
Reviewed by Connor Harney

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In their introduction, the volume’s editors begin with the question: “why does the tourist site and class remain an inauthentic, unauthorized, or otherwise spurious subject?” (p. 9). As an outsider to the particulars of tourism’s political economy, this inquiry proved useful in understanding and placing *Sounds of Vacation* within the larger field. According to Guilbault and Rommen, tourism and the accompanying “sounds of vacation” are often ignored for a number of reasons, among them: the focus on work over leisure in political economy, vivid visual aesthetics associated with vacation and the music’s characterisation as kitsch.

Over the course of volume, its contributors answer the initial question through an examination of how capitalist power dynamics operate on “social scale” and in “musical production”, along with the link between political economy and “the notion of hospitality by and through music and sound” (p. 9). To narrow their scope of investigation and concretise this more abstract goal, the volume’s scholars all focus on a particular kind of tourism – the all-inclusive resort. As islands of leisure in a sea of work, these hedonic temples testify to the monotony of daily life under late capitalism and the need remove oneself from it. But beyond their appearance as pleasure palaces for Western professionals, these all-inclusive resorts have within their walls a hidden world of work, one characterised by similar “industrial rhythms” to those that make up the daily lives of those seeking refuge from without.

Looking to uncover this world, the authors take up the task of looking at these social relations of work across different Caribbean locales including the Bahamas, Sint Maarten and Saint Lucia. With its roots in the sounds of slaves and late colonial tourist spectacles, many of these national musical landscapes are haunted by the spectre of colonialism. However, if the ghosts of colonialism prove so difficult to exorcise, it remains to be seen why Puerto Rico and Cuba were not included among those chosen for study. As a current colony of the United States, one facing the continued deprivation of colonial underdevelopment, it seems a missed chance to compare colonial and post-colonial soundscapes alongside one another. Cuba would have provided another interesting
case study. That the island’s revolution was in part a rejection of being viewed as den of debauchery for the West to exploit, and it was only into the 1990s that country began to open itself to tourism in a way comparable to the pre-revolutionary era: a study of Cuba’s tourist sector could have provided a link between the all-inclusive and anti-colonial resistance. In their absence, hopefully the volume will provide other scholars the inspiration to take up the task of studying the vacation soundscapes of these countries and the musicians that produce them.

Beyond the colonial legacy of tourism as uneven development, the volume looks to the commodity on offer at all-inclusive resorts and those involved in its production. What makes their political economy so interesting is that the tourists are not simply purchasing a room at the resort and the accompanying food, drink and access to leisure activities, but rather an experience, a feeling. For instance, Camal’s essay on Guadeloupe argues that the hospitality industry is meant to produce happiness as reality for its consumers. Part of that process, in terms of sound, means that much of the work must remain silent or outside the earshot of tourists. On the other hand, part of a musician’s labour is to conceal some of those same unwanted sounds.

Ultimately, then, the role of the musician is to curate the sounds of happiness to create the atmosphere of vacation. Often, this means synthesising different kinds of music, mixing local and global, contemporary and classic sounds into a potent musical concoction meant to meet the needs of the moment, which in turn, means the ability for improvisation and reading the performance of guests. In economic terms, these musicians face the same kind of precarious work that people all over the contemporary neoliberal world face: temporary employment, gig work and accompanying uncompensated labour.

These musicians form part of the collective “project of selling the tourist experience” as part of “the labor of hospitality”, but it is not only behind resort walls that this experience is sold. Everyone on the island is tasked with role of salesperson and helping shape perceptions of their home, “even when they are customers of the tourist industry.” (p. 204). This is one of Percy Hintzen’s closing reflections, explaining that the volume has gone further than a study of political economy, and instead, provided numerous case studies in the operation of bio-power. The ability of sound to elicit certain responses, and an attempt to manage those responses, certainly fits under Michel Foucault’s conception of bio-power as the intersection of politics, power and technology. But for me, I think this observation actually helps get at one of my biggest issues with the volume. It functions less as political economy of sound and more a critical theory. Of course, there is overlap between the two in research methods, but it
seems that the researchers of the volume could have benefited from engaging more thoroughly with the economics of the all-inclusive resort (and I mean in this sense, the discipline of economics). Even if that engagement were solely critical, it would perhaps provide a quantitative analysis alongside the contributors’ qualitative one. A minor critique, but one that might provide future research pathways for scholars interested in this emergent field.