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Tourism's [neo]Colonial Afterlives. Reading Blake C. Scott's *Unpacked: A History of Caribbean Tourism*

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Abstract

This paper takes Blake C. Scott's *Unpacked: A History of Caribbean Tourism* as its central archive to trace the historical continuities that shape contemporary tourism in the Caribbean. It argues that leisure in the region has never been innocent but has functioned as a neocolonial system structured by infrastructures, labor hierarchies, and cultural representations. Scott's history demonstrates how imperial projects such as the Panama Canal, mosquito eradication campaigns, and Pan American Airways transformed the Caribbean from a feared 'white man's graveyard' into a consumable paradise, embedding racial and class inequalities within the very mechanics of mobility. Hotels like the Tivoli and the Havana Hilton epitomized a service economy sustained by racialized labor, where the 'service smile' masked exploitation. Meanwhile, travel writing, Hemingway's dispatches, and airline advertisements naturalized the tourist gaze, erasing colonial violence and ecological transformation. By situating today's overtourism, characterized by cruise ship congestion, environmental degradation, and service dependency, within this historical arc, the paper highlights how contemporary crises are intensifications of older colonial patterns. Bringing together historical, postcolonial, and ecocritical lenses, it calls for reimagining tourism not as extraction but as reciprocity, advocating models of slow tourism, ecological justice, and regional cooperation to resist the entitlements of neocolonial leisure economies.

Keywords: Caribbean tourism, neocolonialism, overtourism, labor hierarchies, colonial Infrastructures, tourism economic inequalities, tourism history

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Introduction: Tourism's Tristes Tropiques and the Caribbean Paradox

Tourism in the Tropics has always carried with it a paradox. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, popular discourse framed the resurgence of travel as 'revenge tourism,' a collective desire to reclaim mobility and leisure after prolonged lockdowns. Yet within a few years, that wave of movement transformed into a crisis of 'overtourism,' with destinations such as Bali, the Maldives, and parts of the Caribbean simultaneously listed as 'must-see' paradises and 'places to avoid'. This tension is not an aberration of late modernity, but a long-standing feature of how tourism has been imagined, structured, and experienced in tropical regions. Blake C. Scott's *Unpacked: A History of Caribbean Tourism* (2022) contends that Caribbean tourism must be understood as a neocolonial formation rather than a neutral economic activity. By examining infrastructures of mobility, racialized labor economies, and cultural representations of paradise, the book demonstrates how the historical trajectory of tourism in the region illuminates the contemporary crisis of overtourism. Situating Scott's work within historical, postcolonial, and ecocritical frameworks, this paper contends that present-day tourism crises represent the intensification of long-standing colonial patterns rather than their rupture.

As scholars of environmental history remind us, tropical nature has long been represented in terms of two extremes: as "an earthly paradise" (Arnold, 2000, p. 7) or a treacherous reservoir of danger and disease, "swampy, snaky [and] roiling with deadly, engulfing agency" (Smith, 2003, p. 117). The Tropics are figured both as the world's playground and its sacrifice zone: marketed for their beauty, climate, and exoticism, while also serving as sites where inequalities of mobility, labor, and ecology are starkly exposed. Lundberg et al. (2021) emphasize that tropical regions, which have long been imagined as abundant and life-sustaining, are now among the most vulnerable to climate change (pp. 2–3). MacCannell (1999) famously exposed how tourism depends on "staged authenticity" (p. 91), while Urry and Larsen (2011) theorized the "tourist gaze" as a socially organized way of seeing that naturalizes inequality and consumption (p. 14). Within Caribbean studies, Sheller (2009) and Cabezas (2008) have shown how mobility systems and service economies reproduce colonial hierarchies under the guise of leisure. Scott's *Unpacked* builds on this intellectual lineage but distinguishes itself through its historical depth, tracing how infrastructures of empire, canals, airlines, sanitation regimes, and hotels actively produced tourism as a neocolonial system. By foregrounding the *longue durée* of mobility, labor, and representation, Scott extends critical tourism studies into a historical account of how leisure itself became an imperial formation.

Scott's intervention also resonates with Caribbean and Latin American thinkers who have long insisted that tourism and development are inseparable from colonial economic and epistemic structures. George Beckford (1999) locates persistent

underdevelopment in the institutional legacies of plantation economies, a framework extended by Norman Girvan's argument that "dependency is a consequence of colonialism and postcolonialism and continues to shape the Caribbean's peripheralized development" (2006, p. 339). Arturo Escobar (2008) similarly challenges universalist development paradigms by emphasizing that nature itself is culturally produced rather than passively given. Sylvia Wynter's destabilization of "Man" as a supposedly universal category, "neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed for human knowledge" (2003, p. 257), further enables tourism to be read as a regime that organizes racialized hierarchies of mobility and value. The affective consequences of these structures surface most starkly in Jamaica Kincaid's assertion that "the native does not like the tourist" (1988, p. 17), a refusal that crystallizes the everyday violence beneath the fantasy of tropical leisure.

