

ENCUENTROS



*Columbus's Ghost
Tourism, Art and National
Identity in the Bahamas*

Lecture by

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COLUMBUS'S GHOST: TOURISM, ART AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE BAHAMAS

Ian Gregory Strachan

The television commercial and the magazine advertisement have become the most powerful avenues through which information about the Caribbean is collated and packaged for the world to process and consume. They promise Bacchic release and then some: happiness, eternal youth, sexual adventurism, non-stop sunshine, and partying. Tourist advertising, which maps and commodifies the region for the world consumer, is not usually *of* the Caribbean. It is usually the work of foreign advertising firms enlisted by the tourist ministries of local governments, and contains scenes that Americans and Europeans—certain classes of Americans and Europeans—want to see of “the islands,” as they are homogeneously known. Or, at the very least, it contains what local governments *believe* their foreign clientele want to see. In either case, the commercial rarely seems to veer away from a formulaic portrayal of the landscape and its fun-loving folk so as to depict what the people themselves may think their respective countries are

truly like. Or have some Caribbean people come to believe the hype?

This *brochure discourse* offers an interesting version of “Paradise” to the hungry eye and able pocket book of the foreign visitor: captivating aerial shots of rocks plunging into deep blue-green waters teeming with colorful fish that flourish amongst astounding coral reefs; a white woman, alone, inviting, walking on a white sandy beach without footprints; lush green landscapes, smiling black natives chopping open coconuts, ready to serve, ready to please, gesturing with their hands for you to come and join in the fun. But how much authenticity does this world have for the “native”? Is it as “real” as a stage prop or movie backdrop?

What the television commercial doesn't show is that tourists are often kept as far away from the local population as possible, and that the parties, the bacchanal, are not meant for everyone. The television commercial does not show that the sea can also be rough and life-threatening—Haitian and Cuban “boat people”

Columbus's Ghost: Tourism, Art and National Identity in the Bahamas was presented at the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, D.C., on June 30, 2000 as part of the IDB Cultural Center Lectures Program.

know all about that. It does not show the lives of the citizens who, in countries like the Bahamas, are prohibited by law from gambling in the casinos and discouraged from swimming on certain beaches set aside for visitors. The lives of the smiling coconut chopper, of the man who keeps the beach free of debris, of the woman who cleans up after the revelers at pool side, remain concealed, un-illuminated by tourism advertising. In this genre, the beach itself is typical, unspecific, and could be any sandy stretch in the Caribbean, Florida, or the Pacific.

The revues that are performed in hotels and clubs that showcase “native culture,” are often caricatured displays, removed from the communities of people who were alleged to have created them. They typify what Derek Walcott, in his essay “What the Twilight Says,” quite aptly labels the “culture of the brochure”: *nativeness* packaged to enhance the tourist experience, replete with limbo dancing, fire spitting, and sure-footed walks on broken glass. Governments even attempt to take carnivals and other folk festivals, which have historically been sites of grassroots cultural resistance and commodify them as sources of exotic entertainment for the tourist.

And when they are not producing the exotic, the natives are cultivating a colonial past that adds to the visitors’ sense of a quaint island atmosphere. They are keeping alive the Royal Police Marching Band, and preserving the plantation Great Houses. Private concerns occasionally purchase such relics of slavery and turn them into inns for tourists. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century forts are refurbished and the exploits of long dead pirates are heralded. The natives give

tours of the old colonial buildings; they give vacationers rides by horse and carriage, and perform the quadrille while dressed in the style worn by slaves more than a century before (straw hats, scarves and all). Here, nostalgia for a time when things were “much simpler” is evinced. Proof is offered to the Northern leisure-seeker that the natives are indeed grateful for all that colonialism has given them, that the privileges they have won at the expense of others are not begrudged them. In fact, as Mark Crispin Miller suggests in his analysis of Jamaican tourism advertising, “Massa Come Home,” they want their white masters to return and make things fine again.

But however distant this imagined, heavily promoted, and staged Eden may be from the everyday experience of the majority of Caribbeans, it is a fantasy which the region’s nations—many of whom have achieved political independence from European colonial powers and represent the formerly colonized majority—encourage their citizenry to maintain for the benefit of tourists. Tourism is the cornerstone of the Bahamian economy. It is the largest source of private sector employment in the country and has been a crucial part of the Bahamian way of life for over a century. Indeed, the Bahamas is one of the most extreme examples of the Caribbean’s growing dependence on tourism for economic survival. Tourism has afforded Bahamians a level of material prosperity envied throughout most of the region, and this, of course, stands as its principal virtue.

This paper focuses on how the language and symbolism of tourism advertising (*paradise discourse*) and the local effort to maximize profits in the tourist

workplace, inform Bahamian artistic production and, by extension, inform notions of what it means to be Bahamian. The media I focus on principally are painting and popular songs.

In the field of popular music, the state's promotion of pro-tourism ideology through school curricula and state-run television and radio, in combination with the lure of the tourist marketplace, inspire a touristic brand of music that is not only consumed by visitors but by locals, as well. In the field of Bahamian art and crafts, the impact of tourism is equally as apparent, if not more so.

