From Sight to Site to Website: Travel-Writing, Tourism and the American Experience in Haiti, 1900-2008

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From Sight to Site to Website: Travel-Writing, Tourism, and the American Experience in Haiti, 1900-2008

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

Department of Anthropology

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This paper presents an anthropological examination of touristic representations of Haiti throughout the 20th century. I identify three main themes - Racism and "The Negro Question," Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue, and Voodoo Mystique - that illustrate a dominant discourse, but later transform these touristic sights into bona fide tourist sites. Despite its emphasis on voodoo and possession, the touristic discourse effectively dis-possesses Haiti, whitewashing its people and culture, and subsequently re-possesses it with Western values in a way that commoditizes not only what it means to experience Haiti, but what it means to be Haitian as well. Today, an interplay between the "development" and touristic discourses brings the discussion full-circle: from primitive people to primitive culture to primitive conditions. These representations have a certain mobility all their own and over time move farther from Haiti itself. Examining these sources does more than chart the rise and fall of the country's tourist industry. Anthropologically speaking, the touristic genre offers an important resource in understanding the construction of Haiti's place in the world.
This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Dedication

To my friends and my family, here and in Haiti.
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Introduction

In 1988, one year after Haiti’s bloody Election Day Massacre, American pop band The Beach Boys released their hit single “Kokomo.” It makes sense why the song would praise destinations like Aruba and Jamaica as ideal, romantic getaways given their successful tourist industries and good rapport with the American public (see Thompson 2006). What’s peculiar is how Haiti fits into the picture. Stranger still is the fact that several travelogues and guidebooks also cling to this fairytale of Haiti as a tropical, exotic paradise (e.g., Crewe 1987; Longmore 1989; Thomson 1992; King 2006).

Haiti, once abandoned by cruise ships in 1993, was back on the itinerary by 1995 (Pattullo 2005:196). Royal Caribbean International (RCI) has been operating a port of call in northern Haiti ever since. RCI offers a total of 27 “shore excursions” to guests arriving at “Labadee®” each Tuesday and Thursday, for a nominal fee. They too smack of paradise imagery:

On the north coast of Hispaniola, surrounded by beautiful mountain slopes and exotic foliage, sits Labadee®, Royal Caribbean's private paradise. This exclusive destination offers pristine beaches, breathtaking scenery and spectacular water activities. We even have an amazing new Aqua Park for kids. Regardless of where you go, you'll find yourself embraced by the beautiful landscape. Labadee's native charm, along with its natural beauty, makes this a destination not to be missed, and only Royal Caribbean can take you there. (RCI 2008b)

The “Labadee Historic Walking Tour” is likewise palpable:

Meet the local guide for a journey back in time and discover the rich history of the Haitian people. Your Haitian historian will take you on a comfortable paced walk around Labadee where you will visit the historic ruins of Nelli's Tower, listen to the breathing Dragon's Rock, and learn about the history of Haiti over the last 500 years. (RCI 2008b)
And again with “SeaTrek Kayak Adventure”:

Paddle along the gorgeous coastline of Labadee® on a relaxing kayaking tour. Your guide will lead you through beautiful coral reefs, where you'll witness an abundance of exotic marine life. You'll also pass various fishing villages that have been unchanged for decades. (RCI 2008b)

Other outings include snorkeling, jetskiing, powerboating, ziplining, parasailing, and lounging, not to mention “shopping for beautiful handmade local artwork, woodwork and crafts. You'll want to bring cash so you can take home a beautiful memento of this private paradise” (RCI 2008a:14-17). None, however, permit leaving “Labadee®’s” barbed-wire perimeter flanked by armed guards, nor allow interaction with locals other than those privileged few RCI selects as staff. It’s staggering to consider how many people experience this “taste of local flavor” each year (see Chart 1).

The socioeconomic inequity on which “Labadee®” thrives ranks among the most shocking scandals in the Caribbean today. While this particular outrage has gained currency in some circles, it remains far from the public eye. The few press articles which do scandalize “Labadee®,” however, present it as an isolated and unprecedented occurrence. For Haiti, a country steeped in misrepresentations, misinformation, and propaganda, this is a dubious proposition. So what accounts for the construction of Haiti as the touristic playground of Western society? What have been the motivations that shape the touristic imagination of Haiti? Do these things change over time? Do they relate to larger, institutional visions of Haiti and Haitian people?

This study looks at North American touristic materials on Haiti from 1900 to the present. Three periods, which I discuss in turn, emerge from sources such as travelogues, guidebooks, some music and film, and even today’s travelblogs and YouTube videos.
First, from 1900 until 1941, Haiti is marked/marketed by racism and “The Negro Question,” Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue, and Voodoo Mystique. Next, representations of mass tourism dominate Haiti from WWII until the ouster of Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier in 1986. The cookie-cutter “Haitian Holiday” of this period offers a fresh perspective on notions of (in)authenticity. Today, the interplay of “development” and touristic discourses brings the discussion full-circle: from primitive people to primitive culture to primitive conditions. Interestingly, these representations have a certain mobility all their own and over time move farther from Haiti itself. North American tourist literature on Haiti does more than chart the rise and fall of Haiti’s tourist industry. Anthropologically speaking, the genre offers an important resource in understanding the construction of Haiti’s place in the world.

**Background and Methods**

Scholarship on North American representations of Haiti is extensive. Laennec Hurbon (1995), for one, provides an erudite breakdown of how flagrant misconceptions of Haitian Vodou have commanded the American imagination, particularly on the silver screen. Hurbon argues that films like *White Zombie* (1932), *Black Moon* (1934), and *The Invisible Menace* (1938) were not merely early experiments in Hollywood horror cinema. Producers used their success with demonic terror and zombie fears to launch an entire genre of voodoo-thrillers that has never failed to make a killing at the box office.
“Haven’t American writers,” asks Hurbon, “invented a Vodou for their own convenience” (1995:195)?

It’s no surprise that such tropes should figure prominently in the American press as well. In *Haiti’s Bad Press*, Robert Lawless (1992) challenges the lopsided views of print journalism regarding its coverage of events like the 1980s AIDS fiasco and the Haitian “boat people” pandemic. Rather than hardnosed analytic models of cultural analysis, Lawless finds that news media deploy “folk models” similar to other pop culture narratives on Haiti, which favor sensational stereotypes over accurate “facts.”

Michael Dash’s *Haiti and the United States* (1997) is likely the most thorough work to date. Dash’s survey of American literary fiction is a compelling account of the discourses and processes by which Haiti was invented for America. “Literary representations of Haiti,” he argues, “are the key to the racial dichotomy that governs moral, aesthetic and intellectual views of Haiti” (Dash 1997:5). These “imaginative constraints” contribute to an “inflexible rhetoric of power” that both distances Haiti and imprisons it (Dash 1997:135). Hurbon, Lawless, and Dash each point out the irony that it is Haiti’s reprehensible air which allows it to be seen in the first place. Consequently, such discourses “guarantee a constant stream of researchers, missionaries, adventurers and tourists with a taste for the outlandish” (Dash 1997:10).

There is a gap, however, when it comes to touristic sources specifically. Tourism is one of the great touchstones of Western civilization. The phenomenon of tourism is rooted in old-school colonialism, when those touring “mainly traveled as advance scouts for European capital” (Pratt 1992:146). The 19th-century African Safari and Grand Tour,
for instance, both still native to the colonial endeavor, made leisurely travel a popular bourgeois pastime. For those eager to behold the colonial mise-en-scene yet unable to afford the luxury of travel, World’s Fairs, International Expos, and “human zoos” offered practical alternatives (Blanchard et al 2003). The introduction of air travel and the geopolitical rearrangements following World War II, among other things, revolutionized tourism by “opening up” the world, transforming this somewhat marginal hobby into an economically lucrative and massively popular activity (Young 1977; Crick 1989; Pattullo 2005). “Today,” writes Dean MacCannell, “everywhere on the face of the earth there are patches of social reality growing out of the collective experience of tourists” (1999:141).

Touristic sources are an artifact of this phenomenon and shed light on how these social realities are constructed. As Mary Louise Pratt (1992:38) shows, the tourist genre first sprang from the travel-writings of early colonists and explorers and centered on “the mutual engagement between natural history and European economic and political expansionism.” “The encounter with nature,” she adds, “and its conversion into natural history, forms the narrative scaffolding” (1992:51). These travelers acted primarily as a collective moving eye on which sights/sites register (Pratt 1992:59). Pratt concludes: “Within the text’s own terms the esthetic pleasure of the sight singlehandedly constitutes the value and significance of the journey” (1992:204, her emphasis). It is important to note that all travel-writing is produced under the influence of what’s been called the “contact zone,” a social space “where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like
colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths” (Pratt 1992:4). Tourism is one such aftermath. Incidentally, so is anthropology.

Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins (1993:24) have shown that popular culture-oriented texts often transcend their jurisdiction and don a “scholarly veneer,” sometimes to the extent that they become a surrogate for ethnographic texts. Publications like National Geographic, Smithsonian Magazine, Americas, and Bulletin of the Pan American Union allow “the reading public’s original version of what was interesting or aesthetically pleasing about the world outside the United States borders” to be “validated, elaborated, and heightened by its presentation as scientific fact” (Lutz and Collins 1993:25). They simultaneously give an “instant vacation” (Lutz and Collins 1993:44). The authors note (1993:27) that such publications are located “on the boundary between science and entertainment,” thus blurring the lines between touristic and ethnographic texts.

This is not to say that touristic texts are ethnographic texts and vice versa. MacCannell (1999) and John Urry (1990) distinguish the two by the social practices from which they emerge, specifically leisure- and work-related activities. The drawback to this approach is that such leisure/work distinctions in turn rest on notions of cultural (in)authenticity and ultimately a doomed search for a cultural essence. On the other hand, Edward Bruner (2005:7) bases the separation on a choice of visibility—“touristic and ethnographic ways of seeing.” One encourages the sort of cosmopolitan hobby obsessed with entertainment and cultural voyeurism; the other, as James Clifford (1988:9)
demonstrates, makes up the "diverse ways of thinking and writing about culture from a standpoint of participant observation."

Clifford (1988) is instructive for sorting out the trajectories of each genre. Rather than asking which textual representations of culture are most accessible or eye-opening, he forces us to ask which texts are most believable. This "crisis of authority" resonates in touristic and ethnographic texts alike, because both rely on experience to construct textual authority (Clifford 1988:25, 37). (Indeed, who would read a piece of tourist literature by an author who's never set foot in the land?) In other words, both genres rely on an "I was there and I know" dictum (Clifford 1988:22). But what separates the two is also a matter of voice. Touristic texts are singular, consisting "of a gesture of converting local knowledges (discourses) into European national and conventional knowledges associated with European forms and relations of power" (Pratt 1992:202). Ethnographic texts, however, are multivocal, giving "visible place to indigenous interpretations of custom" (Clifford 1988:49).

