Caribbean In/Securities: Creativity and Negotiation in the Caribbean (CARISCC)

Working Papers Series

Mediating Escape: Caribbean Conversations on In/Security, Tourism and Mobility

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The Caribbean has figured prominently in narratives of security, mobility and transnational connections. Referred to as the 'Third Border' in US foreign policies, and inhabiting contradictory geopolitical spaces between North and South America, the region also negotiates narratives of in-betweenness and in/security in relation to more 'leisurely' pursuits, notably tourism. In this working paper, I begin an exploration of the ways in which representations of in/security and mobililty have framed media images of Caribbean tourism by revisiting the critically acclaimed documentary film, Life and Debt (2001). While geopolitics and tourism studies have largely tended to remain distinct areas of research, this particular film—and the conversations within and around it--illustrate the usefulness and urgent need to exhume the interdependency of both. I argue that media representations, Caribbean literature and policy decision-making are part of ongoing conversations that illustrate the limitations of over-generalised notions of time, security and space. Drawing on Benítez-Rojo's (1992) concept of 'repeating islands,' I discuss the ways in which re-examining representations of mobility as part of a series of interconnected and multi-layered conversations, opens up new possibilities for interrogating the ways in which tourism narratives have reinforced, recreated, and stifled opportunities for diverse, secure and inclusive social spaces.

Revisiting *Life and Debt* and Repeating Conversations

It is sixteen years since Life and Debt first screened in film festivals, Caribbean campuses and various venues globally. Largely set in Jamaica, the film maps out the stories and problematic narratives of globalisation, colonialism, tourism and debt through the experiences of a parallel series of central characters; visiting tourists, small scale farmers, hotel and factory workers, Jamaican government officials, leaders of the International Monetary Fund, Rastafarians, and environmental conservationists, among others. These interweaving, and contradictory cartographies, highlight that while Jamaican coastal resorts offer the opportunity for overseas visiting tourists to 'escape' from the 'banality' of their life, they simultaneously symbolise a failure of politicians and multinational agencies and organisations (international and domestic)—to fundamentally address the restricted mobility and ongoing insecure circumstances of a large proportion of the Jamaican (and by extension, global population). The film's director, Stephanie Black, contrasts picturesque views of relaxing tourists and an 'impossibly' blue Caribbean sea, with slow pan shots of low income West Kingston streets from the vantage point of an 'urban safari' tour arranged by an all-inclusive hotel. The voiceover—adapted from Jamaica Kincaid's novel, A Small Place--notes that

these residents who you, the viewer, are also watching with curiosity, "are too poor to escape the reality of their lives; and they are too poor to live properly in the place they live, which is the very place you, the tourist, want to go."

Life and Debt is striking in its ongoing relevance to both Caribbean, and wider struggles with globalisation, inequality and debt. The film provides a useful focal point, and reminder of the ways in which conversations about security and mobility continually resurface and intersect. Although 'globalisation' has frequently been depicted as following a narrowly (western) defined linear trajectory (as Escobar (1995) also shows in relation to discourses of 'development'), the film, and the intertextual narratives it draws on—e.g., Kincaid's novel, the engaging musical soundtrack (a key component of this filmic landscape), face-to-face interviews, archival and television news footage—challenge such constrained images of time and space. In these resistant narratives globalisation (and the opportunity that tourism apparently offers), does not simply do its work then 'deliver.' Narratives of globalisation and tourism are anancys: they are tricky and dynamic—they bring back the past, they appear to include people in the story, or conversation (e.g., documentary scenes that include residents questioning the environmental impacts of resort developments in sensitive ecosystems, or highlighting the loss of livelihood in rural settings), but as Life and Debt highlights, ultimately, they are slippery to keep hold of and they are insecure. Small scale farmers, Jamaican politicians, children playing in the street, vacationing tourists, factory workers, are all part of these landscapes of globalisation, but through unequal relationships that effectively amount to what could arguably be called a situation where the vast majority (individuals, nations and regions), are 'living in arrears.' While the narratives of political trade agreements (such as the archival footage of the 1944 Bretton Woods trade meeting shown in the film) suggest 'forward looking' agendas, economic security, and social mobility, the outcomes appear to suggest ongoing (social, military and economic) struggles over the power to represent and control Caribbean identities and space.

These repetitive practices and representations, are brought into relief via Life and Debt, A Small Place and a wide range of critical Caribbean literature (I have also recently discussed more recent films, such as Jamaica for Sale, which demonstrate reformulations of these connected and disruptive narratives of place (Mains 2017)). This repetitive nature of in/security is helpful to note: in his seminal exploration of the Caribbean, Repeating Islands, Benítez-Rojo (2001, xi) states: 'This work, as its title indicates, aspires to be repetitive rather than definitive; it is part of a flow of words that has neither a beginning or an end—a never-ending tale.' Through this study, Benítez-Rojo also illustrates that what may initially appear separate and discontinuous (islands, languages, power struggles), under closer scrutiny reveal themselves to be—like the Caribbean—archipelagic.

It is twenty-eight years since A Small Place (1988), entered the public imagination, directly challenging readers to reflect on their own complicity as tourists and/or beneficiaries of inequality—to engage with, what Pedwell (2013) terms, 'alternative empathies.' By utilising an adapted version of the narrator's voice from Kincaid's text as the film's voiceover—shifting from the novel's Antiguan setting to that of Jamaica—Black continues this repeating conversational deictic strategy, again directly questioning the viewer, probing their conscience and (social and physical) place, pushing audiences to challenge the inevitability of these repeating inequalities within Caribbean landscapes. I hope to further explore this idea of resistance and repetition in relation to how we might understand representations

of in/security in the Caribbean as part of ongoing negotiations of, and conversations about, tourism, power and mobility.

