Catherine Cocks

Tropical Whites: The Rise of the Tourist South in the Americas. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. 255 pp. (Cloth us\$ 59.95)

The history of tourism's development in various parts of the global South has been viewed in terms of economic development, peace-keeping, and nation-building projects. As recent scholarship has shown, tourism can be a robust lens for understanding world-making, whether from the vantage point of tourists, toured, travel industries, or nations. This welcome contribution from historian Catherine Cocks considers the creation of the tourist "Southland," comprising the "tropics" of southern California and Florida along with Mexico and the Caribbean. From the late nineteenth century through the early 1940s, she shows, these regions underwent a significant transformation from zones considered seductive and dangerous for dominant white sensibilities and health, to the iconic vacationlands of the twentieth century. Changing notions of race, sexuality, and nature drove the transformation, and the growing embrace of tropical travel in turn fueled contemporary attitudes toward cultural difference in the Americas.

Central to this exploration is the wealth of material Cocks unearths regarding bodily encounters with racial difference, such that attitudes toward northerners exposing their skin to the tropical sun dictated dress and travel practices. The gradual acceptance of sun exposure as healthful and of tanning as the mark of a global traveler was accompanied by changing dress conventions for beaches and resorts, including the "shrinking bathing suit" and the embrace of lighter "tropical whites" as befitting travel to the South. Furthermore, what had been viewed as the danger of commingling with dark-skinned "primitives" was becoming a form of cultural exploration, once fears of environmental determinism and the ruination of traveling Whites from the North were laid to rest. Cocks demonstrates that heterosexual liberalism emerged to grant tourists the freedom to reimagine cultural and racial difference as worthy of understanding and acceptance, at least to a certain point.

Tourism in the Southland was to a significant degree conditioned by externalities like the transportation industry, as new roads were built, steamships and, later, cruise ships came on the scene, and air travel began to move travelers comfortably to desired destinations. World Wars I and II, the Mexican Revolution, and other major historical events could slow tourism, but increasing attention to sanitation and safety and to advertising won over many who had the resources to spend on vacations. The promotion of cultural pluralism and the weaker association of tourism with colonialism added to the modern appeal of travel. And the climate of the South was a selling point, with sun and

fresh air being marketed as healthful and a palliative to long and cold winter months up north—tourism in the South was a seductive way to restore wellbeing in the overly “civilized” North. Such sojourns south were, not surprisingly, fodder for stereotyped ideas of friendly if somewhat indolent natives who would provide hospitality for those from the stuffy North.

Cocks’s close readings of travel narratives and literature of the period enable her to conclude that “tropical tourism participated in the liberalization of heterosexuality while promising to bolster white racial integrity” (p. 126). Thus, white travelers could move intimately with other races and even darken their own skin by tanning, a sort of “romantic racialism,” yet maintain and even consolidate their power. The coloniality of power in the tourism encounter was only thinly concealed, notwithstanding the new tolerance for cultural difference. The racialization and sexualization of the “sexy señorita” illustrates how empire continued to construct images, particularly of emblematic women, that commodified cultures. Those who study contemporary cultural tourism will find much that is familiar in this assessment of the shifting terms of engagement of tourists in host nations a century ago.

The perspective offered in *Tropical Whites* is fairly unwavering in its detailed attention to the constructed views of U.S. Whites rather than to those of the host societies. This is reasonable insofar as Cocks wishes to examine the epistemic shift from an earlier time when empire-building called for an exaggeration of cultural difference to a more recent turn toward a desire to know and possess a more benign difference; indeed, her account takes us to the moment when the United States after World War II loomed as an increasingly significant player on the global stage, and when travel acquired new meaning for Americans intent on asserting national pride and entitlement to travel to the Southland. If we learn less about the experience of such travel from the Southerners’ perspective, that remains the province of other researchers, including the growing number of ethnographers concerned with the global impact of tourism. This historian’s deep investigation into matters of northerners’ dress and bodily aesthetics will fascinate many even if some may occasionally find the presentation of evidence in the form of numerous examples to be more than sufficient to make the point.

Ultimately, Cocks argues forcefully that even as tourism may have commodified multiculturalism in the Southland, it also promoted a more expansive view of culture and cultural difference—which contributed to more enlightened relations in the Americas. Breaking with earlier fears of racial and cultural contamination, tourism in the region bolstered the notion that northerners would stand to benefit from their forays to the South, and the South in turn gained from the opportunity to be rebranded as exciting and salubrious regions

to be explored. As Cocks notes early on, “the fact that tropical tourism failed to keep the utopian promise of culture—that mutual understanding will produce social justice—should not blind us to the significant role that the industry and the experiences it sells played (and continue to play) in formulating and popularizing a renovated understanding of nature, including human nature” (pp. 13–14). This beautifully written and engaging book will be of considerable interest to historians and anthropologists and to others concerned with the changing notions of race and sexuality that have shaped modern worldviews.

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