted world of the Caribbean. In *Canadian Bacon* (1995) the American strategists and advisors to the President inform him that Canada would prove an easy foe to overcome. Almost as easy as in Grenada, they say. *Heartbreak Ridge* (1986) stars Clint Eastwood who is the no nonsense officer selected to train a bunch of soldiers for a final assault on the island of Grenada. Before he leaves in noble service of his country he must visit an unsatisfied wife, possibly for the last time. In the ABC high budget television movie *Future Sport* (1998) it is Wesley

Snipes who enters as a quasi-dreadlocked sports network business tycoon. He speaks with an Afric-Caribbean accent. *Tracked* (1998) also tampers with identities. It has the plot of a white protagonist who is captured and imprisoned and charged with keeping dogs, which will later chase him as he is released in some sick game instituted by a deranged jailor. In prison the protagonist is befriended by a black prisoner with a Caribbean accent. But the black man soon sheds his accent to reveal an American intonation and his special undercover agent status. Soon after the film establishes a more stable basis for the black man's development, he is taken out.

At the ending of the big release *Blade 2* (2002), the protagonist (played by Wesley Snipes) returns to reap retribution on a black Caribbean voodoo priest. Of course in the first film *Blade* (1998), Miracia, the Priestess who lives in a landfill ghetto has her cabin filled with, among other things, voodoo dolls. She requires 'an offering for the Orishas' for giving insight to the protagonist. He throws a handful of bills across the table. It is as much a commercial enterprise as it is a cultural, underworld transaction. *Sharktale* (2004) has two jellyfish brothers in Rasta tams (hats). They are subservient hit men for the big bad shark. Their alter egos are the blond dreadlocks in *The Matrix: Reloaded* (2003). In the 2005 movie *Hitch*, the female protagonist walks into the office and someone asks her "Barbados alone"? Rupee's smash single "Tempted to Touch" plays in the dance club. In the 2005 box office hit *The Wedding Crashers* Shaggy and Rayvon's song "Summertime" plays when the party of family and friends vacation somewhere in the USA. There is an allusion to the Caribbean without even stating this verbally in the script. In this same film there is a minor black character with a contrived Caribbean accent. He is servant, he waits on the table of the main protagonists, or otherwise one of his masters turns off the television in his face, when he seeks a space of respite from the demands of servitude. *The Forty Year Old Virgin* (2005) casts a number of characters that persistently discourse on sex and... sex. Among these characters are two minor intrusive characters. One is of East Indian descent and the other aspires

to a Caribbean accent and identity. Their role punctuates the excesses of the movie's fixation with sex. The Caribbean character is especially crazed and nourishes a fixation with goats. Apart from this, there is also a young black "brother" who enters the electronics store wearing a shirt with the words boldly declaring JAMAICA. At least he does not talk dirty about sex. He is more concerned about doing a clandestine, illegal transaction. These, as other mainstream films reference the Caribbean as a place of leisure, unmitigated pleasure, voodoo, servile natives and carefree citizens. Western mainstream film industry therefore falls back on to stereotypes but at the same time the industry perpetuates and institutes these stereotypes.

Virtually Beyond Your Imagination

Caribbean tourism has always been a phenomenal source of regional marketing. In the early 21st century Caribbean governments increasingly turned to tourism as a source of renewable economic activity and revenue. The exotic locations and their culture are a major sales pitch for selling the islands in the 21st century⁹. The imprint of a long history of conquest, exploitation and the working out of imperialist politics have added to the sense of mystique of these islands at the center of Western Atlantic history. In the 21st Century the region's position within the global tourism industry is significant. But increasingly there is threat of competition from other locations, as well as the falloff due to the new global foregrounding of "terror". These threaten the regional marketing potential. The region has also been encumbered by the lurking censure of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) which sought to monitor and control the functioning, and processing of off-shore companies and entities in the region. The region's iconographic trace and the increasingly troubled global climate has made the Caribbean both a surrealistic object of desire and escape, and a region in search of a role in an advancing technological world.

Caribbean presence and relevance is not only being fought for in the realm of entertainment, popular culture, academic dis-

course, and sports, but also in the real hard-sell world of direct cultural marketing. It is in the realm of tourism that the region has most stridently had to project and sell its image in the first decade of the 21st century. As the practice of marketing has advanced, so Caribbean destinations have had to find ways of entering into the technological spaces that capture and project images and sound to global audiences. Yes, Caribbean tourism organisations and entities continue to market through more traditional avenues like travel agencies, radio, television, word of mouth and other low-tech cost-cutting promotions. But in the 21st century the dynamic changed and Caribbean entities have taken to cyber-marketing to help them in the quest to remain visible and viable. To achieve these aims they have had to grapple with the challenges of 'becoming virtual'.