My comments today are taken from larger work entitled *Paradise and Plantation* that focuses on the five-hundred-year-old tradition of describing the Caribbean as "Paradise." This tradition is initiated by the Spanish explorers in the fifteenth century. It was Columbus, after all, who, seeing the Tainos of the Bahamas approach him bare chested and without iron weapons, declared them innocent, incapable of deceit and by extension, inhabitants of Paradise. This metaphor/myth now characterizes the language of Caribbean tourism advertising—albeit with a few arresting alterations. Such accomplished Caribbean writers as Derek Walcott, V. S. Naipaul, Jamaica Kincaid, Michelle Cliff and Paule Marshall have also wrestled with this tradition of paradise discourse, and what they have made of it is also a part of my research.

First let us look at a bit of the history of paradise discourse in the Bahamas so that we can get a sense of the weight this tradition brings to bear on the artists who emerged in the Bahamas since the 1960s. The material I am referring to was all produced after 1851 (when tourism began

its march to social and economic supremacy in the colony) and prior to the 1950s (at which juncture modern mass tourism was born). American and British travel writing, memoirs, and folklore studies composed during this period, though quite distinct from tourist ads as we know them, were nonetheless a forecast and laid the ground-work for brochures, and for many indigenous artistic renderings of the landscape and people. In addition to articles written since the nineteenth century in such publications as *Harpers* and *Scribners*, I am referring to travelogues like Charles Ives' *Isles of Summer* (1880) and William Drysdale's *In Sunny Lands* (1885).

Like the tourist brochures of today, this literature informed its readers that they had an exotic, tropical paradise right within reach—in the American case, right at their doorstep. Drysdale writes, "When the voyage is made in midwinter nothing can be more delightful than leaving snow-bound and ice-bound New York, and landing [in] three days in the height of summer at Nassau" (p. 4). These works seldom failed to mention the amenities of the Royal Victoria Hotel and the variety of diversions available to the visitor, from fishing, hunting, sailing, and bathing, to being amused by the natives, or—the biggest pastime of all—enjoying the warm weather and doing very little else. It is in discussing the benefits of this last activity (or inactivity) that all these writers seem to agree.

According to Charles Ives, "the [eternal] curse that doomed man to a life of labor, does not seem to have extended to those isles of unending summer. In fact," he adds, "it is only in such a climate as these islands that labor is a curse and not

a blessing" (p. 114). Ives writes,

Nobody appears to be at work. In sunshine or shadow, having and wanting nothing, taking no thought for tomorrow, they live on like the birds from day to day, not needing to take lessons of the ant nor of any other of the world's greedy and grasping toilers. All are merry, light-hearted and joyous; nobody frets and scolds; not a child cries; and the dogs, crouching beside their indolent masters, are literally too lazy to bark (p. 55).

The Bahamas is the place to go to unwind, a place outside of real time and real life, a place where the passions cannot be excited, where it is fine, natural, to be lazy, where ambition is impossible to maintain, vice is negligible, and labor unnecessary.

Now the wealthy of an industrial society, in contrast to the Victorian preoccupation with work, are looking for diversions. Now they are tired of work, envious of the lazy; they strive to be lazy, as well. By the mid-twentieth century countries like the Bahamas will become locales where consumers in the developed nations can escape work, spend leisure time, spend money without worrying about the rat race for money. These countries are encouraged to appear under-developed, and "virgin," even though the average modern North American tourist also wants all the technological conveniences he would have in his/her own country.

Winslow Homer made a number of visits between 1885 and 1898 to the Bahamas and was among those who romanticized black life there, particularly as it related to labor. Homer painted a num-

ber of works which showed that he had some appreciation for the precariousness of native life in the face of natural forces, particularly hurricanes. Nor was he unaware of the fact that black labourers on the sea did not work for themselves but were subject to the directives of the white merchant class. Nevertheless his portrayals are predominantly of scantily clad, physically perfect, anonymous black males engaging in work which (contrary to reality) was not at all taxing or exploitive. This suggests that he saw these people as living in a primitive, harmonious, natural, Eden-like state. Paintings such as "Turtle Pond" (1898), "The Sponge Diver" (1889), "The Conch Divers" (1885), "The Water Fan" (1898-99), and "Negro Cabins and Palms" (1898) are compelling examples. Many of these subjects seem as if they could dive for conch, catch turtles, and retrieve sponges, or just as well not do so. Catherine Anne Craft has noted the "exoticizing attitude" of Homer's Bahamian watercolors and his tendency, by ignoring the unpleasantness of their existence, to place these descendants of slaves in a "paradisiacal world in which nature's bounty renders all man-made implements unnecessary" (pp. 14-16). Winslow Homer's 1898 watercolor, "Under the Coco-Palm," now held at Yale, celebrates the elemental innocence of the native, here embodied by the child enjoying coconut water in the shade: the quintessence of island ease. Like the young, dark, sculpted black men almost entirely submerged in the sea, existing "*in nature*" as Craft puts it (p. 17), this boy *is* the landscape.

The cultural behavior of the black native of the Bahamas was of great interest to

travel writers as well. The liberality with which today's tourism industry borrows, bottles, and caricatures the culture of the people is not surprising when we consider that white visitors have treated black Bahamians as exotic parts of the landscape since the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, Anthony Dahl contends that up until the early 1950s, "the black appears in [Bahamian] literature as just another curious element of the landscape of a Bahamas looked upon as a sleepy, sun-drenched, idyllic, tropical paradise" (p. 59).

