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# Circulation and Consumption: Transnational Mass Tourism in Cancun, Mexico

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## Circulation and Consumption: Transnational Mass Tourism in Cancun, Mexico

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**Abstract:** *Cancun's packaged image of paradise is a dynamic and constantly flowing contestation of identity and livelihood for those involved in the service sector. Indigeneity is used as spectacle, prop, and entertainment in the tourism industry and is especially popular in mass tourism zones like Cancun. Circulation of not only bodies, but theory surrounding authenticity and indigeneity, are all represented in the hyper-commodification that defines mass tourism. Cancun uses transnational connections for marketing of space, goods, and people that are in a constant state of circulation. Looking at the rise of the tourism industry in Cancun processually leads us to explore this moment of*

*mistrust between movements between the United States and Mexico. Violence throughout the border between these countries leads to fear that mass media instills in its audiences. How are these emerging attitudes of fear affecting mass tourism in Mexico? What are the effects of mass tourism on its locality? Using a transnational framework helps to decode complex structures of circulation in Cancun's mass tourism industry.*

A tour agency located in Cancun, Mexico describes why Cancun is the premier destination for many college coeds on Spring Break, "The greatest thing about Cancun is that there is more action, stuff to do, and clubs there than any other college spring break destination...Cancun is an astonishingly gorgeous paradise created specifically as a playground of indulgence. Whatever happens in Cancun, stays in Cancun, so we don't have to tell you how crazy it can get."<sup>3</sup> Using the popular tourist marketing adage of "what happens here, stay here" highlights Cancun's exoticism and mystery. Cancun is the epitome of a vacation fantasy. The rules are blurred to discourage inhibitions, an environment where idyllic postcards of balmy beaches come to life. This high energy city is a Mecca of mass tourism and is known around the world for its nightlife, all-inclusive hotels, and beaches. Thousands of people travel to Cancun specifically to have fun, let loose, and enjoy sun, sex, and sand.

Throughout tourist destinations around the world, Cancun represents the standard for mass tourism. Mass tourism can be defined as "pseudo-events which were brought about by the commoditization of culture and the associated homogenization and standardization of tourist experiences" (Wang 1999). The construction and marketing of "pseudo-events" are central to the historical trajectory of Cancun. As previously stated, Cancun was in fact "created specifically as playground of indulgence." The region in the Yucatan, where Cancun is located, developed from a rural countryside to a sprawling, international tourist destination in only forty years. Spring breakers, honeymooners, and even families are choosing Cancun for an escape from their everyday lives as a plethora of affordable packages are offered to lure potential customers over the internet. The economic stability that Cancun provides Mexico and its international investors marks this tourist destination as one of the most popular within the industry. Cancun's successful industry model of a constructed space used for large-scale tourism is recreated throughout the world.

The "Hotel Zone" is the hallmark of Cancun's downtown. "Most of the hotels in Cancun are located in the Hotel Zone, a 17 mile stretch of beach with the turquoise waters of the Caribbean Sea on one side and the ink blue waters of the Nichupte Lagoon on the other."<sup>4</sup> This is Cancun's prime real estate; miles of beaches and lagoons provide tourists staying in these hotels with breathtaking views. With over fifty hotels located in this central location, there are a plethora of businesses tailored to the needs of tourists in this one location. Shopping, restaurants, and nightclubs fill in the spaces between each mega-resort. Subsequently, wage labor employment is the backbone of Cancun's economy. Power structures created by tourists' desires, national governments, and multinational corporations shape the mainly indigenous migrant work force in Cancun. These power structures similarly threaten and promote indigenous autonomy, representation, and agency throughout the region.

Cancun's packaged image of paradise is a dynamic and constantly flowing contestation of identity and livelihood for those involved in the service sector. Indigeneity is used as spectacle, prop, and entertainment in the tourism industry and is especially popular in mass tourism zones like Cancun. Circulation of not only

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.inertiatours.com/cancun/advice.php>

<sup>4</sup> <http://cancun.travel/accommodations/?location=hotel-zone>

bodies, but theory surrounding authenticity and indigeneity, are all represented in the hyper-commodification that defines mass tourism. Cancun uses transnational connections for marketing of space, goods, and people that are in a constant state of circulation. Looking at the rise of the tourism industry in Cancun processually leads us to explore this moment of mistrust between movements between the United States and Mexico. Violence throughout the border between these countries leads to fear that mass media instills in its audiences. How are these emerging attitudes of fear affecting mass tourism in Mexico? What are the effects of mass tourism on its locality? Using a transnational framework helps to decode complex structures in Cancun's mass tourism industry.