Within the context of Caribbean tourism, the ecological disruptions not only threaten the very landscapes marketed as paradise but also expose the fragility of leisure economies built on their exploitation. Scott's *Unpacked* offers an essential perspective for comprehending this paradox. It depicts the Caribbean as both a product and a crucible of global tourism, illustrating how infrastructures, scientific methodologies, and cultural narratives coalesced to establish the region as a prototype for contemporary mass tourism. His project is avowedly personal, beginning with an account of his grandparents' migration to Florida's "vacationland" in the 1960s, a move shaped by what he calls "a vacation fantasy, rooted in history, that would have a long-term impact on our family" (2022, p. 1).

From its opening chapters, *Unpacked* insists that tourism in the Caribbean cannot be separated from imperial histories. Scott demonstrates how early twentieth-century U.S. expansionism transformed the region into what he calls "Empire's Lake," where political, military, and infrastructural interventions, most notably the Panama Canal, laid the groundwork for both commercial shipping and leisure travel (2022, p. 4). The canal was not only an artery of global trade but also a machine of rebranding through sanitary campaigns and mosquito eradication; the isthmus was reshaped "from disease to desire" (Scott, 2022, p. 11). Such infrastructural projects, Scott argues, were not neutral pathways of mobility but what Doreen Massey would call "power geometries", systems that determined who could move, under what conditions, and at whose expense (2022, p. 23). Steamships, and later Pan American Airways, created new circuits of privilege, shortening travel times between the United States and select Caribbean islands while bypassing others. Routes were not distributed evenly; instead, they were carefully chosen to concentrate growth in specific ports while leaving others behind. As Scott notes, "mobility" itself was racialized and geopolitical, not merely technological (2022, p. 54). Mackay and Spencer explain how these hierarchies remain essential to the region's tourism economies. Colonial legacies have

fostered a culture of competition among Caribbean nations, leading to disparities in development and management (2017, pp. 44–59). This competitive environment sustains traits from colonial relationships, exacerbating inequality and underscoring the importance of regional collaboration in making tourism sustainable.

The Caribbean's tourism infrastructure also created rigid divisions between those who consumed leisure and those who provided it. Scott describes how hotels like the Tivoli in Panama City functioned as "bastions of comfort and security" for white travelers, where spatial arrangements enforced racial segregation and ensured that Black and brown workers remained invisible except in service roles (2022, p. 144). At the same time, these hotels became centers of anticolonial protest, where activists knew that the wealth of tourism was built on systemic exploitation. Thus, the Tivoli was both a symbol of neocolonial luxury and a site of decolonial resistance. As Christian (2016) observes, the economic benefits of tourism in the Caribbean have never been evenly distributed, with many communities left marginalized even as others profit. Scott further illustrates that cultural production was integral to the neocolonial dynamics of tourism. Naturalist explorers and travel writers portrayed the Caribbean as a realm of marvel, relaxation, and refuge, with their writings functioning as scientific manuals and literary promotions for an emerging tourism industry. At the same time, promotional posters and brochures naturalized the "fantasy" of the "white man's" tropics (2022, p. 132).

In this way, *Unpacked* challenges the notion that tourism is a neutral or beneficial industry. The existence of tourism in the Caribbean relied on imperial infrastructures, medicalized landscapes, and cultural depictions that perpetuated racial and class hierarchies. Scott (2022) asserts that these structures are not remnants of the past but enduring characteristics of the present. He points to the rise of cruise tourism as a contemporary expression of these long histories, arguing that the "outsized role" of cruise lines in the circum-Caribbean reflects the continuation of economies of scale and externalized costs first engineered by imperial powers (p. 17). Peterson et al. (2020) also emphasize that this growth has taken over the social and economic lives of island communities, often at the expense of environmental health. The link to overtourism is clear here; the mass disembarkation of cruise passengers in fragile island ports is not just a problem of the twenty-first century; it is the result of patterns that started a hundred years ago.

Approaching *Unpacked* through historical, postcolonial, and ecocritical lenses enables a fuller exploration of the implications of Scott's work. The historical account shows that tourism was planned and developed through the construction of canals, airlines, and hotels, rather than occurring spontaneously. The postcolonial perspective elucidates how these infrastructures perpetuated colonial labor and representation hierarchies, entrenching racial disparities within the essence of leisure—here, Homi

Bhabha's (1994) notion of the "third space" is instructive, emphasizing how postcolonial societies navigate inherited colonial structures while generating new hybrid cultural identities. The ecocritical view shows how environmental changes, such as mosquito eradication campaigns or tree clearing to make room for resorts, were necessary for tourism, yet transformed ecosystems into commodities and displaced multispecies life worlds. Scott's (2022) own narrative gestures toward these ecological costs, noting how the "conquest" of tropical danger was also a "conquest" of tropical ecologies (p. 44). The following sections examine Scott's central argument that tourism is a historical process whose continuities shape how we travel today.

