

Travelling Correspondence: Notes On Tourism

Jody Berland

1 Barbados, The Caribbean, February, 1988 Notes from a journal¹

"And we have so much to be thankful for. Just look around you: the sky is bright, the air is fresh and clean, we are truly blessed." The radio is on in the cab. Gospel music floats across a sunny topography of picturesque underdevelopment, and the driver sings along. Barbados is riotously beautiful, at once 'civilized' and impoverished, a former colony, where tourism and sugar jointly predominate as producers of the island's wealth. It is a hospitable environment in which to sketch out some of the themes central to the study of tourism: what it means to "be a tourist" (a form of cultural production distinct from "to travel"); what tourism means to the lucrative underdevelopment of growing portions of the world map; how the tourist industry manages the production of both landscape and culture; how local residents must continuously re-negotiate the possession of their own lives and landscapes.

Tourism motivates a process of continuous transformative *work* on the social environment. The traveller becomes a tourist through this productive process, which is dependent upon the capitalization of space and the never-ending repackaging of history. Everything from the monumental to the intimate and ordinary learns—is forced—to speak, thereby to produce value. It's a language of surfaces, of an excess of signs, and of shadows. Behind these may be found the hidden contours of neo-colonial world economy, of complex change, of an everyday life that is almost invisible to we consumers of the Exotic, of an imaginable era in which those who inhabit the place are no longer conscripted as Others in the text of tourism, and can get on with the work.

One does not ordinarily think of oneself in a category while watching these Others, unless one makes a conscious effort to do so. As Enzensberger points out, even "political tourism" reaches its verdicts from the *outside*². What is being judged, in "tourism of the revolution," is a representation of a possible future from the viewpoint of a rejected present. Other types of tourism reverse the chronology, and consume instead a representation of the pre-industrial past, an attempt to escape without directly confronting the futures closer to home. Either way, what is being sought in the act of being a tourist is the experience of transformation.

The nature of travel depends in important ways on the social unit you travel as. "The couple" is the overwhelmingly dominant construct in travel. Even children are a little seditious, but their parents' transgression is tolerated affectionately as it functions as a necessary footnote to the couple. Romantic

love is defined and shaped predominantly by a specific spectrum of mutual narcissism and comfortable pragmatism, intensified by social and economic sanctions. [These remarks must be read in the context of their origin: watching westerners on tropical beaches is as hazardous to empathy as being one.] The touristic experience is an attempt to reclaim a particular, more "natural" definition of the romantic; away from the banality of the everyday, the environment provides and licenses a more sensual dimension within the social formula of mutual dependency. The southern touristic experience is an intensified interval of pleasure, in which scenic backdrop and romance provide reciprocal legitimations for each other. The unfamiliar rhythmic caress of waves seduces the ear as did, once upon a time, the soon, June, moon croons in love songs of the 40s; no one believes them now, but nature cannot lie. The silhouette of lovers, palm tree and beach forms a harmonious landscape in which intensity of feeling, like the apprehension of the foreign, is at once aroused and becalmed.

Tourism also brings into focus the peculiar interdependence between consumption and intimacy, between consumption and the erotic. It offers an organized release of repressed energies, a set of occasions which practically command you to discover and fulfill your desires. Barbadians ask incessantly if one is enjoying oneself, having a good time, enjoying the meal? First time here? Pleasure is a location requiring continuous solicitude, which the locals offer with evident pride. They possess—they are—a natural resource which produces more than pleasure, and tourists are necessary to its conversion to wealth. Their smiles and solicitude are as necessary to their social and economic survival as stamina, forbearance, and excessive moderation are to our own. Their displays of warmth may be as "natural" as our legendary coldness. But like the nature which surrounds them, this "natural" resource has been converted to a social discourse, and money is changing hands.

We will never understand these smiles if we cannot see what lies behind the 'tropical paradise' we are so anxious to consume: we must also note the ironic amusement of 'natives' who serve it up, the complicit stupidity of tourists, and the social process through which all of these are produced, as any natural resource, for conversion to finished product, for conversion to income, a labour process in which we are an essential ingredient, and our happiness an essential result. The refusal to smile, where it occurs, can be read as a statement about the social economy of tourism, against which, in many cases, it may seem pointless to rebel.

