

The Tropicalization of the Anglophone Caribbean

the politics and aesthetics of space in jamaica and the bahamas

KRISTA A. THOMPSON

Abstract

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The post-doctoral fellowship would enable me to complete my book manuscript which is entitled *The Tropicalization of the Anglophone Caribbean: The Politics and Aesthetics of Space in Jamaica and the Bahamas*. The book examines the complex visual systems through which the islands were imaged as picturesque tropical paradises for touristic consumption and the social and political implications of these images on the physical space on the islands and their inhabitants at the turn of the 20th century, a time when the tourism trade was beginning in the region. I focus on the photographs, international lantern lectures, and postcards the British colonial government and British and American corporations in Jamaica and the Bahamas used to refashion the islands at this time, tracing which aspects of the landscape or local inhabitants they seized upon as visual icons to promote the islands and how these key motifs changed at different historical moments.

I also explore how some parts of the islands were actually recreated or “tropicalized” precisely in the image of these representations. Botanical gardens, hotel landscapes, and tourist-frequented ports, in particular, became spaces where ideals of the picturesque tropical landscape were recreated in miniature. I also investigate how several locations which were frequently pictured in photographs, particularly hotel landscapes, swimming pools, and beach spaces, became segregated enclaves from which the islands’ black populations were restricted or barred. In sum, I investigate colonial representations as they related to and materially shaped the geographical spaces they pictured and practices of racial segregation. Additionally, I explore how sites popularized in colonial representations became contested spaces of anti-colonial protest for the islands’ black populations.

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Project Description

The post-doctoral fellowship would enable me to complete my book manuscript which is entitled *The Tropicalization of the Anglophone Caribbean: The Politics and Aesthetics of Space in Jamaica and the Bahamas*. The book examines the complex visual systems through which the islands were imaged as picturesque tropical paradises for touristic consumption and the social and political implications of these images on the physical space on the islands and their inhabitants. Approximately half of the book comes from my dissertation. The second part of the manuscript which I aim to write in residence will examine black Caribbean challenges to the processes of tropicalization.

The book investigates the constitutive role photographic images played in fashioning the islands as tourism destinations at the turn of the 20th century, a time when the tourism trade was beginning in the region. I focus on the photographs, international lantern lectures, and postcards created by the British colonial government and British and American corporations in Jamaica and the Bahamas. I trace which aspects of the landscape or local inhabitants tourism industry supporters seized upon as visual icons to promote the islands and pay attention to how these key motifs changed at different historical moments.

I argue that what tourism promoters often identified as picturesque were parts of the landscape that most readily exhibited ideals of a tropical island – those parts of the islands' environments which contained recognizable "tropical plants," organized into tamed, orderly, and garden-like displays. The very forms of "tropical vegetation," however, which became popularized as characteristic of the islands in photographs (most famously, banana, coconut, and palm trees) were those transplanted into the islands' landscapes by various colonial regimes and planters. Many representations also featured transplanted "picturesque natives," black and Indian (in the case of Jamaica) inhabitants who seemed loyal, disciplined, and clean British colonial subjects. Such images

served as visual testaments to the effectiveness of colonial rule and naturalized colonial transformations of the physical and social landscape.

This analysis of *tropicalization* will intersect with and revise many of the central theoretical concerns in post-colonial studies, Art History and visual cultural studies. First, the book will shift the geographic and analytical focus of scholarly work in post-colonial studies which has developed on how “the West” imagined other cultures and regions (Said 1978, Mudimbe 1994, Inden 1990), to focus on the Anglophone Caribbean. Comparatively little scholarship examines these processes in the modern Caribbean (Dash 1989, Enloe 1989). This study shows that more so than many other regions, visual representations were central to the colonial creation of the idea of the Anglophone Caribbean at the turn of the 20th century. Moving away from the primacy of textual analyses in post-colonial studies, the book will contribute to the field by adding both a new regional focus and visual cultural perspective, while calling attention in general to the geographically specific forms of colonial imaging.

My analysis of tropicalization will also add to studies of colonial imagery by examining the impact of colonial representations on the locations they picture. Generally, much postcolonial scholarship positions colonial representations as analytic mirrors which reflect the perceptions and ideologies of different constituencies in the West and seldom explores how such images circulated within, were interpreted by, and even informed the physical appearance of the environments they represented. My book provides a more dynamic and even dialogic consideration of colonial images. Indeed, I argue that an ideal of the tropical picturesque landscapes was first created and popularized through visual representations and then physically realized on parts of the islands' landscapes. I look at various campaigns undertaken by colonial authorities and local elites to make aspects of the islands look like the ideal of the Caribbean which had become popularized in visual representations. The importation of “tropical looking” trees from different parts of the world, for instance, was one way governments on the colonies attempted to recreate a visual ideal of the tropical Caribbean landscape on the islands' environment. Additionally, I show how photographs of these tropicalized parts of the island further reified a tropical ideal of the Caribbean landscape and even indigenized these “tropical” forms of fauna and flora from around the world as natural parts of the Caribbean and, more importantly, as representative parts of the islands' landscape.

I also investigate how the picturesque ideal of an orderly colonial society featured in photographs affected the politics of space on the islands and variously justified and naturalized

colonial practices. In particular, I argue that colonial authorities attempted to force certain social controls on the islands' inhabitants, asserting that their respective societies had to live up to the picturesque touristic ideal of a disciplined, law-abiding, and clean society sold in tourism promotion. These social controls were particularly exerted in spaces and sites which circulated in tourism promotion as representative of the islands. As a result several locations which were frequently pictured in photographs, particularly hotel landscapes, swimming pools, and beach spaces, became segregated enclaves from which the islands' black populations were restricted or barred. By examining how the promotion of paradisaical imagery of the islands' landscape had actual repercussions on the segregation, ordering of, and access to space for inhabitants on the islands, I aim to generate a more complicated understanding of the power and efficacy of colonial representations on the colonized.

The book will also contribute to the growing literature in visual culture studies which have been attentive to the use of visual representation, especially photography, in imaging Empire and colonized populations (Poole 1997; Ryan 1997; Tobin 1999). This literature, however, often overlooks the importance of the tourist trade. Recently, however, objects created in "contact zones" (Pratt 1992) of tourist encounters are being privileged as ideal sites for unraveling the complexities of transcultural interactions (Webb and Geary 1998; Phillips and Steiner 1998). Even in these studies of touristic photographs, however, few scholars locate photographs associated with tourism in light of disciplinary theories of photography (Tagg 1988; Crary 1992; Poole 1997). I show that in the context of the Anglophone Caribbean, the very process of representing and deeming parts of the landscape and the black population as picturesque and photographable marked their incorporation into a disciplinary society. The book documents how photographs popularized in tourism promotion served both as visual evidence of a disciplinary society and provided a means of exerting social control.

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