The reality of Caribbean marketing semiotics is that the region is regarded for its exotic, romantic, yet sensual themes. Traditional dedicated travel brochures from throughout the region have played out this theme for a very long time, and even up to the present¹⁰.



The Internet has already gained the reputation as a 'sexy' medium. It is 'sexy' and attractive in the sense that it appeals to a wide range of users, functions, tasks and objectives. But it is also sexy in the sense that there is an active process at work within this technology that seeks to claim greater and greater space for sensual, sexual and also near-pornographic material. It is indeed possible that among the wars being fought within the arena of the World Wide Web there is and will be an all out confrontation between forces which are differently positioned with respect to their outlook on what is acceptable and what is not acceptable on public communications platforms like the Internet. The indices of sex, violence and freedom are three categories that will preoccupy Web legislation and

policy for a long time. The virtual culture wars are therefore destined to be fought on a number of different fronts. The region, partly because it is a hub for leisure and recreation, is destined to be a central site for the playing out of various confrontations. The entertainment industry understands this, and thus a number of mainstream Western productions that deal with sex, gaming, espionage and violence invoke the presence of the Caribbean.

Tourism Marketing on the Web

Caribbean Web marketing politics cannot escape the already heavily sexually driven signature of Caribbean culture in export. The Internet's already sexually coated and under-girded pop-up construction makes it an almost ideal location for the playing out of the Caribbean's iconographic symbols. Caribbean presence in the international world is therefore today constructed around an amalgam of its several global contributions in the realm of culture, sports, entertainment, politics and economic activity. Its geographical proximity to the USA mainland also enhances its presence. A brief examination of tourism marketing practices on the Internet illustrates the extent to which Caribbean societies have begun to internalise their own image and how they perceive their presence in the world. This examination also hints at the role that the Internet is likely to play in the future simulation of Caribbean reality.

The region's umbrella tourist association, the Caribbean Tourist Organisation (CTO) has since its forging in 1989 promoted itself as the unifying core of the region's several independent national tourism partners and associations. Its official website is called Onecaribbean.org. In keeping with its primary mandate of collecting and disseminating research and data about the region's tourism, the official site dissuades casual surfers from browsing beyond its welcome page. This intranet therefore requires users of the site to become members and to have login Ids. The coldness of this "all-embracing" organisation is in stark contrast to the much warmer and friendlier sites of individual tourist centers throughout the region.

It would be too great a task to discuss at

length the plethora of sites devoted to tourism throughout the region. The reality is that tourism entities, ranging from small hotels, to car rental companies have embarked on offering their services and facilities to tourists without much care for larger national imperatives. Some sites are therefore crude hard sell concoctions, others are cleverly fashioned to generate interest and revenue. Conversely, some other entrepreneurs have sought to regularise and centralise their products and services by collaborating with other associations, sharing space on the Internet or by purchasing links on larger, more established websites. Although there is obvious autonomy exhibited at several sites within the tourist industry, it is evident that even autonomous sites draw unconsciously from the pool of established tropes that undergird and entangle the tourism sector.

Many national tourism boards have established their dedicated sites through which they have sought to control and shape the presence of their national product in cyberspace. Belize's www.belize-tourism.org is spared in its presentation, preferring only to give to enquirers some of the hard information and practical details about the organisation and about Belize. Its visual centrepiece therefore is the brightly written logo on the site's front page that says: "Catch the Adventure". Two backpackers sit atop a rocky hill overlooking a wooded plain. Yes this site is careful to show images of beaches and some coconut trees, but it is uncharacteristic and stands out among others in that it seems more intent on giving written narrative detail about Belize and the industry. Its associated website Travelbelize.org is much more colourful and provides greater insight into the world that the Internet opens up as Belize. Its highlight is a virtual tour which one hopes is true multimedia, but which turns out to be text and still-image based. By undermining one's expectations for a true virtual tour, the official site forces the surfer to refocus on the hard data that it presents as scribal document within the otherwise trendy multimedia matrix/matrics called the Internet.

In contrast to the fact-based text driven presentation on Belize's official site, there is the much more trendy, yet formulaic

presentation at www.stkitts-tourism.km/ which comes with an introductory slideshow that you have the option of skipping. But you get to see it anyway. It is a fifteen second juxtaposition of the hustle of the city, against the packaged tranquility of an island experience. This contrast is cleverly conveyed at the level of visual and aural experience. In the opening show the noise of congested motorways gives way to what is intended to be melodic strains of steelband music. The steelband sound samples are weak and are much closer to bells, but the surfer is meant to supplement these absences and to know that this Caribbean location will offer pan, real pan among other stock items. Its virtual tours and slide shows distinguish this site from the previous one on Belize. It gives many images of beaches, carnival, sunsets, smiling natives. While the surfer has near seamless control of the several experiences, being able to navigate through or across pages of information, the promise of moving shows on the slick St Kitts and Nevis site keeps back the navigator who has to wait on the technology to load the graphic experience that will bring the Caribbean near-fully alive.

