

**Selling the Revolution: The State's Involvement in Cuban Tourism**  
**(Working Draft –subject to be changed slightly)**

La Tropicana nightclub re-opened in late 2003 with a gala performance of its cabaret after having been refurbished. Having deteriorated substantially during the 1990s due to the economic hardships of the Special Period in Times of Peace (*el Periodo Especial*), its reopening re-signified pre-Revolutionary Cuba's spectacular decadence while simultaneously reigniting the foreigners' "passion" for the Cuban *mulata*. Overblown and overpriced (\$75 CUC per person for a three hour show), the cabaret at La Tropicana and others like it performed at prominent tourist hotels, like the Hotel Nacional, pull notions of racialized and sexualized *mulata* as embodying *cubanidad*, the essential qualities of being Cuban, out of historical dustbins for re-employment. Throughout Cuba's history, the *mulata* has stood for illicit sex stemming from the reality that from colonial times onward, many mixed raced women were the "love children" and mistresses of white men. That legacy, told and retold through scores of songs, poems, and novels (Kutzinski 1993), made the *mulata* a symbol of Cuba's tourist campaigns (Fusco 1998: 155).

These long dormant notions of the sexualized female embodiment of Cubanness, suppressed by the socialist state, play upon tourists' delusional nostalgias for the conditions of the Revolution –an opportunity to experience life in socialist Cuba before it disappears– and the hedonistic conditions that led to the Revolution in the first place. The reappearance of the *mulata* though is not a real body; rather it is an image, holographic in the sense that while she can be seen and even heard, for most tourists, she can never actually be caressed. Rather, it is unfulfilled desire (and not unrequited love) that the state has summoned. This eroticized body is an illusionary phantasm – a phantasm conjured by the state for the titillating consumption by foreigners. It is this process of phantomism that I wish to use here to address a number

of issues within the application and practice of tourism in Cuba from positions of the Cubans themselves who experience foreign consumption of their selves and lives.

Phantomism, the process of transforming an individual into an ethereal commodity for tourism, is indicative of the processes of making alienated individuals for consumption. Identified by Vallant (2001), it converts subjects into objects via the creation of an imaged fetish conjured through the buying and selling of human bodies. The state's summoning of these historical phantasms to reinvigorate its own waning powers is suggestive of the contested nature between a state and its citizens. Yet by conjuring this phantasm, the state has engaged in the explicit commodification of its very own people, something that clearly contradicts the Marxist dictates of socialism that the workers of society should not suffer exploitation at the hands of its own. It is this process and Cuban citizens challenging of their commodification by the state for others' consumption that I will address in this paper. To this end, I will review and link the Cuban state's strategy for developing tourism and place it within both the context of broader Caribbean tourism and the Cuban state's own nurturing of this industry. In particular I will focus on the residential barrio of Habana Vieja, the oldest and now most contested part of the capital.

### **The State's commodification of its citizenry**

The transformation of tropical luxury goods into European social necessities was a decisive moment in the emergence of the capitalist world economy (Mintz 1985) and therefore a major factor in the development of Western ideologies of individual self-identity through nonessential consumption (Sahlins 1996). There are direct continuities between this transformation of tropical commodities fuelled by earlier forms of colonial domination and surplus extraction and the global inequalities produced and perpetuated by Caribbean-sited tourism-oriented development (Fanon 1968:153-154). This 'hedonistic face of neocolonialism' is painfully ironic since one

‘of the rationales for tourism development in the 1960s was export diversification away from reliance on primary products’ (Crick 1989:322, 319). Transnational tourism conglomerates operating throughout the Caribbean commodify bodies in ways that call on local residents to at least appear to be available for tourists’ consumption in a myriad of ways. Yet, produced via broad-ranging discursive practices, this commodification also contains the potential for creativity and resistance to such portrayals and categorizations. These processes do not deny but instead reveal the differentials in power that exist between tourists and residents, with constraint and mobility, socialism and capitalism, and North-South geopolitics all playing themselves out in these locally-informed and historically-structured micro-level interactions (Cabezas 2006).