In tourism, the class structure of visiting nations is not disguised. One portion of tourists is too anxious to lose its dignity; another, too anxious to retain it. The rich, however, excel at the taking of pleasure. They are knowledgeable about fishing, pleasure boats, good beaches, restaurants, tanning, good liquor, friendly management, currency exchange. Their approach is relaxed and efficient. The rest of us, unschooled in this art, watch them for tips. Like many of the young natives, their bodies are well proportioned and beautiful. Unlike most of the natives, theirs will stay that way. At some point they begin to look like caricatures.

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2 The Bus, Montreal

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"The mystery of foreign places and people appear both as separate from our own culture and its most exciting product."³

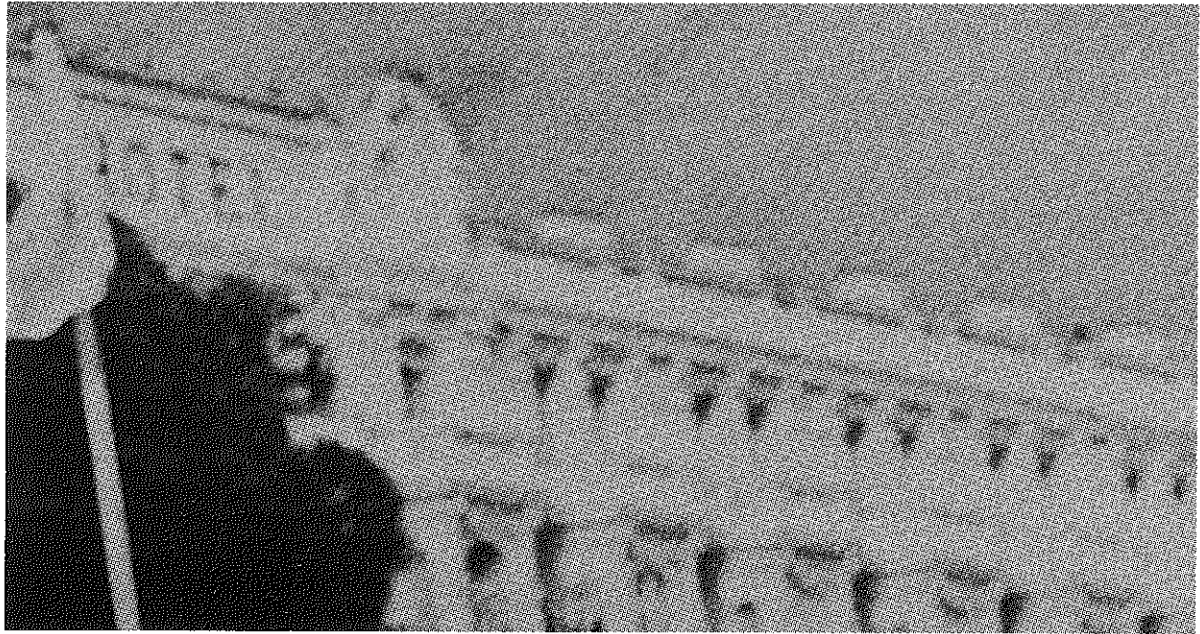
Tourism and desire: the association of terms raises immediate images of the south, of a welcome release of sensuality, of sun and skin, of colours and smells, of taste. Anyone who has travelled to "less developed countries" knows that peculiar reciprocity of longing which is encountered there: it may seem reciprocal but cannot be similar, equitable, or autonomous in its parts. We northerners long for what we construct as perfect difference: warmth, beauty, a nature that blesses self-indulgence, a balm for healing from cold air, cold temperaments, and the cold thrust of a mean-hearted economy. Our hosts long for a vision of escape, change, detachment, impersonality, getting somewhere, progress, money. Between us there can be a moment of strange, perhaps misleading mutual comprehension.

We are never the first outsiders to arrive. Each of us is an afterword to Michael Jackson, Coca-Cola, Jimmy Swaggart, Levi's, the Motion Picture Export Association of America (MPEAA), NBC, RCA, CIA. The worst tourists are the ones who want reliable electricity, good phones, paved roads, along with safety after dark and an unblemished indigenous culture from which to purchase native fabrics and crafts.