Infrastructure and the Production of Desire

Tourism in the Caribbean did not arise spontaneously as an organic outgrowth of leisure culture; it was engineered through the coordinated efforts of empire, science, and commerce. Scott's *Unpacked* makes clear that infrastructures such as the Panama Canal, public health campaigns, shipping lines, and early airlines were decisive in transforming the Caribbean from a space of fear and disease into a carefully curated zone of "desire" (2022, p. 3). These infrastructures functioned as neocolonial tools, producing selective mobilities, controlling access, and embedding hierarchies of race and class into the very mechanics of leisure travel. According to McElroy and Parry (2010), the success of Caribbean tourism has always been linked to such infrastructural investment, and the more the transport systems and facilities have been modernized, the higher the levels of tourism penetration. Infrastructure, in turn, was not only supportive of movement but also of experiences, pre-conditioning the potent mixture of longing and reality in which the Caribbean has been reorganized as a place to desire.

In the late nineteenth century, the Caribbean was widely stigmatized as perilous to white bodies. Richard Harding Davis described Panama's Caribbean coast in 1896 as resembling the River Styx, guarded by a "wicked dragon that exhaled poison with every breath" (Scott, 2022, p. 27). Tourism entrepreneurs faced an uphill battle against this perception. So, in 1891, "to book a passage for Jamaica is almost synonymous with ordering a coffin" (Scott, 2022, p. 27). The region's reputation as "the white man's graveyard" cast it as a space of death rather than leisure (Scott, 2022, p. 37). But this perception began to shift with the construction of the Panama Canal, a project that was as much about environmental conquest as it was about engineering. U.S. authorities undertook large-scale mosquito eradication and sanitation campaigns under the leadership of Dr. William Gorgas. By the early twentieth century, these efforts were celebrated as proof that "the white man can [now] live in the tropics and enjoy as good health as he would have if living in the temperate zone" (Scott, 2022, p. 37).

Lasso (2019) also demonstrates that the Canal Zone was deliberately constituted as a racially segregated imperial enclave, where U.S. authorities displaced local populations and imposed spatial regimes that rendered Panamanians "foreigners in their own land" (pp. 3–4). Entire towns were dismantled or submerged, while Black and brown laborers were subjected to harsh working conditions, differential pay scales, and systemic racial discrimination that mirrored broader colonial hierarchies (Lasso, 2019, pp. 78–82). Beyond its social costs, the Canal fundamentally reengineered Caribbean ecologies through large-scale deforestation, hydrological alteration, and the forced transformation of multispecies landscapes into instruments of imperial mobility (Lasso, 2019, pp. 112–118). Lasso's account thus reinforces Scott's argument that tourism-enabling infrastructures were never neutral technological achievements but were built through acts of erasure that normalized dispossession, environmental conquest, and racial governance.

Public health successes were transformed into tourist attractions. Tour and steamship companies were eager to sell the idea of conquering tropical diseases as part of the trip. United Fruit's Great White Fleet boasted in 1915 that its vessels would "bear you luxuriously to scenes of romance," where once fever and death had reigned (Scott, 2022, p. 37). These campaigns demonstrate that the engineering of desire was intrinsically linked to the engineering of health: tourism was facilitated by the medicalized subjugation of the environment, representing a neocolonial reassertion of authority over both territory and corporeal forms. At the same time, this dynamic reveals the ecological paradox of tourism infrastructure. Maitland et al. (2024) assert that the infrastructure supporting tourism economies is susceptible to rising sea levels and other climate change impacts. The generation of desire is inherently linked to ecological vulnerability, highlighting the complexity of conquest narratives in the context of environmental instability.

Scott (2022) further emphasizes that "each experiential aspect of the UFCO voyage, and each person aboard ship, was part of the social and economic relations of leisure travel" (p. 22). When these ships arrived onshore, they caused scenes of economic dependence. Vendors, drivers, and workers rushed to meet the needs of tourists, and young boys swam out to get coins that visitors had thrown into the water. This was a racist performance of servitude. The Great White Fleet and other infrastructure projects made it easier for people to move around, but they also facilitated unequal encounters that maintained neocolonial hierarchies. They created circuits of pleasure for some people, while others had to work hard to make ends meet. Sheller (2009) reminds us that such mobility systems must be read as socio-political formations, as they often privilege foreign tourists and corporate interests, thereby limiting local agency and deepening inequalities.