Tourists do not to experience everyday life in socialist Cuba but travel through a hyper-real (Eco 1986) version of Habana. While hyper-real experiences can be construed to form a core element of all tourism (Urry 1990), the definition of a group, structure, or practice as “patrimony” is a response to a construction project of cultural tourism completed through hegemonic models of “identity” and “authenticity” that despite the politics of tourism, homogenize, simplify, and congeal groups or practices into “culture” (ETC 2005: 10). The congealing of “cultures” into specific locales for the consumption of foreigners not only transforms ways of life but also encapsulates people in geopolitical containers that demarcate specific international power relations in which the non-Western exotic Other is temporally and spatially immobilized, unable to move from that location whereas the tourist visits these sites in much the same manner as wandering among a menagerie of exotic fauna and flora. The apparent freedom of movement and boundless travel in a “world without frontiers” is produced by the techniques of binding people, places, and meanings to geographic locations. The mobilities of some things and people require the immobility of others

and movement can often become a means by which boundaries are enforced rather than undone (Ahmed 2000). The very technologies, material and social, which enable the mobility of those in positions of privilege also fix in place locations of disadvantage (Sheller 2003: 201).

This relationship in which the movement of some people serves as a means of fixing others offers a compelling way to think about the production of tourist-related commodities. As many researchers have pointed out, the international tourism industry constructs, commodifies, and markets exoticized and deeply gendered images of non-European host societies that stress the passivity and enduring “Otherness” of a country’s citizens (Bolles 1992; Enloe 1989; Mullings 1999) That states are actively complicit in the commodification of its own citizenry for foreign consumption through the categorization and control of movement of its entire citizenry and not just a marginalized ethnic minority is not as widely recognized (see Klak & Myers 1998; Gregory 2007).

Tourist practices of mobility via travelling into, across, through, and around Cuba, tourists establish measures of similarity and difference, proximity and distance, intimacy and isolation, and progress and stasis by which they mark their own “home” position as modern, active, and dynamic and Cuba as primitive, passive, and soporific. Cuba is thus held temporally in place by the international embargo imposed by the United States government in conjunction with the Cuban state’s own strategies of attracting international commerce through the tourism industry. “Isolated” Cuba of tourist fantasy, a world of a by-gone era either disappeared or fast disappearing, has to be held in place behind walls, gates, and smiles in order for the tourist to experience Cuba “as it actually is” before it vanishes like a mirage in the tropical sun. This mirage transforms Cubans, fixing them in space and time, transforming them from active agents entering into vibrant social relations, into inactive commodities waiting

to be figuratively and literally picked up and consumed. Tourist experiences of Cuba remain specific to spatial, historical, and cultural circumstances. Cuban authorities promote tourism primarily as an ‘unspoilt’ Caribbean site of sun and sand. Attached to this hedonistic beach leisure is an undertone of illicit sex that has resulted in Cuba returning to its pre-Revolutionary international reputation as a site for sex tourism. In addition, tourists’ desire to “see Havana as it really was before it all changes” is a distinct form of Cold War nostalgia tied to a romanticism—rooted in the centuries-long relationship between colonial powers (the US and Spain) and Cuba—inextricably linked to earlier colonial discourses on race, empire, and eroticism pervasive throughout the Caribbean. The irony is that it is the Cuban government, in its pursuit of the tourist’s euro (the US dollar is once again illegal), is an active collaborator with the foreign invaders in this alienation of its own citizens.

The significance of tourism lies in its ability to draw together powerful processes of commodification and citizenship. The state institutionalization of the economics of pleasure links important economic and psychic elements for both the imperial tourist and for a presumably “servile” population. The state actively socializes loyal citizens into tourism, its primary strategy of economic modernization by positioning them as commodities (Alexander 1997: 67-9). In this manner, foreign fantasies of Cuba come to be closely allied with experiences of transgression and intoxication in which encounters with Cubans that inhabit this phantasmal world are removed from the modern present. Experiencing “socialism before it disappears”, tourists do not suffer the indignities of food shortages, rationed soap, transportation challenges or other difficulties that life in Havana forces many to endure. Instead, they consume spectacles built upon imperialist nostalgias that create illusionary social worlds in which Cubans do all the labor, living is easy, and one can engage in a myriad of excesses in sensuous abandon by indulging in eating, drinking, fucking, and

smoking to one's delight. Such transgressions only serve to reconfirm the boundaries of historical domination and difference.