The "fetishization" of the "market woman"—that staple of Caribbean brochurism—is typical of the travel literature of this period. Like all the colorful Bahamian figures, "the smiling market women," Anthony Dahl explains, have no life, no meaning, no history, beyond the fact that they add local color (p. 98). Her fruits are a symbol of the abundance of paradise; her colorful dress, her bright smile, her warmth, her swinging hips, are symbols of Eden's vitality and exotic fertility. Her peculiar habit of holding fruit baskets on her head adds to the exotic effect. And to the hip-swishing turban-wearing market woman (a variation on the American stereotype of the black Sapphire) must be added the old or big female vendor, that appealing cousin of the American black Mammy. She is the ancestor of the modern Bahamian brochure favorite, the straw vendor: always she sits on her chair, smiling broadly, her wares hanging around her or at her feet. "Come babies, come," she seems to say. Perhaps she will offer the viewer a breast on which to suckle as in days of yore. Here the heavy-set market woman presents herself in all her matronly glory. It is worth noting that many of the market

women depicted in the earliest illustrations and photographs were not smiling visions of contentment, but by the time the modern brochure comes along, such license is revoked and the vendor must put forth the proper face for the camera.

Part of the process of inventing the Bahamas as a touristic paradise was the delegation of eligible sights to see and the romanticization of aspects of Bahamian history that would give the visitor a sense of adventure. This process of creating "authentic" tourist destinations, of declaring places as "worth seeing," of designating a place as an instantly distinctive feature of the Bahamian landscape, is related to what Benedict Anderson describes as "a history of colonial-era logoization" which affords "instant recognizability" to certain aspects of the colonial landscape (p. 183). "Postage stamps, with their characteristic scenes—tropical birds, fruits, fauna, why not monuments as well?—are examples of this stage," states Anderson. "But postcards and school room text books follow the same logic" (p. 182).

The Bahamas becomes invented as a series of postcard sights/sites. In the nineteenth century the illustration acts as predecessor to the photograph: the Queen's Staircase, local forts, the huge ceiba or silk cotton tree, the flamingo, fish like the blue marlin, flowers like the hibiscus, animals like the iguana and the green turtle, the coconut tree: all of these become emblems, logos of "The Bahamas." The Bahamian water itself will emerge by the mid-twentieth century as the quintessential sight. The transparency of the water on white sand becomes the Bahamian geographical claim to fame and the cornerstone of the Bahamian paradise product (Blake, p. 176).

The paintings of Albert Bierstadt and Winslow Homer certainly helped in this process.

Of course, the natives of the Bahamas are as much touristic emblems of the colony as the nature of which they are a part in the minds of many visitors of this period. Lazy black boys riding mule drawn carts, the “native hut” replete with inhabitants, black boys diving for coins, the street scenes of Grants Town: these were the staple post-cards and illustrations.

In his history of Jamaican tourism, *To Hell with Paradise*, Frank Taylor writes,

The concept of Jamaica as a paradise was a fiction, widely and unequivocally rejected by a black population that was constrained to abandon this so-called paradise were they to improve their material lot in life. Jamaica was a fool’s paradise, for only a fool could entertain such notions of Jamaicans as care-free and contented. (p. 107)

But let us explore the parameters of a state-promoted, tourism-based self-consciousness, a Bahamian paradisiacal idea of community and nation. The objective is to examine the dimensions of tourism’s influence in the cultural domain, its power to shape the self-perception of Bahamians through its presences. So pervasive and overpowering an industry must, through its physical presence, economic presence, social presence, and media presence, impose itself on the imaginations of Bahamians, impose itself in such a way that it begins to influence how Bahamians imagine themselves, how Bahamians imagine the landscape of their country, their community, and their world. And neither is such a phenom-

enon unique to the Bahamas, as Colleen Cohen’s article “Marketing Paradise, Marketing Nation,” on the links between the marketing of the British Virgin Islands as a feminized Paradise and the Virgin Islanders’ own expressions of patriotism, has shown.

Other than increased spending on marketing and continued recruitment of foreign capital, how has the Bahamian Government sought to secure the future of this industry which has had an undeniably positive effect on the material conditions of most Bahamians? Notions of the Bahamas as Paradise and of Bahamians as custodians of Paradise have become part of the ideology of the State, an ideology promulgated through what Louis Althusser would have called “State Ideological Apparatuses,” the schools and the media in particular.

By the 1980s the Bahamas had already risen to the top of the regional ladder and was fighting to maintain its position. The Bahamian Government had become very concerned about the country’s growing reputation as a place where tourists were treated inhospitably. Tourism requires an almost completely black workforce to serve a wealthier, healthier, mostly white clientele, which often harbors notions of their own superiority and many unrealistic, preconceived ideas about the type of experience they will be getting for their money. Clearly, Majority Rule and the improvement of living conditions (due largely to the tourism economy itself) have reduced the willingness of Bahamians to bend over backwards to provide “Paradise” for white visitors. The trouble in the Caribbean is that the region’s history of slavery and the present social and economic realities

which have resulted from that history, make an industry founded on white leisure and black labor more than an ordinary consumer-producer relationship.

In the mid-1980s, the Ministry of Tourism launched a sensitizing campaign which, it was hoped, would remind Bahamians of the importance of being good hosts and which would encourage them to take pride in their work, rather than see it as demeaning. In addition to industry-wide programs and seminars, photo-ads portraying black Bahamians in the hotel industry who were happy, smiling, and enthusiastic were produced and disseminated throughout the country. These images appeared in hotel offices and staff cafeterias, in local businesses, in brochures and magazines, in school classrooms, in libraries and in government offices. "The Bahamas: Our Pride and Joy," became the rallying cry of officials in the industry. The Government was so committed to promoting tourism that then Prime Minister Sir Lynden Pindling, who had led the country for twenty-three years and was considered a Black Moses, dressed up as a bell boy at the Paradise Island Resort and Casino on October 1, 1990 to show the people by example what good service was all about.