The canal not only facilitated travel but also became a tourist destination. Ten years after Davis's frightening story, Roosevelt visited Panama in 1906 and turned the place into a source of national pride. Tourists followed, echoing what Scott (2022) calls the "parrot cry of the patriotic tourist" who marveled at "one of the most marvelous engineering feats that the world has ever beheld" (p. 28). The canal was a symbol of both technological progress and imperial conquest, and it made U.S. tourists feel like they were part of a mission to civilize the world. Tourism here was not merely a byproduct of empire; it was a means to display and celebrate imperial power.

The rebranding of Panama and the Caribbean as desirable destinations was primarily based on this narrative of conquest and colonization. As Scott (2022) argues, "revisiting the history of the canal's construction provides a revealing window into a larger story about how empire-building, medical science, and transportation technology came together…to reimagine the Caribbean environment into a desirable vacation destination" (p. 28). The infrastructure did not simply transport tourists; it transformed landscapes into consumable experiences, embedding imperial pride into leisure itself. Padilla et al. (2018) complicate this narrative by reminding us that such transformations are not only about desire but also about vulnerability—local communities must navigate tourism's economic promise alongside its environmental and infrastructural risks.

By the 1920s, aviation introduced a new dimension to Caribbean tourism. Pan American Airways' inaugural flight from Key West to Havana in 1927 was hailed as "the dawn of a new era of leisure mobility" (Scott, 2022, p. 75). In just three months, Pan American Airways was flying paying customers across the Florida Straits. This reduced travel time from days at sea to just over an hour in the air. The symbolism was powerful: air travel was marketed as "the comfort, speed and safety of aerial transportation" (Scott, 2022, p. 75), in contrast to the discomfort of ocean voyages. The expansion of Pan American Airways' routes rapidly reconfigured the spatial logic of tourism. By 1931, the airline was serving 23 countries across the Americas, and within a decade it had reached 60 countries and nearly 100,000 route miles. Scott (2022) stresses that the "logic of the air" diminished the importance of the sea's territoriality, restructuring how and where tourists could travel (p. 76). Aviation foreshadowed mass tourism by compressing time, consolidating flows into select hubs, and solidifying the United States' role as the dominant source of tourists to the Caribbean. As Scott notes, most accounts of aviation emphasize "technological triumph" but neglect cultural impacts (2022, p. 76). His intervention demonstrates that air travel constituted neocolonial infrastructure that helped the U.S. expand its political and economic power while also making tourism a natural part of national identity and wealth.

Taken together, the Panama Canal, mosquito eradication campaigns, steamships, and aviation reveal a pattern—tourism in the Caribbean was never a neutral flow of people seeking leisure. It was deliberately engineered through state, military, and corporate infrastructures that functioned as tools of neocolonial governance. As Scott (2022) observes, "mobility itself was racialized and geopolitical, not merely technological" (p. 76). Benitez and Lundberg (2022) also argue that disrupting colonial narratives necessitates acknowledging the complexity of ecological entanglements, where even seemingly insignificant species have shaped human history. In the Caribbean, these problems were a significant factor in the development of tourism. Eliminating mosquitoes not only made it possible to build canals and travel for pleasure but also revealed how ecological forces could both help and harm imperial projects.

The transformation of the Caribbean from "death by migration" (Scott, 2022, p. 27) to a "vacation destination" (Scott, 2022, p. 45) was thus not a natural evolution but a political project: it involved defeating disease, using technology, and putting together a story of victory. Infrastructure was not merely a means of transportation; it was also a means of demonstrating imperial power. Tourists could enjoy both landscapes and histories while pretending to be on vacation. However, as Peterson (2020) points out, this story of desire has become a double-edged sword: tourism promises economic benefits but also creates social and environmental problems that make the Caribbean less appealing.

Labor, Race, and Neocolonial Service Economies

The service economy sustained the idea of leisure in the Caribbean, while tourism infrastructure enabled access to it. Hotels, casinos, cabarets, and cruise ships required large numbers of workers, but their labor was often deemed less valuable because they were women or people of color. Scott's *Unpacked* shows that this economy of work kept colonial hierarchies going well into the twentieth century. White tourists and managers took over areas of comfort and power, while Black, Indigenous, and mestizo workers filled the kitchens, dining rooms, bedrooms, and entertainment areas of tourist complexes. People not only put up with these hierarchies, but they also become normalized as the necessary background for pleasure. Tourism was a neocolonial system of labor that reshaped economies to serve foreign elites while keeping locals in dangerous, low-wage jobs.

In the Caribbean, this dynamic is evident in tourism-driven growth, where resort construction and infrastructural projects not only mirror inherited colonial hierarchies but also exacerbate ecological vulnerabilities, reinforcing the neocolonial logic of leisure economies. As Cabezas (2008) notes in her study of the Dominican Republic, the commodification of tourism labor often leads to deskilling and the sexualization of local workers, leaving them marginalized and locked into exploitative service roles.

This pattern reflects broader neocolonial power relations, which, as Chitonge (2025) argues, continue to shape the economic activities of former colonies, hindering pathways toward genuine industrialization and autonomy.