In addition, the tourist genre includes materials other than travel-writing and popular periodicals. Claude Jacobs (2001:312) speculates that "tourism markers" may extend "to include newspaper and magazine articles, advertisements, postcards, brochures, Internet websites, and guidebooks." Following Charles Peirce, Chris Rojek (1997:53) describes an all-out "tourist culture" with "files of representation" and an "index of representation": concepts which accumulate "a range of signs, images and symbols which make the sight familiar to us in ordinary culture." For these, Rojek points to:
Travelers’ tales, printed texts (travel fliers, brochures, as well as novels and poems such as Joyce’s ‘Dublin’ in *Ulysses*, Proust’s ‘Paris’ in *Remembrance of Things Past*, Wordsworth’s poetry of the Lakes), dramatic and cinematic traditions (‘Russia’ in Chekhov’s plays, ‘the West’ in Sam Shepard’s plays or John Ford’s films, ‘New York’ in the films of Martin Scorsese), and television (‘America’ as portrayed in *Cheers*, *Roseanne* and *Miami Vice*, ‘Australia’ as portrayed in *Neighbours*, or ‘England’ as portrayed in *EastEnders, Peak Practice, Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Coronation Street*) (1997:53).

These representations are more immediate and accessible than reality, giving rise to the “cyber-tourist who travels via the Internet from sight to sight without ever leaving home” (Rojek 1997:60). Today one can “practice collage tourism in our living rooms” (Rojek 1997:69).

Academic interest in Caribbean tourism has grown rapidly over the past thirty years. Polly Pattullo’s *Last Resorts* (2005) is a broad look at the different impacts tourism has made across the Caribbean. Tourism is also on the laundry list of the items Mimi Sheller (2003) examines in her study of consumption patterns throughout the Caribbean. Writers like Krista Thompson (2006), David Duval (2004), and George Gmelch (2003) offer case-studies of places like Barbados, the Bahamas, and Jamaica, and help underscore the vital distinction between tourism in the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean; the allure of backpacking through Bob Marley’s native village, for instance, is quite different from the charm of riding a *tap-tap* in the streets of Cap-Haitien. Yet what singles out the case of Haitian tourism from the rest of the Caribbean is Haiti’s embattled culture-history.

Haiti has been a thorn in the side of Western powers since its independence in 1804. The reality of Haiti seen as a country run by wayward slaves who cast down their French masters jeopardized the very ideology structuring colonial design: that blacks
were inferior to whites both in cultural and biological terms (Lewis 2004:127). Fearing that this Haitian germ may pollinate other colonies, Western powers refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of Haiti until decades later: France in 1825, the US in 1862 (Schuller 2007:71; Celeste 2005:6-7). The lingering racial resentments are key motivations behind a second wave of Western imperialist schemes on Haiti, such as when the US nearly strong-armed Haiti into giving up Mole Saint-Nicolas as a permanent naval port in 1889, or the infamous “Luders Incident,” which instigated all but open war on Haiti over the imprisonment of German national Emile Luders in 1897 (Leger 1907:245-250). Likewise racial attitudes have been shown to play central roles in the US Occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) and the US-led “intervasion” in 2004 (Hallward 2007).

The violence associated with these undertakings can be seen as one route the West has taken in its zeal to whitewash the historical effects of losing Haiti. Tourism proves to be another. Pratt (1992:57) maintains that travel-writing “turns on a great longing: for a way of taking possession without subjugation and violence.” I would argue that this is characteristic of all touristic material in that it seizes the foreign and the strange—the Other—and commodifies them as something to behold. I hope to show that the process of constructing Haiti in touristic literature is also a process of re-possessing Haiti.

**Facts and Figures**
Dash (1997) and Hurbon (1995) point out that the American imagination of Haiti began with the early travel-writings of Moreau de Saint-Mery in the 1780s and Sir Spencer St. John in the 1880s. I argue that Haiti’s tourist discourse really begins with Hesketh Prichard’s *Where Black Rules White*, which hit American audiences in 1900.

What makes Prichard’s travelogue a watershed in the touristic tradition is the fact that later texts figure Prichard as an authority, either by quoting from him or adding him to other suggested reading lists (e.g., Aspinall 1954; Waugh 1964:236-239). Neither Saint-Mery nor St. John enjoy this ancestry. In fact, pieces like Prichard’s characterize the majority of touristic designs on Haiti until World War II. And as we have seen, many of these texts have transformed from literary exploits into social and cultural facts.

Prichard arrived in southern Haiti in 1899, and after an extensive tour of the land, published his travelogue in 1900. Prichard was a veteran big-game hunter, the sort who highly regarded the African safari-cum-grand tour that was *en vogue* with cosmopolitan, Western gentry around the turn of the 20th century; he (1971:1-5) points to these experiences as the basis for his “authority” and commentary early on in the text.

Substantively speaking, what makes Prichard’s account unusual in the literature to this point is his harsh treatment of all-things Haitian. He (1971:26-30) curses the mosquitoes “unknown to the loose-treading, good-hearted nigger waiters, who sleep on three chairs” and belittles the “Black Paris,” that “strange graft of Parisianism and savagery” which is an “idolatry of fashion, and insistent militarism, and an exuberance of speech all verging on the grotesque—a distended character of the original.” He ridicules the Haitian army as full of generals and no soldiers; “For Hayti,” Prichard says, “is governed by Generals in
all sizes” (1971:39). He (1971:18) shuffles through villages “which in every particular might have been borrowed wholesale from West Africa.” He (1971:81, 99) blames everything on the “black race” and their “squalid ignorance” and “opposition to Enlightenment.” And he (1971:78) sensationalizes Vodou as “cannibalism in the second stage” that almost always occurs with sacrifices. Prichard’s Haiti (1971:34) leaves the reader with “three impressions more vivid than the rest: the puny beasts of burden, each surmounted by a negress, the blue pervasive soldier, and the black pervasive dirt.”

**Racism and “The Negro Question”**

Early 20th century writers on Haiti, according to Dash (1997:25), were either defenders of “negro primitivism” or apologists for US gunboat diplomacy (including the US occupation). But for audiences less concerned with the political upshot seen in this brand of red-hot imperialism, Haiti became a platform for scientific racism. American racial attitudes around this time were made manifest in terms of “The Negro Question”: Are blacks biologically capable of self-government and civilization? This discussion was not white-sided either; Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Langston Hughes, for example, each weighed in on this subject through their own experiences with Haiti.4

Prichard probably had a foot in both of Dash’s camps. What’s more important is that he drew attention to the spectacles of Haiti—Africa in the Americas, the “Pearl of the Antilles,” and Port-au-Prince, the “African Paris.” When we look past the imperialism involved with racial discussions on Haiti, we see that Haiti was not just America’s
political playground. Haiti was a racial sight. Haiti was a living laboratory where travelers could conduct their own racial experiments and vet their assumptions. If you couldn’t visit this laboratory first-hand, you could always read others’ reports.

Prichard was not alone in damning Haiti and Haitians. In L. Abbott’s article “Impressions of a Careless Traveler,” he writes: “as God made it, Hayti is a dream of delight; as the black man has defiled it, no white person can live there and be content...under self-government life and character in Hayti and Santo Domingo have retrograded; under bureaucratic government life and character in the English West Indies have remained very nearly stationary” (1906:620). Ida Starr’s travelogue (1907:42) continues, calling Haiti “the paradise of the negro” and “a ridiculous caricature of civilization.” It is a land where “swarms of rag-tag human beings whom I call such merely because no species of ‘missing link’ has yet been recognized by our anthropologists” assail her (Starr 1907:50). The Haitian, a “happy-go-lucky African savage fully possessed of his racial characteristics, fondly imagines himself a free and responsible man” (Starr 1907:53). Each of Starr’s (1907:71) pictures have captions like “a West Indian Africa: Port-au-Prince, Haiti.” Starr (1907:79) concludes her Haitian stay, saying “I could not help wishing that some day dear old Uncle Sam would come along and give Haiti a good cleaning up, and whip them into line for a time at least; but Heaven deliver us from ever trying to assimilate or govern such a degenerate and heterogeneous people.” She’d soon get her wish.

Albert Edwards’ (1909) article “Caribbean Sketches: The Misgoverned Island” details his visit to Haiti in similar terms. While Edwards (1909:890) praises the country’s
tranquil landscape, he also compares Haiti’s social eyesores to the rest of the
Francophone Caribbean, saying “the French have kept a certain control over their other
islands—Guadeloupe and Martinique. But it has not been an efficient control, and while
the French negroes have not become so debased as in Hayti, they are in pretty sore
straights.” Henry Austin’s article, “Port au Prince or Port au President,” nearly says it all;
the only civilized “full-blooded African” lives in the Presidential Palace (1911:627)!

Alpheus Verrill (1917) remains unconvinced that even the efforts of the US
Occupation, already in its second year, are enough to save Haiti from the savagery,
barbarism, and widespread bedlam of its own people. Frederick Ober’s guidebook
(1920:266) leads readers to the spectacle of Port-au-Prince, whose “market-places are
large and well worth visiting, even if for no other purpose than to study the Haitianised
Africans.” Harry Frank’s (1920:182) travelogue devotes nearly 80 pages to deplore the
“African-minded ostentation” of Haiti. Speaking of his arrival in Haiti, Frank wryly notes
how “the winds within the gaping jaws of Haiti are as erratic as the untamable race that
peoples its mountainous shores” (1920:107). He (1920:109-111) later calls Haitians “the
children of Ham,” and “African, as thoroughly as the depths of the Congo.” Frank
touches on the 1915-1934 US Occupation as well: “There is a wide difference between
the public-spirited Americans and the black men into which the mass of Haitians has
degenerated” (1920:129).

John Kuser (1970:51) boasts that he accompanied the US Marines who martyred
Charlemagne Massena Peralte, leader of the unsuccessful 1919 caco rebellion, during his
tour of Haiti, and congratulates US efforts for making it “possible to travel in a country
which was previously in the throes of continual unrest.” Aside from fitting squarely in with Dash’s “apologists for the Occupation,” Kuser also epitomizes the racial attitudes that surround Haitian Vodou. “The elimination of Vaudouxism,” Kuser declares, “rests almost entirely upon the shoulders of the Americans. And this elimination is imperative for Vaudouxism is, not so much a religious evil, but an immoral and uncivilizing factor” (1970:57, my emphasis). Taking a cue from Joseph Conrad, Frances Parker (1925:153) tells us that only “within a few miles of Port-au-Prince conditions are as primitive as in the heart of Africa.”

Claudia Cranston’s (1935a, 1935b) travel novella “Wings” is perhaps the most scornful. After arriving in Haiti, Cranston (1935a: 151) stumbles on “two tiny, wrinkled old monkey-colored creatures with calico dresses on tended the pot—two amiable, confused-faced little animals out of Africa that would certainly be taken, wrongly or rightly, for monkeys if they hopped a few feet off the road into the jungle.” She also relishes her misfit skin color while strolling through the black capital:

Out in the streets, among the blacks, she [Cranston] felt that odd psychic thing that is perhaps what has forged the white chain around the world: an odd sort of adequacy—that even if by some chaotic mischance that blacks turned antagonistic and they blotted her out, she would still be the center of their universe. This powerful, unsought, even unwanted racial psychology that makes a ring around a solitary white among blacks stayed with Claudia then and afterward (1935a:153).