It speaks volumes that, in 1999, under a new political regime, the Director of Tourism, Vincent Vanderpool Wallace, would remark in a Feb. 15, 1999 *Nassau Guardian* article that worker attitudes might again hold the country "hostage." But if such overt efforts to indoctrinate the people have had little success, there are many other ways that tourism affects the culture and self-perception of the people and creates a climate wherein talk of Paradise is tolerated, at the very least.

Notwithstanding the contradictions between an imaginary paradise and the lived experience of most Bahamians, in a society so dominated by tourism, independent sources of community identity must contend with a state-sanctioned, financed, and promoted, and industrially packaged brochure "mytho-reality."

First, Bahamians have a distorted sense of the past. Like many colonized Caribbeans, their knowledge of the lives their own ancestors led in the country is very limited. Up to the early 1960s, the history taught in Bahamian schools, and the literature taught there as well, was British. Colin Hughes makes the following observation in 1989 on this subject:

[T]he matter in which Bahamians take national pride would be the beauty of their country; in particular are the shallow sea which gave the archipelago its name, and the colorful history that begins with Columbus's discovery of the New World and proceeds melodramatically through the Puritans and pirates, loyalists and wreckers, blockade-runners and bootleggers. . . . But Bahamian history as it has been written so far is very much the history of the dominant white community, when it is eventually expanded to include the social and economic history of slaves, spongers, peasant farmers and fishermen, that part will lack the Saturday matinee glamour which [is] attached to the earlier, incomplete version (p. 89).

We will return to Bahamians' notion of the beauty of their country momentarily, but the brand of "historiography" Hughes describes, when commodified by

tourism, has even more power to alienate. Tourism makes this romantic history part of its paradise product. The name of Blackbeard is kept alive by every tour guide. We now have Pirates Cove Beach Resort, Blackbeard's Cay and Discovery Island. Businesses as diverse as those that deal in air conditioning, car rentals, and frozen fish now include the word "Paradise" in their titles. These are perfect examples of how Anderson's colonial "logoization" meets the market place. The largest hotel in the nation, Sun International's Atlantis (talk about mythology), is located on what was once Hog Island but which, since 1962, has been known as "Paradise Island."

In the Bahamas, where before they can even collect their baggage or pass immigration, all arrivals to the Nassau International Airport are greeted by a small band playing calypsoes like "Yellow Bird" and "This is My Island in the Sun." It can at times become difficult to distinguish what aspects of Bahamian life exist for tourist enjoyment and which are off limits. Describing this state of affairs in the 1960s, Gordon K. Lewis wrote that, "Entire departments of local government, the public library, and the police, for example, are treated as tourist attractions rather than public services" (p. 328). As a case in point, there was a recent debate in *The Nassau Guardian* (May 2000) about whether it would be in the public interest to change the police uniforms to better suit the climate and risk losing the appeal the colonial garb has for tourists. No one has been a more photographed, living landmark than the black Bahamian policeman in his colonial uniform.

It is fair to say that many parts of the Bahamas have truly become part of a

stage. Bahamians live on it. They cannot escape the tourist. They will run into him/her sooner or later. In 1993, 3,682,260 tourists visited a country which has a population of under 280,000. (The number of tourists first exceeded the Bahamian population in 1937, when there were 34,000 tourist arrivals). Tourists are, of course, immediately recognizable. They wear the tourist uniform. Bahamians become defined in opposition to the tourist. Bahamians know that when they see the tourist, the Government hopes that they will behave in a certain way: when driving, they should give way for the tourist pedestrian; when the tourist asks a question, they must be nice, must smile and give him/her the directions he/she asks for without grumbling; if the tourist asks a question about a building's history, about the weather, they must be as cooperative as possible. They must be as cooperative as possible because the welfare of the nation depends on it. This is not to assert that Bahamians would not wish to be cooperative to strangers if they were not dependent on tourism. This is not to assert that every Bahamian is pretending when he helps the tourist. The point is that the Bahamian Government applies pressure to its citizenry, making it abundantly clear that anything but openness, smiles, generosity and helpfulness toward the tourist would be against the national interest and "unBahamian." The Bahamas is not unique in this. Polly Pattullo has noted seeing a poster in Dominica in the early 1980s which read "Smile. You are walking a tourist attraction" (p. 62).

Since the construction of the Royal Victoria Hotel in 1861, the tallest man-made structures in the Bahamas have al-

most exclusively been hotels. In the Bahamas, tourist posters are often the only images of the country that cover elementary classroom walls. Bahamian college students abroad have tourist posters plastered on their bedroom walls. In the Bahamas, tourist advertisements are shown on local television as programming fillers. Other fillers educate the public about the history of key landmarks, landmarks designated touristic sites over one hundred years before. Snippets of footage show flamingoes marching, or fish swimming, or fishermen scaling fish as they smile, or black boys on a dock smiling as soft music plays in the background, or idyllic shots of quaint Family Island settlements in Abaco or Harbour Island. As a result of all this, Bahamians have a kind of brochure self-knowledge. The posters of sunsets, of flamingoes, of certain flowers, of certain seascapes, underwater and on-land scenes—all of which are deemed beautiful by the colonizer and now the tourist—give Bahamians an idea of what is worthwhile and beautiful in their country. This is exactly the overlooked element in Hughes's observation that Bahamians are most proud of the natural beauty of the country. We are not saying that every glance at a sunset or the sea is one in which the Bahamian sees through the eyes of the tourist, of the foreigner. Nor are we saying that Bahamians could not come to the conclusion on their own that certain aspects of the landscape or seascape are "beautiful." We are saying that for over a hundred years, the sunset, the sea, certain birds, certain fish, certain flowers, the forts, certain limestone and coral formations, have been fetishized, logoized, commodified by the tourist and the tourist industry, and that