The Hotel Tivoli in Panama provides perhaps the most vivid case of racialized service. Built in 1906 to serve visitors to the Canal Zone, it quickly became "the crown jewel of this burgeoning tourist economy" (Scott, 2022, p. 143). Travel writer Harry Foster observed in the 1920s that "every tourist stops at the Tivoli at least for dinner, which consists usually of about twelve courses of chinaware and cutlery, wiped, flourished, and served with much ceremony by a score of negro waiters" (Scott, 2022, p. 143). The hotel was famous for its white guests and Black staff. White tourists on the veranda looked across the Fourth of July Avenue into Panama City, where the line between imperial comfort and local vice was blurred. People could eat lobster in the Empire Lounge and then walk across to the red-light district, where they could find bars and brothels. So, the Tivoli was a line between safety for the empire and exotic pleasure. The Black waiters and workers were part of the show for guests. They were visible enough to serve but not visible enough to be seen as political actors. This "service smile," as Scott (2022) calls it, was a performance of deference that masked deep felt inequalities beneath the veneer of hospitality (p. 157).

The Tivoli was also a flashpoint of political tension. In January 1964, Panamanian protesters attacked the hotel, recognizing it as a symbol of imperial domination. Scott (2022) points out that hotels like the Tivoli "functioned as places of luxury and escape but also as spaces of resistance" (p. 136). What tourists thought was paradise was actually exclusion and humiliation for the people who lived there. The attack demonstrated that the racial and labor hierarchies underpinning the tourist economy were no longer tolerable to local residents and could not remain unchallenged. The racialized service economy was equally visible in Havana, where by the 1950s Cuba had become "a tourist's paradise of hotels, casinos, and cabarets" (Scott, 2022, p. 149). Cuban elites, the American Mafia, and businesses worked together to make Havana's nightlife what it is today during Fulgencio Batista's U.S.-supported dictatorship (1952–1959), a period marked by authoritarian rule, corruption, and the rapid expansion of casinos and tourism. Again, the tourist economy depended on a workforce of waiters, performers, sex workers, and cleaners who primarily served white North American visitors. Scott (2022) notes that "modern tourism so misrepresented Cuban culture and diluted local identity that it helped destabilize the country's social order" (p. 149). Maurer (2008) situates this within a larger pattern in which global corporate interests take precedence over local well-being, ensuring that labor practices remain tied to older colonial inequalities.

Further across the Caribbean in the newly independent Jamaica, the tourist economy continued to entrench racial divides. In the early 1960s, many Jamaicans expressed

resentment toward white North American visitors. Journalist Peter Abrahams captured this ambivalence, reporting in 1963 that "the majority of tourists to the island were racially white, and it is a plain fact that because of America's racial picture there are many Jamaicans who do not want to be friendly to [white] Americans" (Scott, 2022, p. 149). For local workers, the industry's service smile echoed colonial deference, even as political independence promised a sense of dignity. Hoteliers, such as Abe Issa, complained about "anti-social behaviour" toward tourists, arguing that crime and disrespect were harming their business (Scott, 2022, p. 149). But this friction was a sign of a larger problem with post-colonial tourism: independence had not eliminated labor hierarchies; instead, it had placed them within a new system of dependence on foreign capital and tourists. As Mackay and Spencer (2017) emphasize, the Caribbean's continued vulnerability to both economic and climate shocks is rooted in colonial legacies. Meanwhile, Perry (2021) argues that climate justice frameworks often neglect marginalized communities, thereby compounding their precarity within tourism-driven economies.

Scott's (2022) analysis culminates in a reflection on the 'service smile' as a survival strategy. He cites Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, where she writes, "That the native does not like the tourist is not hard to explain…every native would like a rest, every native would like a tour. But some natives—most natives in the world—cannot go anywhere. They are too poor" (p. 157). The service smile conceals resentment and necessity, embodying the long history of racialized labor in the Caribbean. As Scott (2022) notes, whether on a cruise ship or at a luxury hotel, "service workers are reminded of their place, and it doesn't look like a vacation" (p. 157). These racialized labor practices draw on long-standing Western binaries that position the West as rational and civilized while casting the non-West as primitive, sensual, or naturally suited to service work. Such ideological frameworks made it easier for tourism economies to justify the exploitation and invisibility of local labor. The service smile is thus both a personal mask and a structural symbol, a performance that allows the tourist fantasy to persist while hiding the inequalities that sustain it.

Scott, thus shows in these cases that the tourist economy carried over colonial labor ideas into the post-colonial era. The Tivoli and the Havana Hilton were examples of a system in which outsiders took value from the area, such as through corporate profits, Mafia partnerships, or tourist spending. At the same time, locals did the invisible work of service. Caribbean countries were still dependent on providing hospitality to wealthy foreigners even after they became formally independent. Tourism became, in Scott's (2022) phrase, "a template for regional and perhaps global development" (p. 158), but this development was profoundly unequal. In this sense, labor and race form the core of tourism's neocolonial practice.