### **The Cuban State and Tourism**

Much has been made about the “gringo ghetto” or “jardines de yuma” in Cuba where Cubans are not allowed to enter hotel resorts and beaches. The policies of this so-called “tourist apartheid” are not unique to Cuba in this regard but, in actuality, are quite similar to the practices of exclusion found in all-inclusive complexes throughout the Caribbean. The structuring of space for tourist consumption and the removal of citizens by state authorities are attempts to maintain the illusion of Cuban socialism “as it really is/was”. As a consequence of these spatial practices, most Cubans remain somewhat distanced from foreign tourists—a social distance reinforced by the state through physical and moralistic means. While state-run tourist companies dominate the kinds of interactions individuals have with foreigners, the explicit presence of Cuban police on nearly every street corner in Habana Vieja constrains more intimate interactions with foreign tourists on the part of many Cubans. In addition to these institutional controls, socialist moralistic codes of expected and acceptable behaviour also play a significant role in Cubans interactions. Whether by individual choice or institutional force, such enforced distancing turns Cubans' everyday interactions into a living history performance in much the same manner as the various late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fairs and expos transformed non-European peoples into exotic displays for North Atlantic consumption.

In the decades leading up to the Cuban Revolution (Pérez 1999:168-198, Schwartz 1997), Cuba was the exotic, erotic, tropical Other of the North Atlantic imagination. It was a place of license and loose morality filled with night clubs, brothels, bars, and casinos in which tourists mingled with prostitutes, pimps, politicians, gangsters, racketeers, and policemen in a sinuous dance of corruption. The

reputation of Havana as the “red light of the Caribbean” and “the brothel of the New World” offended many Cubans. The irony of the Cuban government’s entrance into the international tourism industry in the twenty-first century is that, in some ways, the socialist state has reproduced this lurid reputation of pre-Revolutionary Cuba. After dedicating decades of ideological discourse towards the erasure of racial bigotry and ethnic stereotypes, the Cuban state via its tourist industry now emphasizes and capitalizes on such stereotypes, especially Afro-Cuban performances that further emphasise the tropical eroticism and exoticism of Cuba. Resorts offer shadowy, mysterious religious rituals based on *santería* to amuse tourists with “direct contact” with magic, spirits, and African ritual. Typical tourist itineraries include “cultural performances” enacted by one of several national folkloric groups, rumba and other dance shows at the reborn *Tropicana* and *Sans Souci* cabarets, and visits to Guanabacoa, a Habana suburb, to see a folklore museum devoted to Afro-Cuban religion. Galleries and street artists pander to these tropical images by producing works of art utilizing exotic imagery intended for foreign consumption.

It is tourists’ perception of “exotic excess”, a kind of “natural” carnivalesque vibrancy, which justifies the ongoing relations of consumption of Revolutionary Cuba. Ironically, the immediate gratification of tourists’ desires and the apparent inexhaustibility of this phantasmal Cuba incites the tourist to further consumption (Sheller 2003: 166). In a place touted for its state mandated controls of consumerism, the illusion of “excess” is a narcotic drawn in and exhaled like the smoke of good cigars, a vision sold to the consumer that only dissipates upon leaving Cuba. In a sense, the socialist state is creating a “society of the spectacle” (Debord 1995) for foreign consumption. Any movement into and through various sorts of public space where tourists appear —such as beaches, shops, restaurants, hotels, museums, plazas, parks, and stadiums—turns Cubans into caricatures of their “true” selves.

Simultaneously gazing at and gazed upon by others, Cubans are transformed into representatives of an idealised “culture” assumed to be dying if not already extinct. That a socialist state asserting the inalienable rights of the person and the insistence of one’s dignity is now a peddler of a façade of excessive and exploitative experiences of those it purports to care for has resulted in the complete commoditization of the Revolution itself. Whether state officials like it or not, the very notion of Cuba is a commodity with use-value that others attempt to extract and the question for them is whether they can beat the neo-colonial desirers to the punch.

Now that tourism is the main source of hard currency, the state is less invested in an image of itself as a modern industrial nation and more heavily comprised of imagery that showcases “traditional” Afro-Cuban religious rituals, art, music, and citizens, especially women. As Cuba’s economy rapidly shifts its emphasis from a traditional base of agricultural exports to tourism, Cuban bodies are increasingly coming to function as transfer points of value extracted in the form of competitively priced services realised in the cultivation of foreign (primarily but not exclusively) male consumers. To what degree people will individually compromise themselves morally in order to access *el fula* (originally slang for a US dollar but now for any single unit of hard currency) is a question Cubans are having to continually ask themselves.