Cranston later pairs up with a suspicious, light-skinned businessman who accompanies her into the Haitian backcountry. Trouble stirs in the Haitian bush, but it’s Cranston’s racial ideology that saved her skin:

‘Thank God I was born in the Deep South,’ was [Cranston’s] first really coherent thought, ‘so I know how to manage the darkies. If I’d been a
Yankee, I'd probably have cut some kind of caper myself last night and got voodooed. Then they'd have blamed the poor Negroes' (1935b:153).

For some, like Edna Taft (1938:28), “the racial question” plays a central role in a trip to Haiti. Taft (1938:28) resided in Haiti for half a year “to study her people and her history,” fashioning her sojourn “very much like Alice in Wonderland.” Her (1938:32) travelogue tells of an inner conflict in which she felt uncomfortable to meet “the colored people as equals.” Taft (1938:375) did not, however, “come to any satisfactory solution of the racial question. My prejudices, both innate and acquired, had not undergone any appreciable change.” For others like Amy Oakely (1941:134), a trip to Haiti will prove that “darkest Africa is to be found—a startling revelation to one who had never anticipated the seeing of African compounds.”

Racism and “The Negro Question” is a collection of commentary on scientific racism, primitivity, Haitian savagery and barbarism that acts as a forum whereby American audiences could locate themselves in relation to the perceived exotica of Haiti. By representing Haiti in scientific racist fashion, it is also the most effective way to repossess Haiti.

Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue

Racism and “The Negro Question” dominate the tourist discourse well into the 1940s, but this fixation is also a point of departure for other themes. Langston Hughes reportedly called the Harlem Renaissance a vogue in which whites were whisked away
by the spectacle of blacks (quoted in Garber 1989:328-329). In many ways, Blair Niles mirrors Hughes' point when reflecting on her Haitian tour:

It is only with travel, I think, that history comes thus sensuously alive, that it appears with the reality of personal memory. You set forth with your mind stored with history and with contemporary opinion. But from the first moment of entering the harbor the history begins to appear as memory, its characters as ancestors, and contemporary opinion as gossip, while the country itself becomes a living personality (1926:199).

Niles' fascination with Haitian history also highlights one way the Harlem Renaissance infiltrated the tourist discourse: Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue.

Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue—the so-called “Great Man” histories of Haiti’s revolutionary leaders Toussaint L’Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Alexander Petion, and Henry Christophe; the rich romanticization of Christophe’s Sans Souci palace and La Citadel fortress; and the general fascination with Haiti’s ontology—pervades American tourist literature on Haiti. John Vandercook’s (1928) *Black Majesty* is a landmark of Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue, and a “Great Man” history of gigantic proportions. Vandercook (1928:28), cultural playboy and self-proclaimed “anthropologist,” makes epic the Haitian tale of “the whites against France, the mulattoes against the whites, and the sullen, full-mouthed, hating blacks against the world” through a rich, 207-page narrative which both details the rise and fall of Henry Christophe and romanticizes the ruined monuments left to testify. *Black Majesty* captured audiences with the drama of Haiti’s history, like how Dessalines rent the French tri-color flag long symbolizing “the union of the blacks, the whites, and the mulattoes” and “let the white part fall to the dust” in order to create the Haitian rouge et bleu (Vandercook 1928:84). Readers were fascinated by lavish descriptions of places like Sans Souci, “the finest mansion in the
New World” where “everything was on a scale of grandeur never before or since equaled in the West Indies” (Vandercook 1928:126-127). Vandercock’s persuasiveness was so great that many would call on him as an “authority” for all matters regarding the Haitian Revolution (e.g., Waugh 1930:261; Moritzen 1934:722; Cranston 1935; Whitman 1938:308; and Oakley 1941:147).5

Subsequent authors like Hendrik Leeuw follow Vandercook’s footsteps of intrigue. Leeuw (1935:294, 265) eagerly details Christophe, the “Napoleon of Negros” and again notes the location where Dessalines fashioned Haiti’s flag. Taft’s (1938:144-150) treatment of “L’Ouverture, the black Washington” and “Christophe, the black Napoleon” strikes similar chords. J. Gayer’s (1931) National Geographic article “Hispaniola Rediscovered” mimics this trend as well, giving readers titillating nuggets about Haiti’s past. Also writing in National Geographic, John Houston Craige’s “Haitian Vignettes” (1934b) is both memoir of his time in occupied Haiti with the USMC and virtual companion for those who wish to retrace Christophe’s historic footsteps.

Other texts put greater emphasis on material remains for their quota of Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue. For example, Keyes (1925) brings the colonial landscape to life as she compares her fast-paced journey in 1920s occupied Haiti to living out the final uncertain days of the Haitian Revolution. F.E. Evans (1930:35), however, is less cryptic when discussing Haiti’s historic attractions: “There is no more impressive or spectacular ruin in the New World than the famous Citadel…often called the ‘Eighth Wonder of The World.’” The landscape is more evocative for Jay Moritzen (1934:720), who anticipates that “while viewing the ever-changing scenic effects as your car speeds on, you will
probably try to recall what you know of the history of Haiti.” Moritzen (1934:722) also reveals the power Sans Souci has over the imagination: “you have but to close your eyes as you seat yourself on a broken pillar, and in imagination the place becomes filled with all that Haitian splendor which in the time of King Christophe lent an atmosphere to the scene.” Ronald Kain (1937) goes further, suggesting that tourism in Haiti starts with these historic sights. “There at the foot of the range crowned by the Citadel,” Kain says, “our sightseeing began in earnest…Milot offered much more of interest, but our main objective was the Citadel” (1937:853, 855).

Throughout these texts, Haiti’s historic landscape is a twilight zone where “tropical verdure of never-failing variety and interest enveloped us, walling out all thoughts of the outside world” (Kain 1937:856). Its ruins impel visitors “to glance backward for another look at the Citadel’s lofty walls—a look full of unspoken tribute to the capacities of the race that flowered so brilliantly during the birth pangs of the New World’s only French-speaking republic” as they leave (Kain 1937:859).

Instances of Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue also appear in the works of well-known artists. Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* (1920), Langston Hughes’ *Troubled Island* (1936) and *Emperor of Haiti* (1936), C.L.R. James’ *Toussaint Louverture* (1936), and Orson Welles’ “Voodoo” *Macbeth* (1936) are plays that demonstrate the craze of Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue. Welles’ “Voodoo” *Macbeth*, adapted to post-revolutionary Haiti, is particularly interesting. Commissioned by FDR’s Federal Theatre Project, Welles put “Voodoo” *Macbeth* together with Harlem’s American Negro Theater. It opened at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem on 14 April 1936 to critical acclaim.
(McCloskey 1985:406). As if taking a page from Vandercook, Welles found the Haitian Revolution to be just as tragic as *Macbeth* and used figures like Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henry Christophe to fill “the great vacancy where Scotland had been” (McCloskey 1985:409). “For whites traveling uptown to see the production,” Richard Halpern notes, “Welles’s savage representation of Haiti might well have blended with their own cultural preconceptions about Harlem itself. Attending a production of *Macbeth* was thereby transformed into the equivalent of an anthropological field trip” (1994:13).

There are interesting similarities between Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue and what’s been happening in contemporary Martinique. Richard Price (2006) examines how Martinican culture-history has moved from censorship to celebration over the past 100 years, and discusses this transition through the life and artwork of an early 20th century convict. To Martinique’s colonial government, Medard Aribot was a criminal; today, he is a celebrated folk hero. Aribot’s fantastic handiwork, his gingerbread house more specifically, is representative of a Martinican legacy made iconic by/for the island’s tourist industry, a process Price (2006:147) calls “post-carding the past.” The end result is “a musemified Martinique, a diorama’d Martinique, a picturesque and ‘pastified’ Martinique that promotes a ‘feel-good’ nostalgia” (Price 2006:175). Price’s (2006:180) silhouette of Martinique’s “commercialized folklore” resonates with the tourist discourse on Haiti. As Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue romanticizes the country’s landscape and ruins, it too “post-cards” Haiti’s past.

Not everyone who celebrated the Haitian revolution, however, did so with a touristic mindset. The US Occupation prompted unanimous condemnation from the
African American community almost immediately after the first marines landed in 1915 (Plummer 1982). Occupation opposition also built solid ties with Haitian nationals like Jean Price-Mars and Jacques Roumain. Langston Hughes, whose efforts helped organize an African American delegation to investigate charges of racism and foul-play in Haiti, was among the most vocal critics (Balch 1927). The writings of both Hughes (1977) and C.L.R. James (1963), including their plays, took to task the image of Haiti made emblematic by touristic sources. For them, the Haitian revolution provided an opportunity “to refute the allegations of inferiority and irresponsibility” characteristic of all-things black: “The Haitian revolution, not any more an example of unworthy and volatile black behavior, was put forward as an example blacks could be proud of” (Dash 1997:12). Given its agenda, it’s little wonder this counter-current was “silenced.”

“Silences,” as Michel Rolph-Trouillot (1995:24-25) demonstrates, play an essential role in “the process of historical production.” Converting past events, texts, and figures into historical fact is at the mercy of the reporter’s discrimination, Trouillot (1995:52) shows, and means that “a tourist guide, a museum tour, an archaeological excavation, or an auction at Sotheby’s can perform as much an archival role as the Library of Congress.” This conversion edits things out, sometimes people, and leaves gaps or “silences,” sometimes deliberately. Since “silences” are present at the “moment of fact creation, moment of fact assembly, moment of fact retrieval, and the moment of retrospective significant,” history is never just the narration of a sequence of events (Trouillot 1995:26). It is also an exercise of power.
Two cases of Trouillot’s "silences" prove helpful for our discussion of Haiti’s tourist discourse. First is Colonel Jean-Baptiste Sans Souci, a prominent Haitian revolutionary who "gained the loyalty of other blacks, soldiers, and cultivators alike" (Trouillot 1995:37). Betrayed by Henry Christophe, Sans Souci waged, and lost, a bitter war-within-a-war against his erstwhile ally (Trouillot 1995:42). Sans Souci’s legacy, however, has been "silenced"; few know Sans Souci the man, and fewer still would find ironic the fact that Henry Christophe named his palace after him. If only Vandercook knew... 

The second is a more thematic concern: the historic significance of the Haitian Revolution. Trouillot argues that by carefully neglecting Haiti’s role in thwarting Napoleon’s plan to invade Louisiana, and therefore Haiti’s role in safeguarding American independence, Western society has "silenced" the place of Haiti in world history. Trouillot (1995:82) chalks this "silence" up to the fact that the Haitian Revolution was "unthinkable in the framework of Western thought" and it became a "non-event."

Denying the momentousness of the first successful slave rebellion, let alone the first sovereign black nation, is the Western way of bringing closure to letting Haiti slip through its fingers in the first place.

By capitalizing (literally) on some things and "silencing" others, Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue behaves much the same way. The "silence" here is the "moment of retrospective significance" altogether (Trouillot 1995:26). The fact that Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue streamlines Haitian history for quick digestion and easy consumption is a practical measure in keeping with touristic ways of seeing; Haitian
Revolutionary Intrigue transforms physical sights into touristic sites. Of deeper concern, however, is how power has been exercised in this process.