Thus, the promise of paradise relied on inexpensive, racially stratified service labor, akin to the dependence of colonial plantations on enslaved or indentured labor centuries prior. The difference was in form, not function. The plantation economy transitioned into a service economy, but both were based on the exploitation of local workers for the benefit of outsiders. As Lugones (2007) emphasizes, dismantling these structures requires not only critiquing colonial legacies but also reclaiming suppressed Indigenous perspectives and epistemologies. Similarly, as Samal and Samantaray (2025) argue, historical narratives themselves must be interrogated, since colonialism not only reorganized economies but also distorted the very concept of history (p. 103).

Representations and the Tourist Imagination

If infrastructure made tourism materially possible, representation made it desirable. Travel writing, advertising, and popular literature transformed the Caribbean into a consumable fantasy—a paradise available for the taking. Scott shows in *Unpacked* that texts, images, and advertising culture turned the Caribbean into an exotic playground, a place for adventure, fun, and escape. These cultural works made the tourist gaze seem like a right, hiding the histories of violence and environmental damage that came with colonization. They were at the heart of the neocolonial dynamics of tourism because they gave the ideological framework that made leisure economies based on unfair labor and environmental change seem legitimate. At the same time, as Asgarali-Hoffman (2025) suggests, cultural tourism has also been a site of resistance, where the imagination serves as a mode of self-affirmation, challenging colonial stereotypes and reasserting alternative Caribbean narratives.

Scott also shows that modern tourism supplanted the ways nineteenth-century science and naturalist exploration presented phenomena. Scientists and travelers depicted the tropics in profoundly racialized and gendered terms, portraying them as uncharted wildernesses awaiting exploration by white men. The naturalist tradition fostered a culture of ownership regarding tropical ecologies, promoting the notion that they could be documented, regulated, and exhibited. As Scott (2022) explains, "modern tourism has mimicked and packaged this adventure for mass consumption," allowing visitors to feel like explorers of "undiscovered or threatened nature." At the same time, local guides, maids, and drivers labor invisibly to produce the sensation of discovery (p. 110).

The "pristine" rainforest experience, advertised in brochures and on guided tours, was not pristine at all—it was a carefully staged fiction that erased the Indigenous histories and ecological disruptions necessary to make such spaces accessible (Scott, 2022, p. 109). Representation here was not merely for show; it was a key part of neocolonial practice that encouraged tourists to believe they were encountering untouched nature while concealing the Indigenous displacement and environmental alterations required

to produce those landscapes. At the same time, as Sheller and Martin (2023) note, cultural representation is not entirely passive; it can also become a space where Caribbean artists and communities negotiate authenticity and express political resistance through music, art, and performance. While extractive industries deplete natural resources, tourism often commodifies the very same environments by presenting them as pristine paradises or exotic retreats. In reality, these regions experience severe ecological pressures alongside the gradual erosion of cultural identities.

By the start of the 1900s, literary travel writing had become one of the most important means of shaping how people think about touring. Scott (2022) shows how Ernest Hemingway's personality was closely tied to the founding of *Esquire* magazine in 1933. Arnold Gingrich, one of the magazine's founders, recalled that in its early years Hemingway was "one of the best friends this magazine ever had…its principal asset" (p. 111). Hemingway's rugged, hyper-masculine style reinforced a fantasy of tropical travel as a proving ground of authenticity and virility. Hemingway's dispatches did not simply report on fishing trips or local encounters; they lent cultural legitimacy to the idea that leisure in the Caribbean was a natural extension of modern masculinity. Scott demonstrates that these portrayals were never politically neutral; they framed the Caribbean as a setting for the self-actualization of white men, while marginalizing local individuals, frequently depicting them as servants or curiosities. Saidi (2008) frames this as part of the politics of "geographical imaginations," where states and corporations mediate national identity by generating tourist images that simultaneously appeal to outsiders while constraining local representation.

Alongside literature, advertising played a direct role in transforming the Caribbean into a commodified paradise. The Pan American Airways brochure, '*The Air-Way to Havana'*, famously enticed passengers by contrasting the misery of sea voyages with the "comfort, speed, and safety of aerial transportation" (Scott, 2022, p. 75). The language led readers to view themselves as gulls flying over the ocean and in control of nature. These brochures portrayed leisure travel as usual and as a reward for living in the modern world. Islands were marketed as eternal paradises, devoid of their legacies of slavery, piracy, and colonial exploitation. Scott observes that "contrary to timeless-looking brochures, islands and peninsulas did not rise out of the sea to bless eager visitors in search of paradise" (2022, p. 3). Instead, they were reimagined through representational labor that effaced conflict and emphasized comfort. Such promotional culture reinforced the neocolonial view of the Caribbean as a resource for outsiders' pleasure. Peterson et al. (2020) note that this representational framing often obscures exclusionary practices, as development initiatives that emphasize cultural spectacle frequently fail to align with sustainable tourism ideals, leaving many local populations marginalized.