### **Habana Vieja**

The Cuban government’s investment in tourism has made the island itself a sort of nostalgic living history museum, resulting in the commodification of the Cuban populace as a whole. After forty years of a near total avoidance of investment in and development of the city’s infrastructure, Havana is slowly regaining its status as one of Cuba’s, if not the Caribbean’s, major tourist destinations. Havana’s re-development can be seen as a direct outcome of the state’s post-Soviet economic

strategy grounded upon the promotion of international tourism. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the old colonial part of the capital, Habana Vieja. Being in Habana Vieja is one of the few places where tourists can engage with the illusion of Cuban state socialism as actual historical practice instead of as a kind of historical phase. Yet tourism development in Habana Vieja is exacerbating divergent socioeconomic conditions within its confines, triggering the spectacularization of residents' everyday lives thereby rendering them mere commodities of foreign imaginations and money. More precisely, such delusional encounters between tourist and resident illuminate the historical practices of Cubans as they reflect on the moral texture of the world in which they conduct their daily business in the face of wholly uncertain futures. Encounters between Cuban citizens and foreign tourists precisely capture this sense of becoming "moral artifacts" through the embodiment of a paradox in which residents of Habana Vieja must think and act in profoundly un-Cuban ways in order to remain living, breathing Cubans (Eastman 2007: 274).

Habana Vieja is the most heavily touristic neighbourhood of the capital. It also happens to be one of the poorest neighbourhoods and is historically famous for its subversion of state authority through a variety of illegal activities. Unlike the tourist resorts, Habana Vieja is a major tourist attraction in which the state cannot simply separate Cuban citizens from foreign visitors. While tourists come to drink daiquiris at La Floridita and La Bogedita of Hemingway fame, Habana Vieja also houses just over an estimated 100,000 residents in its four and a half square kilometres, making it one of Havana's most densely populated barrios.

Following the collapse of a historic convent in 1993, the director of the Office of the Historian convinced state authorities that his office was ideally situated to organize the revitalization of Habana Vieja. In a surprising turn of events, he managed to make his office the first Cuban institution that could control spending, profit

reinvestment, and general economic management on a municipal scale. Autonomous financial management liberates the Office of the Historian from the orthodox economic model that requires other municipalities to surrender their incomes to centrally governed ministries, which budget according to national priorities rather than municipal ones (Hearn 2006: 148). In 1994 the Cuban state created the tourist agency Habaguanex, to be administered by the Office of the Historian of Habana, so that profits from tourism would be reinvested into the municipality's seriously deteriorating infrastructure. Through foreign joint ventures, tourism has become the most dynamic sector of the Cuban economy according to Cuban-sourced statistics acquired by Amalia Cabezas (2006: 508). Between 1990 and 2000 the number of hotel rooms tripled from just under 13,000 to 50,000. In 1990 Cuba received 340,000 foreign tourists, by November 2005 it had already hosted 2 million visitors that year despite the ongoing political sanctions imposed by one of its most probable sources of tourism, the United States. The Office of the Historian has been central in Habana Vieja's role in the country's tourist industry. The Office's rapid construction and/or refurbishment of hotels, particularly around Parque Central, entertainment venues and shops operated exclusively for convertible peso carrying individuals, nearly all of whom are foreign tourists.

These gentrification processes controlled by the Office of the Historian that impact on residents' living conditions and urban space and have been the most impressive and contentious, however. Colantonio and Potter (2006) argue that despite the Office of the Historian's apparent independence from centralized state controls, the current tourism development strategy remains skewed towards meeting tourists' recreational needs at the expense of local residents' requirements. One of the effects of reconstruction has been to redefine public space in a city in which it had meaningfully lacked. In a narrow sense this has meant converting previous privately

held spaces, like the San Francisco de Asis church into a performance space for the Camerata Romeu, the annual Encuentro Callejero de Danza Contemporanea [Street Festival of Contemporary Dance] (Kapcia 2005: 185). It has also meant that public spaces are created for a variety of street performers, the ubiquitous street musicians in the Plaza de la Catedral, the sketch artists that prowl the narrow streets between that plaza and the Plaza de Armas, and the vibrantly carnivalesque *payasos gigantes* [giant clowns] that act out skits in that latter plaza. The economic thrust of these programs is to introduce community-produced theatre and dance performances for tourists, which has generally succeeded in strengthening the state's relations with previously unrecognized groups in Habana Vieja despite local concerns over cultural appropriation (Hearn 2004).