The process of creating Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue is the process of taming, whitening, and Westernizing Haitian history. Take the “Great Man” histories of Toussaint L’Ouverture, et al. Only after having been given epitaphs like “the black Washington” or “the black Napoleon,” only after having been assigned patently Western qualities, and only after having been made to resemble a Western pantheon of founding-father figures are Haiti’s “Great Men” granted access to Western historical canon. Only after having been whitened are they allowed to be seen. Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue constructs a Haitian Revolution that is not so much concerned with overcoming the inhumanity of slavery as it is concerned with valorizing Enlightenment ideologies. This is the way Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue tells it: Each of these individuals were just another depraved negro until one fine day, Providence delivered them to Enlightenment and selected them to carry out a revolution that is decidedly American at its core. These aren’t Haiti’s heroes, and these aren’t Haiti’s histories; they are Western forms projected onto Haiti, and the supine landscape, heroes, and battles is the stuff Western bedtime stories are made of.

Voodoo Mystique

Voodoo Mystique proliferates the American tourist discourse on Haiti from 1900-1941 as well. Leeuw (1935:269) makes this clear: “since so many sensation-seeking
authors have succeeded in playing [Haitian Vodou] up in their writings, no book dealing with Haiti would seem to have a chance unless it is dominated by mysterious rhythms devoted in sinister fashion to voodooism.” While sources as early as Prichard (1971), Starr (1907), and Ober (1908) discuss Haitian Vodou, their commentary on the religion was intended as an angle on the topic of racism and “The Negro Question.” For one thing, these sources made little effort “to distinguish Vodou from magic, terms most earlier accounts of Haitian life tended to conflate” (Largey 2006:199). It was not until the Harlem Renaissance that the tourist discourse shifted toward a primacy on Voodoo Mystique.

Leeuw’s “sensation-seeking authors” comment no doubt refers to the scandalous travel-writings of William Seabrook (1929), Faustin Wirkus (1931), and John Houston Craige (1934a), whose works aimed “to bring vicarious satisfaction to those who sought this kind of novelty and disorientation in the nightclubs of Harlem at the time” (Dash 1997:34). “For those who wished to reach beyond the exotica of Harlem,” Dash continues, “Haiti became the accessible and authentic next stop in the quest for a world of primal innocence” (1997:34).

The pushback against “the ‘Magic Island’ school of writing” about Haitian Vodou seems to have met a fate similar to that of Langston Hughes and C.L.R. James with the Haitian Revolution (Dash 1997:88-89). During this time, anthropology-savvy scholars like Zora Neale Hurston (1990), Melville Herskovits (1937), Alan Lomax (1938), and later still Harold Courlander (1960), Maya Deren (1953), Katherine Dunham (1969), and Alfred Metraux (1972) gave Vodou honest treatment as a topic worth more than racial
libels. Their acumen was well-received on the Haitian side of things, by Price-Mars and even a young François Duvalier, but was nonetheless co-opted or “silenced” by the tourist literature.

Work on this topic is thorough (e.g., Lawless 1992; Dash 1997; Largey 2006), but Hurbon (1995:181) best captures the essence of Voodoo Mystique, a theme that inspires “in the observer a sense of ‘disquieted strangeness’ and ambivalent feelings of attraction and revulsion, onto which diverse fantasies can be projected.” These sources have a symbiotic, if not causal relationship with the tourist discourse. Once Cranston (1935a:151) arrived in Haiti, her mind “guttered with the memories of Hollywood movies in which the Haitian always made human sacrifices out of the white women they liked.” Cranston continues:

And when learned scholars analyze Haitian voodoo—and on the silver screen the moving-picture queens flee before the savage blacks—Claudia will always say, ‘You tellin’ me!’ For she will always remember the voodoo scene in her own bedroom among the Haitian hills at midnight—the huge Negress in blue calico plastering her great mouth with an orange-colored lipstick from Paris, before a small, bright, borrowed mirror, in the village of St. Michel (1935b:153).

Thanks to Voodoo Mystique, audiences found Haiti “to be a mystical place where the spirit and human worlds intersected...an imaginary antidote to the rational, materialistic world of the foreign tourist” (Largey 2006:203). Most scholars hold Seabrook, Wirkus, and Craige responsible for authoring Haiti’s sensational place in the world (Lawless 1992; Hurbon 1995; Dash 1997). These notorious travelogues relied on a grandiose embellishment of experiences and a wholesale invention of others to titillate their audiences (Largey 2006:198). Reports of zombie conspiracies and “goat without horns”
child sacrifices no doubt prompted suspicious dinnertime discussions, but Seabrook et al. did not singlehandedly pen Voodoo Mystique.

Voodoo Mystique is strongly tied to Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue, and the two often go hand-in-hand. For instance, Ober’s Caribbean guidebook leads readers to connect Vodou with Haiti’s phenomenal past:

[Vodou’s] taste for human blood may have been acquired at the time of the massacres of the French, when infants were sacrificed to the African deity...if one were desirous of witnessing a voodoo ceremony he could be gratified, report says, without going far from Port-au-Prince; but it might be at the risk of his life, for the enraged and excited worshipers might forget to respect a white onlooker if they were to penetrate his disguise (1920:268).

Ober’s speculations pique interest in Vodou first by making it ancient, then by making it accessible. One National Geographic article makes similar connections:

In this carnival of barbarism religion also had its place. Cannibalism and the black rites of voodoo magic of the African jungles were revived in all their horror, and the sacrifice of children and of animals to mumbo jumbos of the local wizards was practiced in the appropriate seasons (Johnston 1920:500).

Shocking, to say the least.

Vandercook (1928) best illustrates the connection between Voodoo Mystique and Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue. Beginning with the bloody Vodou ceremony at Bois Caiman that symbolically launched the Haitian Revolution, and ending with the Vodou-related mysteries of King Henri Christophe’s tragic suicide, Vandercook weaves legendary history and outlandish religion together in a way that leaves readers wanting more of both. Edmund Whitman (1938:294) echoes these connections: “They say when the voodoo drums are beating up the valley and the mists of dawn swirl past the prow of
the Citadel, that it looks like a giant ship moving through space.” Only certain Vodou drums, “drums that I had been told were strung with the cured skins of virgin Haitien girls,” seem to inspire this imagery (Whitman 1938:309). Taft’s travelogue (1938) centers on sniffing out vestiges of Vodou, and with good reason. Taft (1938:47), the student of all-things Haitian, found it “difficult to tell which was the more interesting: Haiti or her inhabitants”; she could not separate her fascination with Haiti’s past from her quest to find its religious manifestation in the present. Each chapter of the “blood-bespattered story of the black republic” has a voodoo root (Taft 1938:123). Her comments like “the presence of an alien at a Voodoo dance is fiercely resented and might cause serious trouble” seem more like reverse psychology than deterrents, as they immediately mystify Vodou (1938:210). We must empathize, however, with poor Taft, who had

Entertained hopes of being led as a privileged guest before the altar, to the wild throbbing of the Arada and Pethro drums, where [she] might watch with prying eyes the consecrated black goat fall beneath the blow of the papa-loi, who would presently asperse the devotees with the warm blood, whereupon they would drink the remaining gore from a trencher (1938:374).

She never saw any of it. But maybe the reader can.

Orson Welles’ “Voodoo” Macbeth, whose “production pulsed with the sounds of voodoo drums and chantings, thunder, wails, bells, and the report of pistol fire,” is another good example (McCloskey 1985:409). “At once primitive and sophisticated, vibrant and doomed, the expression of tribal nightmare and elegant fantasy,” McCloskey notes, “Welles’ Haiti was also the place where witchcraft, in the form of voodoo, was widely supposed to be practiced” (1985:410). Indeed, “Welles’ choice of a setting already
associated with the practice of black magic enabled him to authenticate his witches without resort to Halloween costumes or subliminal effects” (McCloskey 1985:410).

The juxtaposition of Haitian history with Haitian Vodou is a knockout punch for audiences. Like its counterparts, Voodoo Mystique simultaneously sensationalizes and tames Haitian Vodou by marking/marketing it as a set of spine-tingling experiences and curious taboos, which audiences could not wait to read more about or see for themselves.

Haiti opened its first official tourist outreach program, the National Tourist Office, in 1939 (Plummer 1990:50). It closed two years later when the US declared war on Japan, Germany declared war on the US, and Haiti declared war on Germany (Dash 1997:91). In 1941, a New York Times article describes the scene at “America’s playground” as increasingly “closed to the tourist, as America strengthens the bases that defend her play kingdom.” The article goes on to note that after 15 January 1942, tourists will need passports and special documents to visit certain countries, including Haiti.

Tourism in the Caribbean would be forever changed, but its Haitian side was left with a vivid, three-pronged tourist discourse. Together, these three themes offered American readers a wealth of literary figures they all-too eagerly interpreted as facts. These “facts” are the model for touristic ways of seeing Haiti and set the stage for the rest of Haiti’s tourist discourse.

Mass Tourism, Pleasure Island, and the “Haitian Holiday”
The number of tourists in Haiti increased 25 percent in 1949; expecting more to come, the Haitian government launched a bold $5,000,000 construction initiative for its International Exhibition in 1950 (Friedlander 1949). In less than a year, forecasts jumped to 15,000 for the celebration of Port-au-Prince’s 200th anniversary (Bogat 1949). Brenda Gayle Plummer (1990:59) refers to the seven years after WWII as “Haiti’s golden age of tourism.” Gage Averill (1997:20) dubs this era the “bel epek,” when American tourism and the explosion of trendy Haitian meringue albums went hand-in-hand. Haiti’s salad days may have ended under the brutal dictatorships of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier and son Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier (1957-1986), but their regimes strived to maintain a steady flow of tourist capital into the country well after twilight fell on Haiti’s golden age of tourism. Indeed, predictions ran at 70,000 Americans for the winter of 1957 alone (Wilson 1957:196). An estimated 51,000 tourists chose the “Haitian Sensation” in 1968, only four years after Papa Doc proclaimed himself “President for Life” (Zendegui and Muschkin 1972:24). In this spirit, the uprooting of the Duvalier dynasty in 1986 is the true bookend of Haiti’s golden years.

To this point, tourist literature had cultivated a reputation for Haiti as a land of reprobate people, wounded history, and sinister cults. Yet more and more Americans flocked there each year. This era has two Haitis: America’s Haiti, and tourism’s Haiti. One was the subject of a half-century of ill repute; the other was a sublime tropical paradise. America’s Haiti was anathema to tourism’s Haiti. Plummer (1990) posits that America’s Haiti had to change if it were to become one of the Caribbean’s top vacation destinations. Dash (1997:82) agrees, writing “the change in American attitudes to Haiti
was almost complete by the late 1940s. The ‘Good Neighbor Policy’, scientific scrutiny and cultural relativism meant that Haitian culture and society had acquired a new respectability in the eyes of the United States.” Both scholars believe this change was necessary for Haiti’s nascent tourist industry.