Security, Geopolitics, Economics and Tourism

> "We recognize that threats to our security, concerns, and other challenges are diverse in nature and multidimensional in scope, and that traditional concepts and approaches must be expanded to encompass new and non-traditional threats, which include political, economic, social, health and environmental aspects.
>
> The objective of the Third Border Initiative is to focus U.S.-Caribbean engagement through targeted programs that comprise both new and ongoing activities designed to enhance cooperation in the diplomatic, security, economic, environmental, health and education arenas without prejudice to additional areas of collaboration that may be agreed upon in the future. The Third Border Initiative provides the opportunity to focus funding and assistance on those areas where we see the greatest increased need" (Ereli 2004).
>
> "I am going to be announcing shortly a new regime for safety and security in the tourism sector. We are working on that now, and by the time I get to budget [debate], we will be ready to roll out that new concept," said Bartlett. "It is going to, I am telling you, say to the world, this is a friendly, wonderful place to come [Jamaica], but we have a strong hand on your safety and security" (Lewis 2016).

Geopolitics and tourism depend on, reinforce and contradict concepts of security and mobility. Geopolitics explicitly involves analysing the relations between power, identity and space in light of topics such as, monitoring borders, multi-lateral trade agreements, civic participation, nationalism, migration, censorship and media images of conflict. Tourism studies includes the examination of the ability to access recreation and travel, the marketing of places, visitor experiences, the development of resorts, and images of places and destination cultures. Central to both of these (diverse) bodies of work is an implicit—and increasingly explicit—awareness that an ability to move, and represent movements, is a central component of how we understand, challenge and rethink relationships to people and places. In both of these (not necessarily mutually exclusive) areas of study, there has been a growing recognition of the need for a critical analysis in order to unearth several areas of concern: how certain political and cultural landscapes are produced; the role of representation in policing security and space; and, the ways in which discursive practices (e.g., television news, tourism advertising, novels, investigative documentary films, economic policies) mediate our understandings of space. I would also suggest that the production of tourist destinations and the discursive and material contexts in which they exist, provide an understudied and invaluable window into the ways in which geopolitical discourses of security are becoming increasingly embedded and embodied in discussions of specific Caribbean tourism policies and destinations. And, in the example of Jamaica discussed above, the active integration of a 'militarised' language—traditionally taken towards international monitoring of activities such as, drug-trafficking, arms trading and/or international policing of maritime seas more broadly—reflects (internalised and external) anxieties about 'securing' island states and a desire to formalise tourism's path towards a specific development trajectory.

Mobility and security are inherently contradictory. The two statements at the start of this section—the first from the launch of the (still in existence) Third Border Initiative, commencing during the Bush Administration in 2001, and the second from a recent announcement on Tourism strategy by the Jamaican Tourism Minister, Edmund Bartlett—hint at a tension between collaboration, support, policing, potential threats and enjoyment. These are not only Caribbean concerns, but they are particularly

pertinent for a region in which tourism is an integral part of often vulnerable and insecure economies, and where a US presence has been viewed as a lingering neo-colonial influence. As Noxolo and Featherstone (2014, 604) have noted, 'the Caribbean has been produced as a region with a dense network of international connections—it is a global 'crossroads'… Most obviously,the region's geopolitical significance as the USA's 'backyard' has made it a recurring focus for western anxieties.'

As Noxolo and Featherstone (2014) also point out, in addition to understanding regional/ global connections the specificities of place (historically, culturally and physically) are worth noting. For example, specific economic practices and structures have relevance when analysing broader contemporary policy place/decision-making. The parallel working papers posted here succinctly highlight the need for attention to historical and geographical strategies used to define and 'manage' the security of Caribbean landscapes and political narratives. Since the production of Life and Debt, Jamaica has continued to experience dramatic levels of indebtedness, and a growing reliance on tourism as a potential escape route (see, for example, discussions of intensified Jamaican professional tourism network strategies (Davis 2016) and promotional campaigns (Mains 2015)). It has been estimated that (direct and indirect) travel and tourism related activities contributed approximately 29.3% to the country's GDP in 2015 (the figure for the Caribbean as a whole was 14.77%) (World Travel and Tourism Council Data 2016). The largest earners of foreign exchange (viewed by many as a critical resource due to the devaluation of the Jamaican dollar—partly as an ongoing requirement of ongoing and new structural adjustment loans)—are remittances and tourism. These latter figures highlight the ongoing importance of mobility via emigration, international money transfers, and service industries and developments targeting potential overseas visitors. Although Jamaica's level of total government indebtedness has decreased from a high of 145% of GDP in 2012, it is still a significant burden (most recently calculated as 128% of GDP in 2015) (The World Bank 2017).

The financial and political geographies to these tourism security discussions is significant: revisiting Life and Debt (its title alone signifying the survive-or-perish realities of insecure lives), does not highlight how far we have travelled, but rather how far the challenges and opportunities of these webs of interconnection continue to contract and stretch. The repetitiveness, exclusivity and urgency represented through the themes raised by the film, audience responses, activist groups, government decision-making, multi-national organizations and local residents highlight the discursive, physical and emotional tensions that imbue necessary and frequently, postponed and/or silenced conversations. But—and as I hope to show with further exploration of this topic—these are conversations that can never be completely controlled or erased, and through resistant representations (for example, Caribbean literature, activist projects and films such as Life and Debt), can open new opportunities for dialogue. For as Senior (2005, 17) states, despite the repeating cycles of colonialism, tourism and inequalities in the Caribbean:

you cannot tear my song
from my throat

you cannot erase the memory
of my story

you cannot catch
my rhythm.

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