these were the *only* images, along with those of happy, welcoming natives—and occasionally, working natives—that were promoted by colonial governments, tourists and travel writers, through illustrations, stamps, postcards. We are saying that even after nationalist governments assume power this fetishization/logoization/commodification has continued, has in fact proliferated with the advent of color photography and the electronic media. Bahamian currency, for instance, reifies various clichés of Bahamian "native" life, flora, and fauna that have been enriched by travel literature since the nineteenth century. In 1992, Christopher Columbus even graced the dollar bill in commemoration of his landfall five hundred years earlier.

Though we must grant that every nation inspires love, loyalty, and sacrifice, the bombardment of the local community with touristic propaganda, coupled with one of the highest standards of living in the region, largely through tourism and international finance and a long history of isolationism which dates back to the colonial period, makes the Bahamian love of country a very peculiar one. One can argue that Bahamian national pride is to a degree a product of brochure discourse, of touristic marketing; that much of what Bahamians love about their country is what travelers and the tourist industry claim is worth loving. The battle cry of tourism in the seventies and eighties was, "It's Better in the Bahamas." At the close of the 1980s this was changed slightly to, "It's Better in Our Country." In 1996 the slogan is, "The Bahamas: It Just Keeps Getting Better." These slogans have served not only to capture the attention of tourists but to capture the imaginations of Bahamians, as well. It is

no surprise then that the governing party Free National Movement used “Better, Better” as its campaign slogan in the General Election of 1997.

An illustration of the extent to which some Bahamians may be uncritically embracing the paradise myth, is the local success of blatantly touristic songs. These songs, written and performed by Bahamians, are played regularly on local radio and enjoy considerable popularity. Such popularity must at some level be seen as complicity in the tourist fantasy. These songs do not speak of the general Bahamian experience but celebrate the tourist experience. Tourist-targeted songs have been Bahamian favorites since George Symmonette’s “Lil Nassau,” in the 1940s. Symmonette celebrated the tourist experience and invited visitors to come to the Bahamas and live the life of a big shot while on vacation. Since Independence in 1973, songs have offered the natural beauty of the nation, the food, the culture and the friendliness of the people to the dollar-spending outsider for his/her enjoyment and consumption. A favorite is King Eric’s “Once is Not Enough” (1983). Part of the success of such saccharin songs is the fact that Bahamians genuinely love their homeland and know that others love it, as well. The thing being celebrated is the wonderful, beautiful landscape, and hence the songs are a source of pride.

Once is not enough
Even twice you don’t see all uh we
stuff
Come back for some conch
Peas and rice and guava duff
Cause when you visit the Bahamas,
Once is not enough

. . . .

Even Christopher Columbus in 1492
Went home and came back
Just like you folks should do
Before he died he thought
The Bahamas was the most
Returning each year but now as a
ghost.

Of course, seeing “Home” as a cherished landscape, as an idealized place, as a subject of nostalgia, can be complicated in the context of the postcolonial Caribbean society. In the era of colonialism under Britain, and now in the era of neo-colonial dependence on the United States, the Bahamas is often situated on an imagined lower plain of existence. It was the Mother Country and its landscape (like its history, songs, and traditions) that were idealized, that were the subject of fantasy, of reverence. (V. S. Naipaul of Trinidad and Jamaica Kincaid of Antigua have both written insightfully on this issue.) In our present context, existing in America’s shadow, the notion is still alive to many that the Bahamas is less “real” as a nation than its powerful neighbor and other First World countries. This inferiority complex is not unique to Bahamians. What happened to Bahamians during British colonial rule, then, was a kind of alienation from the very land on which one lived. Bahamians dreamed of one world and lived in another, which was meaner and more crude. The same can be said of today’s generation of cable satellite viewers. (Of course, one could argue that Americans themselves do not inhabit the rarified world depicted on the silver screen or on the tube). But this problem is what inspired Bahamian poet Jerome Cartwright

to write in his poem "Cold Snap":

We are who we are
Children of the hot lands
We build fires every Christmas
And pray in earnest for cold weather

The problem of "place" is further complicated by the fact that most Bahamians descend from slaves who never wished to come to this country, who had a "Home" that was elsewhere, in Africa. I speak historically here, and therefore I must say "most," because a sizable share, perhaps an indiscernable share of our present black population, descends from Black West Indians and Haitians who came to the Bahamas seeking better lives and did not come here as captives. The loss of Africa, some have argued, has contributed to a sense of restlessness and a lack of connection with the land among Caribbean people. We are a people, in other words, who mourn the loss of that which we never knew. The West Indian, it is argued, has no archeological link to the land. S/he has no ruins to look upon. S/he cannot trace her/his ancestry in these islands back into the mists of antiquity.