The propaganda needs of a would-be tourist mecca clearly do not resemble those of a military protectorate. Continued occupation of Haiti had required rationalization on the grounds of present danger, as well as the putative primitiveness and incompetence of the natives, qualities hardly reassuring to fastidious vacation travelers. The removal of these ascriptions by substituting Haitianization for a permanent American military presence was the first prerequisite to any alteration of the Haitian image (Plummer 1990:54).

Images of Haiti as both the victim of mishandled Monroe Doctrine policy and a prolonged military protectorate were not the only obstacles to overcome. Racism and “The Negro Question,” Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue, and Voodoo Mystique helped make Haiti the butt of every joke, and this myopic vision of Haiti badly needed resuscitation as well (Plummer 1990:54). Plummer (1990:55) suggests a change of heart came about through various efforts to sanitize Haiti’s nefarious notoriety, but this seems only partially true. The combined assault of intellectuals, academics, and artists Plummer (1990) and Dash (1997) laud certainly helped redeem Haiti’s image, but this effort played an ancillary role in the elevation of all-things Haitian.

The Haitian government realized full well that one of its greatest continuing sources of American dollars lay in the post-war tourist trade, and its 1950 Cité de l’Exposition gave officials the wherewithal to turn this potential source into a permanent supply (Sutton 1947). Haiti’s bid to overhaul its tourist scene is what drew the attention
of eager American tourists, since it meant that Haiti could supply all the tantalizing accoutrements of a tropical, carefree, and most importantly modern relaxation location.

If you build it, they will come—Port-au-Prince’s fabulous hotels like El Rancho, Sans Souci, Habitation Leclerc, and the Grand Hotel Oloffson seemed to attract tourists on their own. Audiences were seduced by a new Haiti—Pleasure Island, the dreamy “Haitian Holiday,” a little slice of America in Haiti (Kennedy and Kennedy 1953; Rasky 1960; Polvay and Cohen 1979).8

Pleasure Island and the “Haitian Holiday” is the total embodiment of the American experience in Haiti—it offers chic shopping opportunities, world-class luxury hotels, the therapeutic benefits of tropical sun and sea, and everything in between (including Haiti’s local color). At Pleasure Island, “a first-rate planter’s punch is obtainable for a nickel; a good filet mignon can be bought in a restaurant for fifty cents; hotel accommodations, including toothpaste and postage stamps, can be had for two dollars a day; and the company of some of the most charming, gentle, and childlike people in the world can be had for free” (Stinnett 1951:100). The Island’s “tourist shops which dot the waterfront feature objects made of native mahogany, gay sisal bags and shoes, and other pleasing souvenirs” (Bervin 1947:613). “The stores of Port au Prince,” says Herbert Lanks, “amuse and entertain for their range of stock” (1948:99). “Mahogany ware is a tourist favorite,” William Krauss proclaims (1950:107). Mary Johnson is more informative:

The tourist shops are modern and are banded together in an Association to outlaw commissions to taxi drivers and other unethical practices that tend to drive prices up and efficiency down. European luxury goods are offered at free port prices and best buys are French perfumes, German cameras,
Swiss watches, English cashmeres. Haitian Barbancourt rum is a top buy. Mahogany ware, sisal or straw products, tortoise shell jewelry, hand-painted skirts, embroidered linen dresses, paintings and sculpture are also recommended (1958:40).

Deborah Messinesi (1978:211) reduces the essence of Haiti into hotels, restaurants, markets, architecture, and “just about everything Haitian—mahogany bowls, pendants made of hardened nuts embossed with gold, dresses, shirts, even paintings.” These artifacts fall under the rubric of “tourist art” and “airport art,” as Nelson Graburn (1976) has shown, and indicate the outer appendages of a more mature tourist industry.

The true allure of Pleasure Island and the “Haitian Holiday” is hotel life, which the “All American Plan” makes possible (Boline 1948). “All of Haiti’s hotels and rooming houses operate on the modified American plan,” Zendegui and Muschkin report, “which means that the rate includes the cost of the room, breakfast, and dinner” (1972:24). Louisa Comstock (1951:255) brings home Haiti’s hotel allure, saying “you’ll find that Haiti too has added modern luxury to its picturesque scene.” Its hotels have “an illuminated pool, a night club with South American entertainment and both meringue and rumba orchestras, and Haiti’s only gambling casino” (Comstock 1951:255). Krauss (1950:106) gives a blue-ribbon list of bars in Cap-Haitien and Port-au-Prince that make for great social rendezvous. “Hotel bars stay open late,” Krauss notes, “and the traveler may if he likes consort with fellow visitors from Cleveland and Little Falls, Minn.” (1950:110). As David Dodge (1958:40) writes, “most of the hotels have their own restaurants, bars, swimming pools, dance floors, amusements and souvenir shops. You do not have to go down into town at all, except perhaps to sample the entertainments of the International Casino on Harry Truman Boulevard.”
After getting a first look at ragtag Port-au-Prince, tourists “are likely to hurry up into the surrounding hills where half a dozen glittering pleasances proffer the standard amenities” (Kobler 1959:28). John Kobler (1959:28-89) couples his enticing hotel descriptions with a roll call of frequent celebrity vacationers, like playwright Lillian Hellman, actor Maurice Evans, New York Times writer Paul Kennedy, cartoonist Charles Addams, and author James Jones. Kate Simon (1960:34) reiterates that “Port-au-Prince is, of course, the prime tourist haven, with splendid hotels, good shops for French importations, a florid Iron Market in late Victorian style, an art centre blazing with primitives, and a casino by the sea.”

As if these accounts were not enough, a number of sources include tantalizing pictures to boot (Krauss 1950; McGurk 1969; Zendegui and Muschkin 1972; Beckman 1974; Weddle 1974). Kobler’s article (1959), for instance, gives pictures of beautiful white women lounging poolside, tourists dancing in nightclubs, and audiences applauding “native machete” dances. A now classic tourism ad accompanies Bob Wallace’s piece (1978:132): lush tropical vegetation frames the scene as two white women make their way to a crowded pool with their Haitian waiter, drinks in hand, close behind.

The “All American Plan” meant tourists could expect few financial surprises, but it also meant that American comforts, and by extension American routines, guided life on Pleasure Island. Tourists in Haiti are doing Western things in Haiti, with a very docile shade of “local color,” and calling it Haitian. By transplanting these images of American leisure and high-class onto Haiti, the tourist discourse has again made Haiti not its own.
Such "visual economies of tourism," as Thompson (2006:6) would call them, prove essential in constructing the American experience in Haiti.

(In)authenticity Revisited

Voodoo shows took center stage in the lion's share of Haitian holidays during these golden years (Goldberg 1981). Maneuvering Haitian Vodou into commercialization was a joint venture between certified, government-sponsored groups and popular, commercial venues. Authors were alert to both camps, and sent readers mixed signals about voodoo in Haiti: Is it true? Is it real? Is it authentic? On one hand, institutions like the Centre d’Art, the Bureau d’Ethnologie, and the National Folklore Troupe presented a somewhat authoritative version of Vodou (e.g., Williams 1950; Zendegui and Muschkin 1972:17; Davis 1967:49). On the other hand, places like the Don Pedro Club, the Bamboche Room, and the Grand Hotel Oloffson offered a decidedly glitzier alternative (e.g., Wilson 1950:31; Ohl 1957:60; Kobler 1959:89; Pan American 1967:52).

It seems that everyone’s a critic (and an authority) when it comes to voodoo. Krauss (1950:108) boasts his authority to readers when he claims “at an actual voodoo ceremony, three drums, which must have been baptized, are used.” Selden Rodman offers more authoritative advice:

If you do not know a Haitian who can take you to an authentic [voodoo] rite, the best way is to wander about the poorer quarters of Port-au-Prince or its environs on a Saturday or Sunday evening (except during Lent). Listen for the cadence of drums and follow them. If you are not conspicuously dressed enter the tonelle unobtrusively, say “Bon soir” casually to those nearest you, and behave with respect, the chances are that
you will be ignored or treated courteously; and that if you wait patiently—perhaps for several hours—you may see something interesting (1955:113).

Ruth Wilson (1957:48) warns of the “advertised voodoo ceremonies near the waterfront. They are not the real thing, but are put on expressly for tourists and often end up in drunken orgies.” Indeed, “no white tourist is likely to ever witness a genuine voodoo ceremony, and it is doubtful it one ever has...these events are staged at a moment’s notice and while they are colorful, with orgiastic dancing and the beheading of chickens, the ceremony is empty of any primitive religious significance” (Stinnett 1969:97).

Authors were convinced there was no way the frenzied cannibal cult that they knew so well could ever make its way on stage. There was no way the real, authentic voodoo was out in public. “There is a commercial version for the tourist,” Pan American’s guidebook states, “but the real thing is hidden away” (1982:1063).

Scholars demonstrate that such claims are typical for touristic experiences (e.g., MacCannell 1999; Gable and Handler 2000; Bruner 2005). Goldberg (1981; 1983), Largey (2006), and Richman (2008) offer trenchant assessments of Haiti’s so-called “staged” voodoo shows in particular. Nevertheless, a closer look at these texts yields a fresh perspective on the construction of the “authentic” Haitian experience, one that does not center on the real/fake dichotomy.

It’s not what has been said about the “authenticity” of tourist experiences in Haiti that has been overlooked, but how it’s been said; the “authentic” Haitian experience is also constructed through the tone authors adopt. Most authors address readers directly in the second person, which is at once invitation and endorsement (e.g., Bervin 1947:615;
Wilson 1950:29; Simon 1960:34). Kobler demonstrates the power of the second person nicely:

You start on your second rum punch. You exchange pleasantries with some of the Oloffson regulars. You cool off in the sky-blue pool. You savor your first meal to the accompaniment of sentimental French ballads from Coster’s never-silent hi-fi set. You take a long siesta. You drive a rented car—ten dollars a day with no limit on mileage—through the majestic, jasmine-scented hills. After dinner you go to the Choucoune, a vast nightclub in the shape of an African hut. You dance the meringue, the easiest Caribbean dance to learn, and the hardest to perform with style. You goggle at some of the loveliest women on earth—the flowers of Haiti’s light-skinned, so-called elite. Back at the Oloffson toward dawn, you fall asleep to the gentle blip-blip of starlings’ wings as the thirsty birds skim the swimming pool (1959:90).