To the extent that these, and other blessings, are possible in Barbados, we find ourselves in an unusual situation, for which we have Canadian banks (local branches proliferate) and Canadian foreign aid to thank. Canada is very popular here. Everyone has a sister in Montreal, and many are saving up for a visit (they avoid the winters, of course), or speak of Canadian cities with admiration or nostalgia. Most Canadians are not accustomed to enjoying the fruits of the colonizer in such tangible, friendly, pleasurable a form. In this most beautiful and civilized island of the Caribbean, it is a rich and contradictory experience.

2 The Bus, Montreal-Ottawa

In the gaze from the bus window, forced passivity renders one philosophical. The emptiness of an unfamiliar landscape invites serious projection. Anthropologically, we "make a space for nature", a category that comes to encompass the zoo, the neighborhood park, Sundays in the country, camping, gardening, natives, women. In undertaking tourism, we look for ourselves in that demilitarized zone. The search of a landscape for clues to personal continuity works in precise opposition to the familiar anonymity which defines the everyday urban environment. Nature sites, like foreign civilizations, now present a choreography of controlled risk, our exploration providing an occasion for the testing arousal and conquering of change. Our contacts with "nature", as Alex Wilson points out, have been carefully mapped in order to make this process as efficient, economical, pleasing as possible. The idea that our relationship with nature is therefore a social construction doesn't mean that it's not "natural": if we "need" nature, this is an attempt to restore what is missing, presumed dead.



Tourism tantalizes us by proposing that everything visible is within our grasp, and yet works (as an industry) by evoking a degree of underlying longing, nostalgia, dissatisfaction. It rearranges marginal and metropolitan sites alike as conduits for pleasurable, thereby flattering us, providing a tangible sense of power over those sites which seem to place themselves before us. It mobilizes a desire to confront the sense of elusive displacement which will present and perhaps disperse itself only with the act of physical displacement which tourism incites.

3 When We Know Whom To Thank

Like everyone, I have travelled, and like everyone, I hate tourists. The contradictions of experience find their parallel in the contradictions of the landscape being traversed. We do not want to believe that the landscape is looking back at us, planning our arrival, calculating our movements. Much of what we dislike about "tourists" is the complicit dissimulation of this perception. Tourists want to possess the authenticity of the lake, the castle, the ruin, the dance, while in fact recognizing such "authenticity" (as Mark Neumann points out) only by previous circulation of the requisite image.

Canada is constructed through picture postcards as a series of "natural" sites, dominated by physical landscapes of a peculiarly rounded, vulnerable geometry, as if waiting for physical invasion to follow the eye; and by animals, and Natives, and Mounties in natural (not urban) settings. In the wake of tourism the distinction between nature and culture becomes increasingly meaningless. In Ottawa, even the seasons are presented as products of a beneficent administration: fall is presented as a gift of the National Capital Commission and February's Winterlude enjoins us to demonstrate our patriotism by enjoying winter. Oscar Wilde understood all this early in the century, arguing that sunsets were simply lesser imitations of picture postcards. Nature and culture can be equally picturesque;

they can also be equally reconstructed. When social history is also shaped to further the economy of tourism, we are confronted with very complex questions; then popular or artistic attempts to construct an indigenous history become part of the shaping of landscape for further colonization, as Ian McKay points out in his genealogy of Peggy's Cove.

Tourism elaborates the social construction of ethnic and regional identity, of difference, which is prerequisite to a renewed social ecology, and yet contaminated by precisely the same forces of commodity production against which such construction (and perhaps our travel) arises in implicit or conscious opposition. In this sense tourism is an exemplary metaphor for the cultural, psychological, economic, moral and aesthetic organization of contemporary cultural experience. It involves the re-alignment of both space and time: the reconstitution of the past and of the Other parallels the reconstitution of nature in the present, and in the end all tourism becomes a search for something called nature, even if that nature is simply one's own.

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Notes

1. This section is drawn from a journal kept during a 2-week convalescence in Barbados. Thanks to Rosemary Donegan for many conversations, cups of tea, joint encounters, and running commentaries during her week there with me.
2. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Tourists of the Revolution", *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics & The Media*. New York: Seabury Press, 1974.
3. Judith Williamson, "Woman is an Island: Femininity and Colonization". *Studies in Entertainment* ed. Tania Modleski, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986. p. 112.