### *Transnational Theory: Why Cancun?*

The state of Quintana Roo was selected by the Mexican government in 1974 as the "site for the nation's first master-planned resort or 'Tourist Integral Center'" (Torres 2005). Most likely an intentional name change, Quintana Roo and surrounding coastal tourism-centered communities were labeled as "The Mayan Riviera." This exemplifies how the State's focus has historically been rooted in better accommodating foreign, elite tourists into the area. The substantial revenue generated for the state and its investors from Cancun is extraordinary, "Arrivals in Mexico tripled between 1970 and 1991, while foreign exchange earnings from tourism soared to more than nine fold, from 415 million to 3.8 billion dollars" (Clancy 1999). As tourism in the region grew to over a billion dollar industry, Quintana Roo's population also rose dramatically. Between 1970 and 2000, population levels rose from about 200,000 to over 800,000 (Torres 2005). In over forty years, Cancun has shifted from essentially a privately owned, rural space into a completely urbanized zone. Moreover, this dramatic development was initiated and has steadily continued for the sole purpose of fulfilling tourist desires. In turn, tourists actively seek out and consume industrial mass tourism in Cancun. Ultimately, Cancun represents hyper-commodification of space and culture.

Arjun Appadurai sees culture not as a mere reproduction but as series of "conscious choices, justification, and representation, the latter often to multiple and spatially dislocated audiences" (Appadurai 1996). Cancun's tourism industry is defined as a construction of multiple representations displayed for a multicultural audience. This dislocation from authenticity, or indigenous culture, can be translated into Appadurai's deterritorialization theory. "It is the fertile ground of deterritorialization, in which money, commodities, and persons unendingly chase each other around the world, that the group imaginations of the modern world find their fractured and fragmented counterpart" (Appadurai 2008). Mass tourism aptly reflects the cyclicity of money, power, and people in manufactured spaces. Culture has become schizophrenic, creating fluid, transcending, and fractured territorial boundaries and identities. Spaces that are created for tourists, marketed to tourists, and exist because of tourist dollars are prime examples of deterritorialization because representations of place, culture, and citizenship are intentionally skewed. I use the term "theme parking" to define the process of (re)engineering an inorganic, hyper-commodified space intended to establish and sustain mass tourism. "Postmodern landscapes become 'economic' rather than 'vernacular,' and whole sections of cities become detached from local culture and society and recreated through simulation and theming" (Wood 2000). Reality is kept away from tourists and only a deterritorialized, manufactured, hyper-reality is presented for tourist consumption. Boundaries in mass tourism melt away; the entire city of Cancun is marketed and used as a playground solely for tourists. The hyper-reality and commodification of this resort paradise did not organically grow. Rather, the creation of a mass(ive) tourism zone is the product of multinational corporations working in tandem with national governments to build and sustain a continual flow of tourism based on fragmentation from reality.

In the same vein of deterritorialization, emergent authenticity also describes Cancun as a transnational space. Not only is this space purely invented for tourist consumption, but these manufactured spaces

become vernacularized by tourists as fully organic and authentic to the region. Emergent authenticity in tourism studies is defined as “products invented for the purpose of tourism may over time become incorporated into and perceived as manifestations of local culture” (Medina 2003). Like products, manufactured environments, spaces, or regions can shift to become perceived as authentic. Modern engineered spaces, like Cancun, are constructed to resemble important archeological ruins or recreate indigenous artwork in hotels, restaurants, and nightclubs. “Even though something can initially be inauthentic or artificial, it may subsequently become emergent authenticity with the passage of time. Such is the case of Disneyland or Disney World” (Cohen 1988). Correlating Cancun with Disneyland or Disney World is a powerful connection. The two are universal symbols of play in vacation. Both are also inorganic concepts intended for commercialism and revenue. Like the spaces Disney has created all over the world, Cancun is now believed to be an experience unto itself, disconnected with the outside world.