What these ways of representing have in common is that they can obscure the violence associated with tourism. Travel writing praised adventure but ignored the hard work that made it possible. Brochures sold pristine ecologies while omitting campaigns to control mosquitoes, tree clearing, and canal construction that altered those environments. Hemingway's literary glamor hid the racial hierarchies of Caribbean leisure, just as Pan American Airways' ads hid the political power that air routes represented. Moreover, as Uyarra et al. (2005) demonstrate, representations of the tropical paradise remain vulnerable to shifting economic and environmental factors, such as climate change, with destination preferences shaped as much by ecological fragility as by fantasy.

Scott captures this disjuncture when he notes that contemporary consumers remain "seemingly unaware of the long arc of power, violence, and social and environmental transformation that made the industry possible" (2022, p. 3). The idyllic images of white sand beaches and turquoise waters could not exist without centuries of dispossession and ecological manipulation. Yet representation ensured that such contradictions remained invisible to the tourist gaze. Lutchmansingh (2018) notes that this invisibility is compounded by the inherent difficulty of articulating Caribbean identity, shaped by slavery, migration, and histories that resist easy categorization (p. 35).

So, these cultural texts did more than just sell places to visit; they made tourism seem like a right. By presenting the Caribbean as a place to be enjoyed, they ensured that visitors felt welcome and needed. Tourists were depicted as adventurers, connoisseurs, and saviors of vanishing nature, whereas locals were cast in service roles or omitted from the narrative. Representation was an essential part of the neocolonial order because it turned landscapes and people into pictures, fantasies, and things that could be bought and enjoyed. As Ross (2008) cautions, such narratives of tourism as economic salvation often obscure the alienating effects felt by local communities, for whom development projects can erode social cohesion and well-being. As Scott (2022) argues, "tourists are still encouraged to imagine themselves as explorers of undiscovered or threatened nature…while guides, trail cutters, maids, drivers, and a whole host of servants labor in the shadows to produce the sensation of discovery". This "truncated vision" of tourism ensured that the asymmetries of labor, race, and ecology were hidden behind the spectacle of paradise. To consume the Caribbean as an image was to participate in its neocolonial reduction to leisure space (p. 109).

Conclusion: From Historical Tourism to Contemporary Overtourism

The history of Caribbean tourism, as reconstructed in Blake C. Scott's *Unpacked: A History of Caribbean Tourism*, demonstrates that leisure in the Tropics has always been inseparable from systems of power. Infrastructure, labor, and representation all

played a role in turning the Caribbean into a paradise that people could buy. This included the mosquito brigades that made the Panama Canal safe for U.S. engineers, the glossy brochures of Pan American Airways, the service smiles at the Tivoli Hotel, and Hemingway's literary dreams. The tourist economy was not innocent; it was a type of neocolonial extraction that brought imperial ideas of control into the world of leisure. To understand the current crisis of overtourism and ecological precarity in the Tropics, we need to know this history.

Scott (2022) insists that tourism is "the past rolled up for leisurely action" (p. 165). The canal, the Great White Fleet, and Pan American Airways air routes were all important for early tourism. Today, mega-cruise ships and discount airlines still use these same routes. Today's resorts have the same kind of racialized service hierarchies as the Tivoli or Havana Hilton, where low-paid workers labor behind the scenes of all-inclusive luxury. And the images that used to be in ads for *Esquire* or *United Fruit* are now back in Instagram posts and online marketing campaigns that recycle the idea of a paradise that never ends. Scott's (2022) conclusion, aptly titled "*Perilously Cruising into the Future*," underscores this point by examining the growth of cruise tourism (p. 156). Scott (2022) also argues that, "below the surface of pleasure, historical layers of production and transportation link consumers and their fantasies with underpaid workers and exploited environments" (p. 156). Thus, the cruise ship is a floating condensation of history, which Scott reconstructs; a technological marvel that produces luxury for some and invisibility for others, sustained by ecological and labor exploitation.

The current debates about overtourism, characterized by crowded beaches, destroyed reefs, and overwhelmed cities, must be read against this backdrop. Scott writes that "the contradictory combination—to travel in luxury/to pamper in poverty—is thoroughly and unfortunately representative of the privileges and injustices of the modern world" (2022, p. 158). Overtourism is not just about numbers; it is also about systems of entitlement that regard fragile environments as resources to be depleted and local people as resources to be exploited. When thousands of cruise passengers come to a port for a few hours, eat and drink, and leave trash behind, they are doing the same thing that *United Fruit* did when it was both a cargo hauler and a passenger line. As Peterson (2020) stresses, overtourism must be understood not only in terms of excessive visitor numbers but also through a political-economic lens that links contemporary practices to entrenched historical inequalities.

