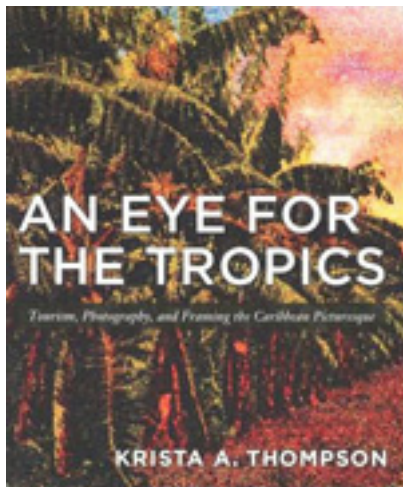


***An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque* by Krista A. Thompson**

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Thompson, Krista A. *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006; 366 pp.; \$89.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.



For many places in the postcolonial world, tourism has provided a contradictory avenue for the acquisition of modernity through the production of images and spectacles of the “premodern,” and “timeless” for the consumption of first-world travelers. Krista A. Thompson’s *An Eye for the Tropics* is a richly detailed and theoretically intriguing account of the cultural history of this complex mimetic process in the Anglophone Caribbean. The book examines photographs produced by and for tourists in the first half of the twentieth-century in order to “illustrate the historical roots and long term effects of touristic representations on the islands and inhabitants, implications of tourism on ways of seeing the Anglophone Caribbean and lived experience of space for local residents” (3-4). She argues that in the early 20th century tourist industries transformed not only the visual representations but also the physical spaces of the Caribbean through a process she calls “tropicalization,” referring to the selective development and circulation of visual icons of tropicality. Subsequently, these visual iconographies played a constitutive role in how developers transformed the islands’ physical landscapes, and local residents imagined their national selves. In addition to a valuable contribution to the history of photography and art history, I suggest that this book is a vital contribution to an emerging conversation on the interface between visual culture and performance.

The book is divided into five roughly chronologically organized chapters. The first three chapters focus on how early tourist promoters consciously fashioned tropical images of Jamaica and the Bahamas for the eyes of the “modern world,” before the advent of mass tourism. This section gives a rich account of the entanglement of transnational capitalism, the production of social

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space, and the civilizing process whereby tropical nature, including particularly racialized bodies imagined as “primitive,” was tamed by rendering it as “picturesque.”

Although in this first section Thompson is mostly concerned with the production and circulation of tropical images, she does analyze some specific interactions between photographic images and embodied performances. In the early years of tourism in Nassau, both tourist promoters and the masqueraders themselves explicitly refused to allow tourists to photograph black Caribbean cultural performances, particularly the John Canoe masquerade. In the 1930s, John Canoe became subject to efforts to contain and sanitize the masquerade in order to make it into a suitable tourist attraction. Masqueraders negotiated and frequently subverted these efforts in complex ways, and also appropriated the new social value they acquired for their own purposes. In chapter three, Thompson examines the contemporary theme-hotel complex, Atlantis, designed to simulate the experience of being submerged underneath the sea. In this new “experience economy,” the ocean is rendered safe and inhabitable for tourists to act out their popular culture-induced fantasies of exploring the ocean depths.

In the final two chapters, Thompson turns to the performative interventions of local residents in the cultural politics of “tropicalization.” I was particularly intrigued by her layered interpretation of black Jamaican journalist Evon Blake’s transgressive jump into the racially segregated pool of the Myrtle Bank hotel, Jamaica’s most visible icon of the economic, social, and cultural capital of modernity. Blake’s actions were part of a complex public performance of self in which he sought to expose the concealed racial segregation of Jamaica’s elite social spaces. Thompson argues that he sought to appropriate the distinction of “social whiteness” at the same time that he revealed its very construction. In the final chapter, Thompson analyzes the “afterlife” of tropicalized imagery through picture books, historical accounts, and contemporary art produced for local consumption on the islands themselves (26).

Although Thompson rarely engages explicitly with concepts of performance, I contend that this book has a lot to offer to readers who wish to engage with the complex interactions between visual cultures and embodied performances. The study of the industries and practices of tourism calls for such an interactive approach. At every level from the production of marketing materials, to the staging of cultural performances as “picturesque” for tourists, to the embodied experiences of tourists that are both documented and legitimated through the taking of photographs, an adequate understanding of tourism as a cultural practice seems to defy the boundaries between visual culture and performance. The stakes of this engagement are high, as Thompson’s conclusion makes clear, in the contemporary moment of late capitalism, where marketing firms increasingly promise tropicality not only as places and products to be passively consumed, but also as particular lifestyles to be actively inhabited by both tourists and local island residents.

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