To this must be added the fact that despite universal suffrage and Independence, the formerly enslaved and colonized people of this archipelagic state still do not feel that they are in full possession and control of the institutions that employ them and of the economy that feeds them, that the State is not necessarily the same as the Community in the eyes of the people. Rather the State is often viewed as an adversary, something to use whenever possible, but also to manoeuvre around for one's individual best interest whenever possible. There is little

thought of how one's illegalities, one's mediocrity or low productivity may hurt the nation. One's energy is spent more often on helping oneself and one's family, and avoiding the Law. Hence, successive national inquiries into the problems of youth development and crime in Bahamian society have noted the absence of a spirit of volunteerism and community spirit among the citizenry. These circumstances contribute to a disregard for the landscape among many, a lack of reverence for the place on which one walks being characteristic of a people who still feel no stake in the place in which they find themselves, no need to ensure its preservation for future generations.

It is against the backdrop of this tradition of colonial and neocolonial negation of their own landscape's right to exist as a "real" place, against this tradition of disinheritance, and this sense of exile while at home, that Bahamian artists engage in the necessarily political act of representing and celebrating "Home" as they wish to define it. This is why Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott could recollect in an article, "The Sea is History," that there was something revolutionary about writing the word "breadfruit" on a piece of paper in the 1950s. One was elevating in art that which was too mean, too mundane, too native to be celebrated in English verse. But to an extent, the Bahamian artist's representations of home are informed by yet another colonizing force, that of tourism, and its highly marketable conception of the Bahama Islands as places of not only natural beauty, but also of purity, forgetfulness, tranquility, and fun in the sun all day long.

One of the most revealing, popular, brochure-songs has been Raphael

Munnings's "Bahamas Experience" released in 1986.

Chorus: Bahamas experience
You can find true romance
So much to see so much to do
Come along we'll share with you

Take a ride in the sky
You'll believe you can fly
Walk on a beach or on the street
And smiling faces everyone you meet

Skippping over the ocean
Wind blows in your face
Hook a big blue marlin fish
Let him go again.
Pink sand and mango too
Blue green waters forevermore
See for yourself
It's oh so nice
Truly this is paradise.

There are other such songs, like Marvin Henfield's "Come Down, It's Better in the Bahamas," and The Esquires' "The Bahamas." More recently—in 1999 to be specific—the female artist Nita released a song called "O Lord" and also made a music video for it that has appeared as a filler on ZNS TV13, the country's only television station. In the video, Nita, band members, and dancers perform enthusiastically on a beach wearing bright "native" costumes. (Few Bahamian music videos do not display artists on the beach since it the quintessential sign of "Bahamianess.") Says Nita:

If the good Lord
Never went on holiday
Tell me why

He made the Bahamas.
If the good Lord
Never used to come this way
Tell me why
He made these islands.

Considering that most Bahamian musicians have had to make a living performing for tourists, and that tourism is not only our principal employer but is heavily promoted by the State, it is no wonder that some song writers have either taken the initiative or been asked to compose touristic songs. In the capital city of Nassau it is impossible to hear a Bahamian band play popular music on a normal evening unless one enters a hotel or is in the vicinity of one. This has been the case for at least fifteen years.

That these songs have had tremendous popularity among Bahamians speaks to the extent to which Bahamians take pride in a touristic vision of the Bahamas as a paradise. This rhetoric has been met with a degree of approval, even if people really know better. Such songs have fed Bahamian national pride and are probably not seen as being any different from other songs expressing pride in the place of our birth, like Smokey 007's "You Born There You Born There." Few recording artists have taken tourism to task and addressed some of its negative social effects. Pat Rahming's "Package Deal" stands as a significant exception with its critique of male prostitution in the touristic arena.

It is not the case, however, that the majority of Bahamians listen to touristic songs all day. Reggae, soca, rap, and r&b are probably more popular on a day-to-day basis than Bahamian music on the whole, although songs occasionally come along that capture the local imagination.

And the majority of secular songs composed by Bahamians promote having a good time more than anything else.

Perhaps the most passionate subject in Bahamian secular recorded music is the radical transformation of Bahamian ways of life since Majority Rule and Independence; more specifically, the transformation in the material conditions of black Bahamians and the ways our culture has been adapted as a result of that transformation. These songs mourn the loss of "Island life"; they reminisce about the "Good Ole Days" in the Bahamas, before modernization and urbanization. They offer a kind of cultural nationalism rooted in the rural Bahamian past, rooted in practices, foodways, and rituals which preceded the transformation of family structures, the collapse of Family Island settlements, the overpopulation of Nassau, and the onslaught of an American-style consumerism. These songs also celebrate annual returns to the Family Islands for regatta or homecoming celebrations that have become an important part of Bahamian life since the major post-60s population shift, which resulted in 60% of the population inhabiting New Providence. The songwriters express pride in the beauty of their respective places of birth, all in contradistinction to Nassau and New Providence. Ronnie Butler's "Crown Calypso," Exuma's "Going to Cat Island," Phil Stubbs' "Cat Island" "Down Home," Eugene Davis's "Do You Remember" and "Perservere," the Magnetic's "Andros Island," Eddie Minnis's "Nassau People" are examples.