This put-yourself-in-these-shoes approach imparts a morally binding force and it constructs an experience that is regrettable if missed. Cave’s anecdote (1957) about a woman who sorely missed out when she chose not to accompany his hiking party in the Haitian “byroads” captures this shoulda-would-coulda vibe. He concludes with, “and that is Haiti—the real Haiti—the Haiti the tourist in Port-au-Prince ought to see more of” (Cave 1957:10, my emphasis). Rodman’s (1955:153) “Primer on Haiti” is an A-Z piece in which each drop-cap letter reveals a juicy “fact” about Haiti, but it is also the first to feature a “don’ts” section. The idea of a “primer” on Haiti catches on, and myriad sources offer words of caution, blurbs about what to see and when to see it, and cultural crash-courses with a generous supply of “yous,” “shoulds,” “musts,” “dos,” and “don’ts” (Riddell 1957; Pan American 1967:48; 1982:1066-1068; McGurk 1969:34; Messinesi 1978:211). Such personal, moral-imperative tones instruct readers not only on what they could expect to experience, but also what they ought to experience. To neglect this advice is to neglect Haiti’s essence altogether.
Durable Cicerones

Pleasure Island’s immaculate tourist scene gave Americans a comfortable, reliable, and modern vantage point to fulfill their newfound curiosity in Haitian culture. Far from exonerating Haiti, the tourist discourse instead capitalized on Haiti’s overly stereotyped reputation. The very things that had made Haiti a red-letter country—racism and “The Negro Question,” Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue, and Voodoo Mystique—doubled as blueprints for tourist-industry success. This renaissance comes at the heels of the so-called “Haitian Renaissance” set forth by American sculptor DeWitt Peters and his disciples at the Centre d’Art in Port-au-Prince (Rodman 1948).

The vogue of Haitian art which catapulted the nation into international fame in the late 1940s celebrated what connoisseurs like Rodman (1948), Stinnett (1969), and Zendegui and Muschkin (1972) imagined to be the primitive essence of Haitian culture expressed in art. As the Centre became a chief tourist destination, Karen Richman (2008:214-215) explains, it brought a half-century’s worth of (mis)information about Haitian Vodou with it. Haitian artists took for fodder the various perceptions of Vodou and imitated them in their art, which, in turn, American tourists enthusiastically consumed as the real thing (Richman 2008:222). Stinnett (1969:98) echoes this, noting that “there are many hints of voodoo in Haitian art, which covers the country and is extremely primitive but often good.” As artists, performers, observers, researchers, and tourists moved fluidly across the boundaries of Vodou’s religious and recreational sites,
the divisions between the two collapsed; the “elements” of Vodou began serving as both models for and models of the more overtly commercialized voodoo shows performed in hotels and nightclubs (Richman 2008:218). The tourist discourse, however, is not so quick to adopt these domestications when it comes to the Haiti’s most infamous and lamentable quality: its color.

Racism and “The Negro Question” reestablishes these ties directly at first. Lanks (1948:131) demonstrates not only racial attitudes, but also colonial power-relations when he describes his ascent up the Citadel as an “onering [sic] African safari, with black porters bearing burdens on their heads and the rest of us in pith helmets strung out along the trail.” A.J. Liebling’s “Paris Parallels” (1949) conjures a well-known Haiti—a black, second-rate France. Here, “the racial cocktail bubbles cheerfully in a night club when visiting Americans make friends with Haiti’s elite and the local rum” (Liebling 1949:60). And again with Krauss (1950:99), who finds Port-au-Prince to be “old France in the mouth of brash young Africa.” The Haitian people exhibit qualities that white Americans could still write home about: “Nowhere do men live closer to the earth that sustains and received them than in the Black Republic of the Caribbean” (Krauss 1950:99). Krauss (1950:103) confirms America’s Haiti, lauding it much like Blair Niles did as “Black Haiti, the Black Republic, Africa’s Eldest Daughter.” Rodman (1954:32) tells tourists that Haiti has “something that the other Caribbean islands cannot offer…the color of the skin.” “Naturally,” Rodman writes, “there are Negroes in all the islands, but Haiti is the only one where the white master has been chased out” (1954:32). Tourists are left with the purest and darkest people this side of the Congo.
The shift to tropes promoting cultural hedonism—"primitive," "uninhibited," "childlike," etc—is a delayed reaction to the Haitian art vogue. Critics found their new "taste" for Haitian art difficult to reconcile with the racial prescriptions that dominated American attitudes towards Haiti, and were forced to articulate their values in different ways. By replacing racist condemnation with cultural celebration, this Creole connection is a bridge to previous discussions on racism and "The Negro Question."

Krauss (1950:110-112) underlines these shifts: "You will perhaps have gathered that the peasants are the 'sight' of Haiti...you find the physical body of the peasant in the native market, his captured spirit—let this not seem odd—in the Centre d'Art." Dozens of newspaper articles made Haiti's budding tourist scene a hot topic, but three stand out; these pieces display large photos of exotically dressed Haitian women walking single file as they gracefully balance oversized loads on their heads (Bogat 1949; Williams 1950; Herschel 1950). With first look, it is clear that this choice of imagery means to accentuate Haitian customs in an awe-inspiring manner and offer readers a taste of what awaits them. Herschel takes a step further to bring the spectacle of the Haitian people to readers:

Their love of independence, their pride in their country, and their complete lack of inhibitions is impressive, but their happy love of living is the magnet which draws you to them...it will be the natives, the people themselves, who cast their spell. There is always something to be discovered in the Isle of Black Magic (1950).

Comstock (1951:225) suggests these things will be seen immediately after arriving in "Port au Prince, where all the primitive color, music, and languor of Haiti goes on uninhibited." Stinnett (1951:100) encourages readers to seek out "the company of some of the most charming, gentle, and childlike people in the world." Jason Seley (1953:20)
all but resurrects a racial value system when he casts doubt on the artists at the Centre d’Art: “All we can give him is materials, tools, knowledge of how to use them, and sympathetic understanding as he works his own destiny.” Eunice and Patricia Kennedy (1953:38) assure readers that although the natives look poor, they could not be happier. “When you tire of the tourist attractions in bustling Port-au-Prince,” Hugh Cave writes, “La Tortue beckons nearby—sleepy, primitive and friendly as a peasant smile, a truly unspoiled tropical gem asking only a spirit of adventure and a little of your time” (1958:58). Stinnett (1969:31) later reminds readers that “Haiti today is still a black republic, far more African in nature than much of Africa.”

These remnants of racism last at least until the late ‘70s. Kay Chernush’s (1978:37) remark—“imaginative bar names reflect a taste for the fanciful so evident throughout the country”—seems to invoke racist commentary similar to that of Hesketh Prichard and others who highlighted Haitians’ love to inflate things. “The unexpected sound you hear in Haiti is laughter,” Messinesi exclaims, but “during the day it’s a sound you see—a glorious grin, a flash of white teeth” (1978:211).

Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue enjoys a similar comeback in Haiti’s golden age of tourism. Indeed, “the royal palace of Sans Souci and the Citadelle La Ferriere, built in the nineteenth century by Henri Christophe, are still major attractions” (Boline 1948). Lanks (1948:119) gives old-school praise for Haiti’s historic sights, “the spectacular ruins of the palace and fortress of the fabulous despot, Emperor Henri Christophe.” He celebrates the “Great Man” histories as well:

It was at a point not far from here that [Dessalines] is said to have originated the Haitian flag by taking the French tricolor and ripping out
the white center which he said stood for white domination, trampling it under foot and raising aloft the blue and red as the symbol of the new Haitian nation (1948:122).

Interestingly, Lanks (1948:128) also confesses how greatly he had been influenced by all the previous Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue literature. Bogat finds it noteworthy that:

The remains of Henri Christophe’s Queen and his Princess daughter, who fled Haiti to die tragically in Pisa, Italy, after the now-legendary Emperor blew his brains out with a silver bullet in his mountain fortress, will be officially transferred to Haiti by the Italian Government in one of the inaugural ceremonies of the Bicentenary Exposition of Port au Prince (1949, my emphasis).

The only reason Christophe should be “now-legendary” is because of this tourist discourse.

Liebling (1949:62-63) calls the Citadel “a great, mad monument to the slave king of Haiti” and “one of the seven wonders of the world.” Krauss (1950:110) refers to it as a “grandiose sight,” and “better than a Pyramid to visit.” Elsie Brown (1950:521) exclaims that “no mention of Haiti or of the fabulous King Christophe would be complete without at least a few words about his grand pleasure palace, Sans Souci, and his mighty fortress, La Citadelle Laferriere.” Haiti’s historic landscape “must be seen to be fully comprehended and appreciated,” and “as a background for a trip to Haiti, a resume of its long and turbulent history seems not to be amiss” (Brown 1950:521). In preparation for a Haitian vacation, the Kennedys (1953:38) advise readers to immerse themselves in Haiti’s history just as they did. They (1953:38) also describe the Citadel as “larger and more massive than the pyramids of Egypt; it sits mournfully on a mountain peak, a disintegrated symbol of defiance” and appears “like the prow of a huge ship about to push off into the sky.”
The Citadel as mountain-ship is one of the touchstones of Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue. Stinnett (1969:31) ties the Citadel in nicely with Haiti’s provocative past: “It is now a tourist attraction for the hardy visitor who can stand an arduous horseback trip of three hours up a slippery, jungle trail—a trail where 30,000 blacks died of heat prostration carrying stone and cannon to the summit.” In this land, “one cannot determine just where history ends and legend begins” (Zendegui and Muschkin 1972:1). These authors (1972:11) reiterate the Citadel’s marvels, speculating that “if La Citadelle Laferriere had been constructed thousands of years earlier, without doubt there would have been eight wonders of the ancient world.” Wallace’s (1978:91) article retelling an enchanting stroll among the ruins of Sans Souci and the Citadel keeps this imagery alive well into the 1970s.

Voodoo Mystique flourishes most of all (Goldberg 1981). “As foreign audiences’ appetites for information about the ‘black republic’ increased,” Largey says, “they demanded materials that confirmed rather than challenged their impressions of Haiti as a hotbed of Vodou activity” (2006:200-201). Earl Leaf and Leonie Greenwood-Adams (1946:22) were proud to present “the first complete picture-story of a Voodoo ceremonial in Haiti,” the practice of which “in its primitive form is essentially a religion based on sorcery and witchcraft.” Antoine Bervin informs readers of a woman who approached him for tourist info:

It was clear that this trip to Haiti was for her like the realization of a beautiful, long-cherished dream. Anyone could understand such an attitude who was at all familiar with the flood of literature written in the United States in the past few years—evocative mainly of the fantastic tales of the island, of voodoo, of zombies, and of jungle drums; of the
Tourssaint-Louverture revolution; of the legendary memories of the royal court of Henri Christophe and his glorious citadel (1947:614).

Kreiger (1948) reminds audiences how “on Saturday night in Port-au-Prince one hears the voodoo drums beating in the back-country.” Lanks (1948:106) downplays such enticements, saying “today voodoo in Haiti is greatly overrated by many who go there and wish to return with something strange and spectacular.” Yet he betrays this discouragement by rousing more interest: “True, there have been in the past rare cases of human sacrifice, and today an occasional chicken or goat may end its days as a bloody offering in a strange religious ceremony” (Lanks 1948:106). “Beating drums, voodoo dances, wilds orchids—Haiti’s still got them,” Rattner writes (1951). Once the Kennedys (1953:113) returned to Port-au-Prince, they eagerly “arranged to see some voodoo rites. Voodoo, as the Haitian authority Hugh B. Cave defines it, is ‘the Haitian peasant’s heritage from the past and his faith in the future.’” This comment seems less innocent considering that the Kennedys drew their information from Cave, a fellow tourist who equally sensationalizes Vodou, alleging that “no mountain peasant sleeps in the open in this land where the night hours are haunted by werewolves and the voodoo spirits” (Cave 1956:27). Sabine Goya (1955a:39-42) went to Haiti because of “the dangerous word”—voodoo—and zombie talk. Jim Abbot (1965:45) carries these discussions through the 1960s and gives readers a true taste of voodoo: “In the homes of the elite of Haiti and out in the country during special festivals and voodoo activities, there’s a delicious concoction called griot that is often served.”