Most of the tourism websites affiliated with governmental agencies are formulaic. Or maybe put another way, they are aware of marketing imperatives and market expectation and so they do not veer too far away from stereotypical or stock images and iconographies. For example, www.svg-tourism.com, www.anguilla-vacation.com, www.stlucia.org, www.grenadagrenadines/cal.html, www.barbadostourism.org all display the tranquil sea, lazy days of relaxation, coconut palms and underwater splendour. Dominica's www.dominica.dm/index.php replaces these with an overpowering photo of its children wishing visitors to the site and the island a merry Christmas during Christmas season of 2004. The children wear what appears to be national dress. A recurring item of focus on most regional websites is their foregrounding of festivities, such as Creole Festival in Dominica, Grenada's sailing and carnival festivals, St Lucia's Jazz Festival, and 'the Caribbean's only Blues Festival' in St Vincent and the Grenadines, of course. Jamaica, Barbados and the Bahamas also display

their celebrations.

Over the Internet it is not easy to differentiate the more developed Caribbean tourism locations. The several sites make use of various technologies that can give the illusion of having the capacity to deliver the goods to all who visit from across the world. Most sites, government-sanctioned and otherwise, still invest heavily in visual impact and imagery, with emphasis on stock photos and slide shows using dissolving frames. Text is crucial to Web marketing, since sound technology on the Internet is not always a stable medium for advertising. Like moving video, Internet sound is still heavily dependent on a range of factors. Among these factors are considerations of the various users and the range of computer or wireless systems they will use to access the World Wide Web. Text is therefore still a dependable medium within virtual transactions. Streaming audio and video are indeed trendy facilities that demonstrate the power of technology and accordingly too, the wizardry and near-magic that should appeal to tourism interests, but these tools are at times too quirky to be trusted as stand-alone investments by marketing agencies in the tourism business. Caribbean tourism related pages are therefore safe sites of technological display. This mistrust of the Internet's imagined potential reflects a shrewd awareness of what is and isn't possible in the real hard world of techno-marketing. It also reflects the kinds of tensions that are at play at the cusp of techno-cultural transactions.

But having said so, the point must also be made that there are relatively few sites in this arena which have consciously sought other ways of circumventing technology's limitation, in order to present less formulaic marketing. For instance, few sites employ humour, irony, non-centralised motifs, or maybe even cartoon-type imagery within their marketing frontlines. They therefore do not aim to set themselves apart as much as they hope to remain the same to the perception of the potential tourist. Locked into this conventional marketing politics is the belief that potential visitors want direct messages, they do not want to be bogged down with difference, they do not want to think of 'natives' as anything more than stock fig-

ures with an island personality.

If I have cast the impression that Caribbean marketing aesthetics in the digital domain is predictable, safe and lacking in inspiration, then that is largely so; but another reality of Web marketing and tourism is the fact that virtual technologies and industries like tourism are excellent associates. The Net's potential for interactivity and dialogue has created a more dynamic set of relations between potential land visitors and their eventual hosts. Most sites therefore offer facilities to book rooms, choose the type of vacation, flights, transportation -all online in a single domain. Caribbean interests have used these facilities to advance their position within the market.

If the Internet is a medium of illusion, then few entities have better exploited the mystique of the Caribbean within this technological matrix than has the cruise industry. Surprisingly, academic literature on Caribbean cruise tourism has not increased to match the vibrancy of the cruise tourism sector in the Caribbean¹¹. This can hardly remain so for much longer, given the ongoing tension between some Caribbean governments and the cruise ship industry. Of course, the cruise industry is owned by large transnational corporations and players. In the first decade of the 21st century Caribbean tourist destinations were locked in contentious debate with the cruise ship industry over the proposal by some islands in the region to increase the head tax on cruise ships. The cruise industry resisted, and even threatened to boycott some islands of the region. The region could not unite on this matter. The large conglomerates had again won out. For as they have proclaimed, no one knows the Caribbean as they do!