### **Resistance to state commodification**

Local concerns over state appropriation of cultural heritage for the promotion of tourism are blithely covered by the government's excessively moralistic rhetorical attempts to obscure not only questions of cultural patrimony but associated economic livelihood. Those who have done research in Cuba and actually spoken with every day Cubans generally recognize that, despite dissatisfaction with state salaries upon which it is impossible to subsist, the extremely poor purchasing power of the Cuban peso in which those salaries are paid, and the emerging class system based on access to foreign currency, the majority of Cubans continue to value and depend on the Cuban welfare state and do not wish it to disappear (Azicri 2000; Rosenthal 1997).

Nonetheless, many residents are frustrated with the need to *resolver*, *inventar*, or *jinetear* solutions to *candelas*, seemingly unsolvable dilemmas, by circumventing some aspects of state regulations, legalities, or moral codes. While all three terms are used in a variety of contexts on the streets, it is *jinetear* and its affiliated terminology associated with sex tourism that has attracted the most attention from state officials

and scholars (Cabezas 1998; Elizalde 1996; Fernandez 1999; Fusco 1999; O'Connell Davidson 1996, 1998; Wonders & Michalowski 2001).

*Jineterismo*, the practice of *jinetear*, is socially portrayed in state discourse as an individual characterized by an economic and ideological crisis resulting in a deformation of moral character (Vallant 2001: 243). State discourse often portrays *Jineterismo* as some form of pathological denial of state-defined categories and their associated essential values that define a person's worth. State officials only recognized this alternative to state constructs of engagement with tourism by Cuban citizens in the mid 1990s. It was not an expository discourse, however, but something to be studied. Yet by portraying such actions as pathological, the tourist then becomes the pathological carrier that "infects" Cuban citizens with such a perspective. By conjuring such a phantasm, however, the state effectively denies its own culpable role in creating the circumstances in which *jinetear* appears.

Cubans who *resolver* or *inventar* novel solutions, that is, engage in *jinetear*, deny their actions are pathological or anti-social actions against state authority. Rather, they declare that they are engaging *luchar*, a discursive symbol of exemplary value in socialist Cuba that is part of the core of how the state configures Cuban persons. Calling themselves *luchadores* [fighters] and their actions as emblematic of *luchando* [struggling], they characterize their actions as a means of making a living not just buying luxuries or other materials. The use of *luchar* designates in this instance the everyday struggle to meet basic needs but is more ethically ambiguous for it denotes activities both sanctioned and prohibited by the state. Popular expressions of discontent with the current state of affairs often use the principles of Cuban socialism, such as unity, equality, and national identity, to complain about the state's failings. These reactions provide evidence of an acute awareness of and concern with the ways in which tourism is reorganizing Cuban social hierarchies and accentuating

material scarcities (Gordy 2004). Cubans recognize the symbolic power of this particular discourse; by adopting the discourse of appropriate personhood, they create a means for questioning the very social discourse of power on which the state is based.

The entrance of the Cuban state into international tourism is simply the latest move of the ‘repeating island’ phenomenon of replicative economic exploitation that began with cane plantations and continues to this day (Benítez-Rojo 1996). Whether through official channels or not, Cubans involved in the tourist industry live less off the government’s attempts to reinvigorate sugar cane production than off the *caramelos* (literally, ‘sweets’ but more accurate as ‘favours’ in this context) that many find themselves supplying for powerful foreign demand. The specificities of these phantasmal Cubans, evident in their thoughts and actions, provoke direct contradictions of state value systems through the use of the self-same discourse. These phantoms appear because of the current framework of socialist society on the island. It exists because of the economic instability that accentuates state coercion, and problematic social pressures to meet necessities that used to be provided by the state. Many professionals, architects, engineers, teachers, and others can no longer make a living in their professions and have switched to independent operations tied to the tourist industry as procurers of illicit goods, private drivers, the renting of rooms, or other services requested by tourists. Even as tourists caress Cuban bodies, they are not embracing the physical reality of Cubanness but an ephemeral spectacle that is performed precisely for the tourists’ benefit. Tourism and the other socioeconomic conditions of Habana Vieja since the 1990s allows for this particular phantom to insinuate itself within the fabric of Cuban reality; indeed it was the state’s own structuring of the tourism industry in Cuba that facilitated the creation and continual conjuration of these social phantoms.



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