As these texts suggest, no discussion of Haiti would be complete without elaborating its most notable features; racism and “The Negro Question,” Haitian
Revolutionary Intrigue, and Voodoo Mystique are the *non sine qua* of the "Haitian Holiday." For a time when Haitian was making the transition from touristic sight to touristic site, these three themes prove to be durable cicerones. With this I have shown that the "Haitian Holiday" is composed of a set of interchangeable parts, themselves consumable experiences, and that the production of which involves both deploying American life ways onto Haiti and commodifying its well-established "facts" into *bona fide* tourist attractions, complete with a virtuoso collection of Haitian "primitive" art and an impressive repertoire of mahogany "tourist art," handcrafts, and voodoo souvenirs. It is a process of converting touristic ways of seeing Haiti into touristic ways of experiencing Haiti.

**A Momentary Moratorium?**

The "Haitian Holiday" would begin its fall from grace in the 1960s, and bring with it significant ruptures to the tourist discourse. Reports on Haiti’s politically repressive climate under Papa Doc dwindled tourist enthusiasm. “Haiti,” says Jean Meslay, “is merely the most extreme case of political and economic maladjustment in a changed world” (1963:375). According to John Barnes (1963:51), “Haiti is in fact the most wretched, debauched, and tyrannically ruled nation in the Western Hemisphere.” Barry Farrell’s (1963) “Voodoo-land in Ferment” was one of the earliest exposés to throw light on the horrors of life under Papa Doc. Graham Greene’s *The Comedians* (1966), a novel based on both his experiences as a tourist at the Grand Hotel Oloffson
and his observations on Papa Doc’s callous regard for human life, made the author a *persona non grata* in Haiti.\(^\text{10}\) While on assignment in Port-au-Prince, Herbert Gold (1991) derided Papa Doc’s administration in his works as well.

Haiti’s dicey politics almost always lead into discussions on the country’s poverty and other socio-economic ills. Malcolm Davis (1967) both praises Haiti’s scene and laments the “Limbo” of its pressing politics and poverty. In Haiti, “bitterness is perhaps the first of emotions poverty breeds” (Davis 1967:47). The film *Vers le sud* (Cantet 2005) integrates politics and poverty in its portrayal of North American sex tourism in Duvalier’s Haiti. In addition to sex, Haiti’s pitiful poverty kept three American women coming back to the same Haitian resort each summer. Their yearly vacations end in tragedy, however, when the coveted beachboy Legba is murdered by Papa Doc’s *tonton macoutes*. “High illiteracy, low life expectancy, a per capita income not much above that of India—these are the realities that make Haiti a set-up for revolution,” Harold Fey exclaims (1961:231). Continuing this discussion, Zendegui and Muschkin (1972:5) state “living conditions in Haiti are greatly influenced by the fact that the country is overpopulated and has the highest population density in the Western Hemisphere.” And again, “if one were to judge Haitian life solely by the statistics on illiteracy, per capita income, and sanitation facilities, the picture would be a very gloomy one; for the masses lack most of the things that are considered essential to maintaining good living standards today” (Zendegui and Muschkin 1972:5).

Joseph Beckman bemoans unemployment, illiteracy, and poverty religious grounds.
The situation in Haiti as far as poverty and religion are concerned is serious. People from the outside cannot solve the problems of the Haitian people but they ought to know about them, be concerned, and try to convince wealthy countries to aid their poorer neighbors financially. If only the people of Haiti had more and better jobs their condition could improve immensely. If people cannot read and write, it they earn less than two dollars a week on the average, they are hardly among the blessed of the earth. God surely wishes a better life for the gentle, soft-spoken and kind Haitian people. And maybe God wants some of us to help Him bring it about (Beckman 1974:8).

Despite such blemishes, “Haiti still remains an enchanted land lost in a mist of decaying history” (Stinnett 1969:31). McGurk (1969:34) adds that Haiti’s tourist scene is “much unchanged” and “still has its unspoiled tropical lushness and its mysterious French-voodoo ambiance.” The band Steely Dan’s 1976 song “Haitian Divorce” tells of a carefree, sex-loaded interlude in Haiti. Lyrics from the second verse and chorus are convincing:

She takes the taxi to the good hotel / Bon marché as far as she can tell / She drinks the zombie from the cocoa shell / She feels alright, she get it on tonight / Mister driver / Take me where the music play / Papa say /// At the Grotto / In the greasy chair / Sits the Charlie with the lotion and the kinky hair / When she smiled, she said it all / The band was hot so / They danced the famous Merengue / Now we dolly back / Now we fade to black. (Steely Dan 1976)

Haiti “is undoubtedly the safest country in the world presently for the tourist” (Year Book 1976:653).

In her analysis of tourism in the Caribbean, Ruth Young (1977:672) concludes that each nation’s travel industry is a manifestation of its existing social, economic, and political structure. According to Young (1977:663-669), Haiti’s tourist portfolio is one of “plantation tourism” rather than “comprehensive tourism” or “luxury tourism”; Haiti’s grisly politics means it must rely on interest in music and dance, tourist crafts, and sales
of native liquors to maintain its travel industry. “Plantation tourism,” Young adds, “is also related to all of the measures of the general level of development” (1977:670).

Arturo Escobar (1995) has revealed how notions of “development” are guiding principles in the construction of the “Third World.” Even today, there is “great difficulty thinking about Third World situations and people in terms other than those provided by the development discourse. These terms—such as overpopulation, the permanent threat of famine, poverty, illiteracy, and the like—operate as the most common signifiers” (Escobar 1995:12). Furthermore, “one could say that the body of the malnourished—the starving ‘African’ portrayed on so many covers of Western magazines, or the lethargic South American child to be ‘adopted’ for $16 a month portrayed in the advertisements of the same magazines—is the most striking symbol of the power of the First World over the Third” (Escobar 1995:103). With regards to Haiti, Davis (1967:47) captures this sentiment best: “No method can more swiftly bolster a nation’s economy than tourism. Indeed, if you really pity the poor native you’ll spread your travel tab around areas economically arid.” A conflicted interplay emerges between the “development” discourse and the tourist discourse, one that lasts to this day. Haiti is the Third World, but it’s still a great place for a vacation.

“Alternative Tourism” in Haiti

The passing of the “Haitian Holiday” was really death by a thousand cuts. Papa Doc’s war on Haiti no doubt began disarming the “Haitian Sensation.” The disenchancing
array of "Third World" buzzwords certainly didn't help. Escalating reports of the "boat
people" pandemic, AIDS accusations, and Haiti's all-around "bad press" delivered blow
after blow to its already fragile image, and further dispelled the myth of Pleasure Island
(Lawless 1992; Farmer 1994). Things came to a head, however, with the ouster of Baby
Doc in 1986. Today, a mixed bag of coups, revolutions, "intervasions," and UN
occupations has left Haiti in a state of catatonic, political uncertainty.

Despite Haiti's political and economic malaise, audiences cannot seem to distance
themselves from the imaginary charm of Haiti. Tourism has recovered notwithstanding
(Library of Congress 2006:14). Indeed, research shows there were 145,000 tourists in
1995, 140,492 in 2000, and 112,267 in 2005 (see Charts 1 and 2). The happenings at
"Labadee®" have played a big part in this.

Not surprisingly, proponents (benefactors) of the deal between RCI and the
Haitian government claim that "Labadee®" is a viable route to "development." In 1999,
officials hoped to exploit the ruins of La Citadel and Sans Souci—both restored as
UNESCO World Heritage sites in 1995—to the thousands arriving at "Labadee®" each
month. "But something had to be done," states tourism authority Ernest Bellande,
"because in order to go from the port to the Citadelle and back, you have to pass through
the city of Cap-Haitien, and it looked so lousy" (quoted in Luxner 1999:48). To fix that,
brokers devised a comprehensive plan that meant to "beautify" the Labadi vicinity and
"revive Haiti's paradise" (Luxner 1999).

The Organization of American States (OAS) jumpstarted the "development of
Cap-Haitien" project with $110,000; in turn, RCI pledged $4 million to upgrade its port
to accommodate their larger ships, each carrying 3,600 passengers and 1,500 crew
(Luxner 1999:48). RCI completed its costly facelift shortly after, but the plan to spread
the wealth across the Cap-Haitien region never came about. More recently, the OAS held
talks in 2007 to aid “tourism development in Labadie and to look at further development
of the tourism potential of Cap Haitien and the Citadel” (Caribbean Net News 2007). The
OAS’s Assistant Secretary General concluded that “assisting the country's tourism can
help expand the debate on Haiti beyond political issues to a discussion of how to assist
the country's social and economic development” (Caribbean Net News 2007). This
relationship between tourism and “development” is the driving force behind “alternative
tourism.”

Largely owing to the UN’s first “International Tourism Year” in 1967, alternative
tourism has come to embrace the vision that “local people will benefit while a situation of
intercultural understanding develops” (Crick 1989:315-319). Dozens of neoliberal
institutions also adopted “the creed that tourism makes sense for both tiny under-
productive islands as well as for larger, more diversified if not debt-laden economies,
such as Jamaica or the Dominican Republic” (Pattullo 2005:6). The idea that tourism is a
panacea for the Third World has had major purchase in the private sector as well. One
notable group is the Ecumenical Coalition on Tourism. Founded in 1982, the ECOT
“works in collaboration with ecumenical, church, other faith-based, and secular groups
around collective efforts to promote socially, ecologically, and ethically responsible
tourism” (ECOT 2007).
Eco- and agro-tourism are key components of this movement in Haiti, whose deforestation and environmental ruin are well known. This isn’t just a day of snorkeling at “Labadee®”—since the mid-90s, Kiskeya Alternativa has been working with the UN Development Program in Haiti to turn both activities into methods of “encouraging environmental rehabilitation and sustainable development” (Paryski 1996). According to UN specialist Paul Paryski, “Haiti still possesses unusual and marketable eco-attractions”:

Hispaniola’s mountains, the highest in the Caribbean, are dotted with dense pine forests, waterfalls, lofty peaks, unexplored limestone cave systems and meadows filled with wildflowers. Haiti’s exquisite beaches are often surrounded by peaks and pristine coral reef systems; Haiti has pocket deserts filled with unusual cacti; in fact, some scientists claim that many species of cacti originated in Hispaniola. In the highest of Haiti’s mountains, two national parks, Macaya and Lavisite, have been established to conserve the country’s natural heritage and unique mountain ecosystems. (1996)

Tourists could leave Port-au-Prince early in the morning by foot or horseback to the mountains of Parc Lavisite.