All of this confrontation took place in the traditional open domain of debate. In the new virtual arena, cruise conglomerates had for some time prior taken charge of projecting the region as though it were owned by them and constructed for the purpose of hosting their floating virtual hotels. Cruise lines like Royal Caribbean and Princess Cruises have marketed themselves as symbols of the region. This is done on a number of sites where again, stock images and sounds of placid, complicit na-

tives provide the backdrop for the moving adventures that only a cruise will provide. A recurring feature of many of the front pages of sites that exploit the region is their foregrounding of usually white travelers, and of the impressive cruise ships. The destinations are usually covered beneath a layer or two of navigational space, hidden away only to be uncovered as exotic ports and welcoming harbours.

The effect of much of this marketing is that it inscribes fixed notions about who is a tourist and who is a native. But the control of the region's images, metaphors, myths and facilities through the virtual domain also explains why the cruise industry reacts disdainfully to any suggestion that the region should derive greater benefits from the tourism transaction. For, after all, in the virtual domain, the reality is that the cruise industry is preeminent. The owners of the cruise liners are foremost. The islands hardly have the kind of global visibility and existence that they do without the presence of the cruise and associated industries. It is instructive how the virtual arena can so starkly reflect the underlying tensions and power relations within the dialogics of the tourism industry. Having won control in the war for ownership in cyberspace, transnational interests have all but asserted dominance over the islands in the true-true world. Many Caribbean tourism marketers have bought into mainstream cyber-marketing aesthetics with its fixed iconographic templates and digitized stereotypes.

In many instances the region has had to follow the major trends and practices that are first tested and instituted in metropolitan centers. Although some countries have attempted to remain rooted to aspects of their traditional beliefs and practices, there have been many challenges. Throughout the early years of the 21st century the region was poised on the brink of an enforced regional union called the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME). An even larger giant of unification and control called NAFTA loomed on the horizon. In as much as these associations create larger economic blocks, they also serve to reinforce a set of stated and unstated cultural and legislative codes. Given the prolifera-

tion of interwoven and wired regional and extra-regional agreements, the Caribbean cannot for long hope to hold off the impending invasion of global norms, standards and beliefs. All this is a prelude to the eventual global homogenization of norms. Of course, the region's predicament has not been cast in these terms by its politicians, social commentators and academics. This way of reading the contemporary and post-contemporary evolution of Caribbean culture is perhaps more clearly expressed by religious commentators. A reality of Caribbean cultural and social evolution and its critique in the new technological era is the effacement of core issues to do with essence, existence, identity, destiny and truth. This calculated erasure has thrown into greater relief the need for emerging digital and cyber critics to work within, yet to work behind the façade of the matrix/matrixes of language, jargon, technology and political correctness.

Notes

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² The movie *Shall We Dance* starring Richard Gere Miramax 2004.

³ See <http://www.royalcaribbean.com/ourCompany/ourLeadership.do> as well as the link to *Find a cruise, destinations, the Caribbean*: at <http://www.royalcaribbean.com/findacruise/destinations/home.do;jsessionid=00000-WmXID-tFX172nDCYlxwcQ:vnkcf1s6?dest=CARIB>.

⁴ See for example these and other works by the authors. M. Clancy, M. 'Tourism and Development – Evidence from Mexico,' *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26, (1999)1: 1-20. Kevin Meethan *Tourism in Global Society* (Lond.:Macmillan, 2001), and M. Oppermann, "Tourism space in developing countries". *Annals of Tourism Research*. 22(1): 157-171, (1993).

⁵ See Jean Baudrillard's "Disneyworld Company" in The Parisian newspaper Liberation (March 1996).

⁶ Graham Dann's work *The Language of Tourism* (Wallingford: Cabi Publishing 1996).

⁷ See *Tourism and Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁸ See the David Timothy Duval ed. *Tourism in the Caribbean Trends Development Prospects* (London: Routledge, 2004). A few of the articles begin to touch on these issues.

⁹ See Yorghost Apostoloulos et al ed. *Island Tourism and Sustainable Development* (Westport: Praeger Publishers 2002).

¹⁰ See, for example, selected tourist brochures from the region.: *Truly Discover Grenada Carriacou and Petit Martinique* (St George's: Concepts Marketing Inc., 2003/2004). *Vacances/Holidays Saint Martin/Sint Maarten_no. 11* (no publisher, but circulated in St Martin around October 2005). *Great Escapes* Issue 4, 2005/6, Editor-in-Chief Alfredo Weatherhead. For these images see *Where to Stay in Grenada* (no publisher, no date) see last page and the back cover page. Magazine collected in March of 2004. On the back cover the name of the Grenada Board of Tourism is printed in bold and a website www.grenadagrenadines.com is given.

¹¹ See Robert E. Wood "Caribbean Cruise Tourism: Globalization at Sea" *Annals of Tourism Research*, 27(2): 345-370 (2002). <http://www.camden.rutgers.edu/~wood/Papers/cruise-atr.pdf>.

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