In these songs, as in the general public discourse about life "On Da Island" certain notions appear consistently. The

expression "Da Islan'" becomes a metaphor for a particular style of life, one which is to be opposed diametrically to life on New Providence, or in the city of Nassau as it is broadly conceived. New Providence (which is almost always called Nassau) no longer exists as an "Island" in the popular imagination. It has the amenities and comforts, trappings and problems of the Metropolitan City. "Da Islan'" is a place where there is no electricity, or running water, where there is no crime, where everyone knows their neighbor, where anyone can scold your children if they are rude, where children are never impolite, where people work together as a community, where doors are never locked, where there is no noise or garbage, where there are no burglar bars, where people are Christians, men are faithful to their spouses, etc. Many Bahamians over the age of fifty who talk of the Family Islands will also use the expression "Home" to describe the island of their birth and first years even though they have not lived there for three decades or more and seldom, if ever, return. We should also note that, because of their landscapes, visits to outlying New Providence settlements like Adelaide and Gambier elicit remarks like "It jus' like da Islan' out here."

The romanticization of the pastoral place is not new in human history. It goes hand in hand with the nostalgia for childhood, for a time of greater innocence. We must remember also that, as a rule, people almost always think the present day is worse than the "good ole days" and that things will get worse before they better.

Clearly then, "Da Islan'" is a kind of spatial and temporal metaphor: it signifies a particular space other than Nassau

but one to which we claim familiarity and affinity. It also represents a time that is “other” in two senses: to go to “Da Islan’” is to go to another time; and talk of “Da Islan’” is talk of the past of most Bahamians, a past which is lost to them. Talk of the past when there was no crime and men were good, when children spoke only when spoken to and learned the Golden Rule, is to inhabit the space of “Da Islan’.”

Even when Nassauvians say they can remember when Nassau people had respect for their elders and children were safe walking home from school, they are in effect saying Nassau was like “Da Islan’” in this way. So then, a recent song like Sweet Emily’s “The Good Ole Days” is inhabiting the same nostalgic space as a song like “Down Home” by Phil Stubbs. A number of books have been published over the last ten to fifteen years documenting Bahamian ways of life prior to the social and economic transformations that modernized the country.

Visual artists have plugged into the romanticization of life in the Family Islands, and, being cognizant of the appeal of “the quaint” among people of the more developed world who are searching for relics of the pre-Industrial world, they have crafted images which simultaneously appeal to the Bahamian longing for a return “Home” and the tourist wish for an Eden. Their portrayals are of perpetual sunshine, beautiful flora, flamingoes and egrets, lovely wooden colonial homes bordered by bougainvillea, poinciana trees in bloom, quaint little harbors, picturesque regatta sloops with poised black male natives, noble old folk standing outside their tabby houses. In other words, these paintings could easily be mistaken

for tourist postcards. And when artists with this tendency depict Nassauvians, they again choose to represent them inhabiting that metaphorical “island” space. They may portray clapboards and poor children but they are colorful and picturesque; they are one with the palm trees and flowers, a part of the local color. The black Bahamian fisherman in Nassau Harbour is part of this also: he is a living tourist landmark, a representation of how close to nature people in the islands are. In this way, a number of post-Independence artists are no different in their portrayals of black Bahamians than Winslow Homer one hundred years ago. Interestingly, with the exception of Alton Lowe, none of the work of these artists, (Dorman Stubbs, Ricardo Knowles, Eddie Minnis are the leaders of the field), appears in this IDB exhibit “On the Edge of Time: Contemporary Art from the Bahamas.” These artists enjoy great popularity in the Bahamas and their work is probably more visible than that of any of the artists focused on here, with the possible exception of Amos Ferguson.

Dorman Stubbs’ watercolor entitled “Antique Reflection,” is a prime example of the selectivity rooted in the search for quaintness we find typical in portrayals of Family Island homes. It is replete with black natives, a standard mode of representation in nineteenth century illustrations. There is a fetishization of objects which come to symbolize the past. This is, of course, a feature of modern tourism the world over (MacCannell, p. 16). The latest monstrosity built by an Andros Island drug dealer or his lawyer are never represented. In other works, Dorman Stubbs offers us the typical regatta scene that so many artists have composed and

photographers have shot in the last twenty years. Drunken men and women in short shorts, and other, perhaps more profound, parts of the regatta experience, are never immortalised. Having attended regattas, I know that few people care about the boat race out on the water; it is peripheral. But this image is chosen as an emblem of Bahamianess, of our past living in the present.

Alton Lowe, a white Bahamian from Abaco, paints many a peaceful Family Island harbor. Always the sun is shining and the water is calm. He likes creating portraits of old Family Island men and women, looking Family Islandish. The old are naturally part of the picturesque past in the present. And the Family Island must always conform to this sense of being an “elsewhere” time and place. Images which suggest modernity in the Family Islands, that suggest that these islands exist in the same world and time as Nassau, are excluded. These islands are to remain repositories of our cultural past in the present; we need them to be so. This is the same sort of fabricated pastoralism to which the country as a whole is subjected, for the Bahamas must exist outside of time and the real in order to be imagined as a tourist paradise.

There is a painting of that Bahamian landmark, the poinciana tree, rendered in oil by Eddie Minnis. Minnis' paintings adorn many a bank and law firm lobby in the Bahamas. Such images allow these companies to be supportive of Bahamian art and at the same to lull customers into that state of bliss most suited to the transfer of large sums of money. One wouldn't imagine that they'd put up paintings of emaciated children, but the range seems narrowly limited to postcard art. (There

could easily have been a crackhead under Eddie Minnis's poinciana tree.) But seriously, the gaze in Minnis's painting seems the same as that of Winslow Homer's “A Wall, Nassau”—island pastoral. And this has great commercial appeal among tourists, expats, and black professional elites because it is not challenging or troubling. These images offer instead an idyllic vision of the nation to the bourgeois eye.