There they could spend two days viewing unique, endemic birds and orchids, waterfalls, pine forests and alpine meadows; they could explore caves and enjoy spectacular vistas of the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean in the cool and sometimes chilly mountain air. They could then descend to some of the Caribbean’s finest beaches, spend a day in Jacmel (a picturesque port city with charming architecture and handicrafts), and return to Port-au-Prince to visit museums and shop for Haitian paintings. (Paryski 1996)

Haiti and the Dominican Republic began annual eco-tourism expos in 2005; although their 2006 event, entitled “Let Us Protect Our Frontier Rivers,” was held in the Dominican border city Dajabon, organizers shared the 500,000 visitors (Sérant 2006). The Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture has also received praise for
their agro-tours of coffee, cocoa, and banana plantations and rural farms in Haiti (Caribbean Net News 2008).

Heritage, cultural, and reality tourism are also big players in the alternative tourism movement in Haiti. California-based NGO Global Exchange has been a leading figure in reality tourism since its inception in 1988 with initial trips to Mozambique, Israel/Palestine, Honduras, Brazil, El Salvador, and Haiti (Global Exchange 2008). Proactive by nature, Global Exchange emphasizes “people-to-people ties” that “enhance intercultural meetings” and “help the US public understand the gravity of injustice around the world” (Global Exchange 2008). Reality Tours Director Malia Everette told me Global Exchange conducted at least two trips to Haiti each year until the 2004 coup (personal communication, 10 March 2009). While many tours centered on understanding peasant organizing, one of their most popular trips was called “Haiti: A Culture of Resistance,” an educational foray throughout rural Haiti showcasing the country’s culture history and Vodou (Malia Everette, personal communication 10 March 2009).

The group DOA/BN (Delegations, Orientations, Local Production / Bluntschli, Nicolas) has an impressive catalog of heritage, cultural, and reality tourism. Business has been booming for DOA/BN, who went from hosting 20 “formal visitors” during its first year in 1992 to entertaining more than 500 a decade later (DOA/BN 2003:2, 25). Their homepage (DOA/BN 2008b) notes they not only “support and coordinate groups and visitors who come with the intention of learning and experiencing firsthand the Haitian reality within its true historical and social context,” but also “provide all the logistics of transportation, lodging, translation, and coordination with the Haitian community for all
cultural experiences.” Adding to their 16 on-the-ground seminars and lectures, DOA/BN also offers a number of “specialties”: “‘Bonjou Ayiti’: A 1-3 hr. introductory tour of Port-au-Prince”; “‘Gwo Jan’: Half-day/Full-day visit to a small mountain village”; “Historical Visits: 3-5 hr. tour of slavery/historic sites around Port-au-Prince”; “‘A Day With the People’: Full-day City/Country cultural experience”; and “‘The Road To Memory’: For the most curious and brave of hearts (and a desire for healing)” (DOA/BN 2008a).

The “reality” of these reality tours, as it were, means to eat local food, do local things, live in local conditions, and learn local facts. Here, local facts means the daily struggles of Third Worldness. But whose struggles are these? Reality tourists get the idea that it’s a matter of peasants vs. globalization rather than peasants vs. the elite. Jennie Smith (2001) has shown that peasant organizing in rural Haiti is more concerned with community change, national politics, and class struggle than it is with global “development” efforts. But in keeping with neoliberal paradigms, reality tourism fancies Haitian peasants as global citizens and omits Haiti’s internal dynamics and the protracted struggle between the Haitian peasants and Haitian elite, whose power and control is the root source of peasant organizing in the first place.

One finds that contemporary travel articles and guidebooks deploy similar discourses (e.g., Luxner 1999:49; Lonely Planet 1999:400-406; 2009:269; Johnston 2001; Footprint 2007:390-402). Accordingly, things like Sans Souci and La Citadel, Port-au-Prince’s Iron Market, and even Haiti’s public-transportation phenomenon the tap-tap are not only incorporated into notions of heritage, culture, and reality. They are also
embedded in images of filth, hardship, and poverty. An excerpt from an interview with John Kamys, director of the 2008 documentary *Stirring Water*, brings this home:

Regardless of what you read or hear, there are over 8 million people living there. Living there is the key. And yes there are many sad and horrible things happening in Haiti and to the Haitian people,...still they persevere as a people and a culture and are in fact LIVING...stirring water to make butter, if you will. There is a prayer from the time of the Renaissance that begins, “In the midst of life, we are in death...” I think of that prayer when I think of my observations of Haiti, a proud and spirited people with inspiring stories and a dynamic culture mingled with the suffering, the hunger, the lack of clean water, the corruption...the misery that exists in that country. I believe "Stirring Water" captures this juxtaposition. It is a 15 minute slice of life that takes into account things simply as they are. (Woulfe 2008)

But things are never just “simply as they are.” Framing Haiti in these conditions paves the way for the anecdotal correlation between poverty and crime, which is exploited by both the 2002 video game “Grand Theft Auto: Vice City,” and by films like *Ghosts of Cité Soleil* (Leth and Loncarevic 2006) and *Miami Vice* (Mann 2006). The recent James Bond film *Quantum of Solace* (Forster 2008) capitalizes on an equally spurious link between poverty and international terrorism in Haiti.

What’s really on display in Haiti is malnutrition and hunger, peasants and unending need, poverty and crime. Alternative tourism shares these guilty pleasures with “dark tourism,” the West’s grotesque infatuation with disaster, destruction, and death (Lennon and Foley 2004). As Escobar (1995:7) observes, “representations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America as Third World and underdeveloped are the heirs of an illustrious genealogy of Western conceptions about those parts of the world.” Alternative tourism, with its rhetoric of neoliberalism and its penchant for sustainable development, “should be seen for what it is—a mystifying image that is part of the industry itself, and
not an empirically well-founded comment upon its nature” (Crick 1989:329).

Alternative tourism hinges on this ironic truth: by highlighting the Third World disparities of Haiti as attractions, alternative tourism re-produces the same images of socioeconomic inequity it seeks to mitigate. It is non-tourism tourism.11

Conclusion

Touristic representations of Haiti are responsible for a considerable amount of alienation. Although alternative tourism boasts a more hands-on and interpersonal Haitian experience, it nevertheless deploys a “development discourse” that centers on Western values, articulates Western hegemony, and distances Haitians from their ability to self-represent. The fact that The Comedians, The Serpent and the Rainbow, Miami Vice, and Quantum of Solace are all set in Haiti, but were not filmed in Haiti, illustrates this. Third World imagery is so generic that it really doesn’t matter where they are filmed—poor is poor, and black is black, right?

Rights to self-representation is not the only thing alienated; rights to the distribution of these representations have also been denied. The dissemination of touristic representations of Haiti through the Internet, including the overwhelming number of YouTube videos filmed at “Labadee®” and the scores of personal travelbogs, makes it now easier than ever before to perpetuate and institutionalize touristic ways of seeing Haiti. As touristic representations continue to move away from Haiti throughout the 20th century—from sight to site to website—they increasingly alienate Haiti altogether.
To say that Haiti’s culture is *still* worth celebration is also to remark on how uncanny it is that such magnificent things can exist in such primitive conditions. With this, Haiti’s tourist discourse has come full circle; from primitive people to primitive culture to primitive conditions: from Haitian Revolutionary Intrigue and Voodoo Mystique to poverty and AIDS, from racism and “The Negro Question” to the US “intervasion” and widespread political instability, and from the vitality of Haitian culture to the perils of the Third World and the despair of “underdevelopment.” As long as these touristic ways of seeing Haiti persist, Haiti will continue to be *the* “failed state.”
Appendix

Chart 1

Passengers to "Labadee®" per Year

Chart 2

Non-Cruise Ship Tourists to Haiti per Year

Sources: Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO); United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).
Notes

1 The lyric in question reads: “Port-au-Prince, I wanna catch a glimpse.”

2 Criticism on the happenings at “Labadee®” are largely restricted to online discussions through Bob Corbett’s Haitian listserv. “Labadee®” is a crass borrow from the neighboring village of Labadi, which lies just east of Cap-Haitien. The politics involved with being allowed to work in “Labadee®” are interesting and merit study. Curiously, Labadi is never mentioned in the literature on “Labadee®.” One imagines there are two types of experience for tourists in northern Haiti: Labadi vs. “Labadee®,” the real vs. the made, the native vs. the trademarked.


4 Douglass served as US Consular to Haiti from 1889 to 1891; Du Bois’ father was a first-generation Haitian; Hughes befriended Haiti’s great writer Jacques Roumain in the early ’30s and devoted much of his work to the defense or celebration of Haiti.

5 Vandercook even quotes himself in his later travelogue Caribbee Cruise, A Book of The West Indies (1938).

6 Trouillot (1995:44-50) is primarily concerned with the way professional historians have sidestepped Sans Souci’s role in the Haitian Revolution to the extent that “almost every mention of Sans Souci, the palace...effectively silences Sans Souci, the man.” Interestingly, G.H. Osterhout (1920:481) gives a fairly decent sketch of the man in his National Geographic article: “In the war against the French slaveholders, Christophe had one rival by the name of Sans Souci, who rose to command the entire northern section of the island, from Borgne to Fort Liberte, the territory over which Christophe wished to hold sway...Hence it is assumed that this name applied to his palace served Christophe as an ironic reminder of the whole affair and possibly as an indication of his contempt for his late rival and the manner of the latter’s taking-off.”

7 The “Haitian Sensation” is a prolific tourism advertisement that pictures a colorfully dressed Haitian woman, and reads: “The Haitian sensation is a feast of the sense; a total experience in a friendly, magic country offering outstanding holiday values. Ambience in Haiti is a montage of spectacular sights...sensuous sounds...tantalizing tastes and aromas. Haiti is laughter and dancing and singing and gaiety...it’s luscious French and Creole cuisine...plush resorts...fabulous shopping bargains...voodoo...elegant casinos...cockfights...scuba...sailing...amidst multicolored mountains, lush forests and white beaches. Most of all, Haiti is gentle, hospitable people who welcome all visitors. Take a Haitian vacation...you’ll revel in the Haitian sensation” (Messinesi 1978:213; Wallace 1978:132).

8 Even though Haiti occupies only 1/3 of the Hispaniola Island, sources repeatedly refer to Haiti as an island unto itself (e.g., Porter 1946:178; McGurk 1969:34; Messinesi 1978:211). Some even capitalize “island,” suggesting that this misnomer is a carry-over from Seabrook’s travelogue (e.g., Krauss 1950:103; Kennedy and Kennedy 1953:113).

9 The list goes on: Truman Capote (1950) spent six months in Port-au-Prince for his short story “House of Flowers” to be released with “Breakfast at Tiffany’s.” Haiti’s amiable hotels attracted author Graham Greene and actress Anne Bancroft as well.
The Comedians made it to theaters a year later, starring Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, Alec Guinness, and a young James Earl Jones (Glenville 1967). Greene's *persona non grata* status and an incensed Papa Doc thwarted filming in Haiti— *The Comedians* was shot in West Africa instead.

Yearly mission trips, the Catholic Church's "twinning" programs (Hefferan 2007), and even university-sponsored "Study Abroad" sojourns to Haiti fit squarely in with the designs of "alternative tourism."
Bibliography