Even after gaining independence, Caribbean nations adopted tourism as a primary development model, often offering generous incentives to foreign investors. Scott details how in Panama, "Law 481" offered twenty-year tax exemptions for construction materials, vehicles, and real estate used in tourism (2022, p. 159). Similar policies spread across the region, as governments sought foreign capital through "generous

economic and political policies to attract tourists and foreign investors" (Scott, 2022, p. 159). Even Cuba, which had promised to end the unfairness of the tourist economy, reverted to luxury tourism when the economy deteriorated. This post-colonial shift demonstrates the enduring nature of tourism as a neocolonial framework. Imperial powers used to impose conditions on people, but now local governments do the same, often at the cost of social and environmental justice, to generate revenue. Scott's emphasis on this history aligns with Spencer et al. (2023), who argue that sustainable post-independence tourism requires cooperation rather than competition, fostering regional alliances rather than perpetuating divisive colonial legacies.

In this sense, overtourism is the neoliberal face of a much older system. Cheap flights, all-inclusive resorts, and standardized itineraries reflect what Scott calls "the democratization of the vacation experience" (2022, p. 158). Still, they exacerbate inequalities by taking over weak sites and placing profits in the hands of multinational corporations. Post-colonial states, by conforming to these models, frequently sustain rather than dismantle imperial hierarchies. As Mackay and Spencer (2017) remind us, regional tourism remains caught between competitive national agendas and the necessity of cooperation, a tension that mirrors the contradictions of the colonial past.

To address overtourism today, Scott suggests that we need historical consciousness. "Historical reflection requires looking deeply, remembering, to avoid making the same journey" (2022, p. 165). This means recognizing that tourism is not merely about moving around and having fun; it is also about the social and environmental costs that sustain it. By contextualizing overtourism within the framework of neocolonial extraction history, we can reconceptualize discussions of sustainability beyond mere managerial solutions such as quotas or taxes. The problem is structural; it concerns the right to treat landscapes and cultures as goods. As Conway and Timms (2010) and Timms & Conway (2012) argue, alternative approaches such as "slow tourism" offer a path forward by emphasizing longer, more meaningful interactions that benefit local economies and foster sustainability.

Scott's history shows how environments were altered for recreation, such as eliminating mosquitoes and digging canals. The effects of these changes are being observed in ecosystems worldwide in the twenty-first century. Coral reefs, mangroves, rainforests, and nonhuman species are all suffering because of the growth of tourism. Lundberg et al. (2021) stress that climate change is reshaping tropical regions not only in environmental terms but also through cultural and neocolonial dynamics. They argue that meaningful responses must engage with the cosmologies and knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples and communities who have long borne the legacies of colonial exploitation (p. 22). This paper emphasizes the necessity of prioritizing alternative worldviews that contest extractive and neocolonial paradigms of leisure, particularly in the Caribbean, where tourism frequently suppresses such perspectives

in favor of idyllic representations. This aligns with Walker et al. (2021), who note that while tourism growth has expanded across the Caribbean, sustainability commitments lag, undermining ecological and social resilience.

Scott (2022) concludes by citing Aimé Césaire's insistence that "exchange is oxygen" for civilizations, but also asks whether the forms of contact between the Caribbean and Europe or North America have been "the best" (p. 165). The question remains urgent today: what kinds of contact can tourism foster without reproducing neocolonial violence? Can travel be reimagined as reciprocity rather than extraction, as dialogue rather than domination? For Scott, history offers both a warning and a possibility. The warning is that illusions of paradise, if left unexamined, perpetuate injustice. The possibility is that new forms of tourism might emerge—less exploitative, more reflexive, and more attentive to ecological and multispecies entanglements. Samal and Samantaray (2024) suggest that such resistance may also intersect with decolonial perspectives, which challenge colonial boundaries and open new spaces for reimagining identity and belonging (p. 54).

Ultimately, overtourism in the Tropics is not merely too many people in too little space; it is the result of a long history of infrastructure, labor systems, and cultural representations that have consistently treated the Caribbean as a playground for outsiders. To address the crisis, we need to view overtourism as a legacy of neocolonialism. Only then can we begin to consider ways of traveling that do not repeat the same mistakes as before, but instead make it easier for people, places, and more-than-human worlds to secure justice. In Scott's history, the Caribbean exemplifies how pleasure economies rely on exploitation, how some people's freedom of movement depends on others' restricted mobility, and how the tourist idea of paradise is built on the erasure of its colonial and ecological histories. In short, tourism's melancholy is not simply about cultural loss but about the persistence of neocolonial structures that continue to operate beneath the veneer of leisure.

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