Interestingly, some recent songs have achieved the twin appeal I have been discussing with respect to paintings. They tap into the local longing for what is imagined as a less vexing time, and they appeal to the romance with “The Islands” with which the North Atlantic is smitten. Bahamen's re-make of Ronnie Butler's “Crown Calypso,” sung in what the performers must have felt assured was the kind of Caribbean accent American listeners would be familiar with or expecting, talks of going back to “Da Islan's” and lists those islands, telling the visitor to “go” there. Certainly Bahamians don't need to be told which islands they can go to in their own country. In a different kind of twist, Eugene—or Geno D, as he is also called— who recorded the song “Inagua,” seems to actually be encouraging Bahamians to become tourists and visit the country's “best kept secret.” It uses the words of a blatantly touristic song by The Esquires, “The Bahamas,” by asking, “Where ya gonna go nex' year/ What ya gonna do?” And instead of saying, come to the Bahamas, it says, come to Inagua. Of course, not all artists have fallen into mystifying the Family Islands, mystifying the past, and mystifying the landscape. There is a striking difference between Antonius Robert's portraits of

the elderly (the repositories of our past) and the kind of sanitizing, romanticizing, “nativization” we see from Alton Lowe. The work of expatriate painter David Smith is notable because he subverts the touristic image with representations of a Bahamas which is anything but picturesque. He opposes the luxury and opulence of a tourism founded on black subservience to parts of the Bahamas not seen on postcards in works like “Pieces of the American Dream.”

And to be fair to our songwriters, they have not entirely glossed over the unpleasantness of the past in their lyrics. Ronnie Butler’s culturally nationalist song, “Burma Road,” calls for a return to the bush but not without a bitter sweet sense of humor, as he reminds his listeners that Bahamians once wore bags for clothing. In Phil Stubbs’ “Down Home,” we find much nostalgia, but among his memories of childhood in Cat Island, are cold nights sleeping in crocus sack blankets. “We didn’t have much / Ah but, we had so much love,” he tells us.

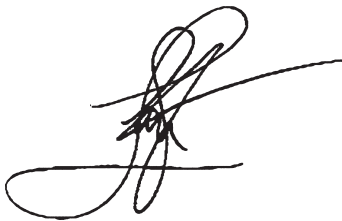
The Bahamian artists of B-CAUSE, Brent Malone, Stan Burnside, Antonius Roberts and others, committed themselves to creating imaginative alternatives to postcard paintings, as the exhibit catalogue for your “On the Edge of Time” explains. The Burnside and John Beadle incorporate African mask motifs and Junkanoo color to form a compelling black Bahamian spiritual and cultural response to colonialism. The irony is that their efforts are equally appreciated by tourists and expats as exotic objects for consumption. Amos Ferguson’s intuitive renditions of Junkanoo and the Burnside/Beadle collaboration precociously entitled “Enigmatic funktification,” are equally

commodifiable as tourist art. Junkanoo has been a target of commodification and touristic consumption for nearly one hundred years. Already, such art work is accompanying more typical touristic photography in the terminals of the Nassau International Airport. Furthermore, I think there is something akin to Homer’s adoration of the primitive black Apollos in Malone’s sculpted black drummers and cowbells of Junkanoo. And there is certainly a questionable embrace of the stereotype of the Caribbean market woman in the art of Eric Ellis.

By way of conclusion, I should note that artistic portrayals of the present-day Family Islands choose to ignore that many of these places are poor and abandoned, that opportunities are very limited and they are, in a sense, Nassau’s Third World. A great many Nassauvians talk about the “Da Islan” but they could not bear returning to it tomorrow to live. In the same way many visitors come to Caribbean paradises that they really don’t mind visiting but would not wish to live in permanently. There is nostalgia for the positive things about the past of the Family Islands but no one wishes to turn back the clock and return to depending on the mailboat for survival, fighting mosquitoes, and not having the comforts of modern life. Certainly, Bahamians are not to be ridiculed too harshly for missing aspects of our recent past. Upon leapfrogging into a modern, urban world, a good deal of trouble has come into Bahamian homes. With the decline of a number of the customs of thirty years ago, Bahamians who can remember when red meat was an event, shoes a privilege, and a toilet a luxury, are feeling dizzy. Naturally then, we seem to wish we could slow it all

down. We wonder if we are not throwing the baby out with the bath water and our art, particularly our songs, express this. Few really wish to return to a time when women could not vote, when black people were political and economically disenfranchised, when the Family Islands were the margins of a marginal colony. Thirty years ago when we lived "in bliss."

The touristic idealizations in which some Bahamian art indulges starkly contradict the lived experience of the majority of Bahamians. They serve the needs of the peculiar Bahamian marketplace well, but do they serve the community well, if what art should do is hold a mirror up to life and spur us on to growth? Perhaps in an economy and milieu like the Bahamas, any art is doomed to become brochure art, any artistic vision, a souvenir vision. On the other hand, I must qualify my statement for fear that I portray tourism as a monolithic force bending everything to its will. My experience as a boy and a young man in the Bahamas tells me otherwise. My desire here has been to broaden our conversation in the Bahamas about tourism, to challenge my fellow artists to consider the efficacy of their work in the process of social and cultural development.



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