In the Global South, commoditization of culture and people in emergent authenticity is also characterized by the state and multinational corporations working together promoting indigeneity as a marketable commodity for tourism revenue. All-inclusive hotels in the region are prime examples of how indigeneity, specifically Mayaness, is commodified in tourism. Mayaness can be described as an ideological manifestation of the exotic; a people with mystic connections to ancient worlds that are beyond any Western scope of history. Tourists to Cancun seek out manifestations of Mayaness when touring archeological sites, buying handicrafts, and staying at hotels with Mayan themes. “As part of the exotic adventure, the tourists expect to breathe an atmosphere of ‘Mayaness’ in Cancun, and the Mexican government has responded with pyramid-shaped hotels, colorful murals that imitate pre-Hispanic Maya icons, and an abundance of stores that sell arts and crafts” (Re Cruz 1996). “The Royal Mayan” all-inclusive hotel in Cancun uses a tagline on their website to describe their businesses to potential tourists as a “tribute to an ancient culture, our own Mayan paradise.”<sup>5</sup> The language centered on marketing Mayan culture is unavoidable throughout the website, “The hand-carved mahogany doors, wall panels and paintings depicting village life in the Yucatan give the villas a warm, Mayan feel...the sculptures of Mayan gods and long-lost rulers in the lobby and in the gardens and even the hand-carved mahogany villa doors.” Tourists who want to experience Mayaness in Cancun seek out hotels such as The Royal Mayan to fulfill their desire for the exotic.

The industry purposefully theme parking Mayaness is a reflection of Roitman’s theories of fiscal disobedience. International and state authorities oversee the production and expansion of theme parking and support deterritorialized zones of mass tourism. How do policies related to mass tourism in Cancun attempt to control those working on the margins of this booming economy? In stark contrast to tourists enjoying Mayaness, all-inclusivity, and relaxed regulation while vacationing, Cancun’s labor force is placed in marginal positions of employment. Wage labor in Cancun is fiscally unstable and exploitative. “Like assembly work, jobs in tourism are characterized by low wages, repetitive motion, attempts to control a worker's sexuality, limited job promotion, a lack of economic security, and racialized bodies” (Castellanos 2007). Women working in the tourism industry, especially indigenous or mestizo women, represent the lowest-paid echelons of hotel and domestic work. Indigenous women often face further marginalization because they are physically segregated from the general population (of tourists) working as housekeepers or domestic servants. Additionally, indigenous women in these occupations are also separated from their whiter, mestizo counterparts also working in Cancun’s tourist zone. A worker receives more access to better paying jobs through direct interaction with tourists. These positions are tailored around those who possess adequate Spanish and/or English language skills as well as a whiter skin tone. Positions such as

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.royalresorts.com/the-royal-mayan.asp>

bartenders, servers, receptionists, or tour guides represent higher levels of economic negotiation, mobility, and agency within a hierarchical labor system.

Roitman describes the State's discipline of its subjects and creation of new subjectivities. This is directly related to the study of Cancun as the Mexican State finances the corporate construction of re-imagined or new subjectivities and representations of Mayaness. "FONATUR (National Tourism Promotion Fund), the Mexican tourism development authority, was the driving force in conceiving, planning, constructing, financing, and, to some extent, investing in Cancun (including direct equity participation)" (Torres 2005). Mexico also disciplines the tourism industry's work force in Cancun through promulgating limited economic opportunity or choice in exploitative labor hierarchies. "Regimes of regulation," as Roitman explains, are based on state-run modes of discipline. From local airport screening procedures to the regular availability of participating in illegal activity or substances, tourists experience little regulation while vacationing in Cancun. Yet, wage laborers working in the many hotels have limited mobility in Cancun because of their long hour, low wages, and the inherit hierarchical labor strata. "Rural workers migrate permanently and on a temporary basis to work in construction, food service, cleaning, domestic work, and room service. This group extracts the least value and fewest benefits from the resort, but it is their backs upon which the resort has been built and by whom it is sustained" (Torres 2005). Reconstituting state authority at the price of thousands of indigenous migrant laborers that are essential to the stability of a richly producing tourist zone as Cancun is a difficult question that is not easily maneuverable.

### *Flexible Citizenship in Cancun*

The U.S. media does not usually report on the impact tourists have on the identity, labor, and migration of the people who live in sites of Mexican mass tourism. Power structures created by tourists' desires, national governments, and multinational corporations shape the mainly indigenous migrant work force in Cancun. These power structures similarly threaten and promote indigenous autonomy, representation, and agency throughout the region. National migration to Cancun by mainly indigenous populations produces negotiation, flexibility, and a constant circulation of laboring bodies. At the same time, economic choice or alternatives are limited because of the level of control and regulation of the economy; wage labor is one of the only means of attaining a steady income.

Cancun and similar mass(ive) tourism zones are economically Fordist in nature because they are categorically based on a rigid wage labor infrastructure. "Mass-tourism' destinations were defined as having been intensively developed, with Western amenities, good infrastructure, and frequented by large numbers of tourists participating in primarily 'sun-and-sand' activities...Mass sites are more highly associated with Fordist modes of tourism production and consumption in that they are standardized and packaged for collective consumption by large numbers of tourists" (Torres 2002). Standardization breeds affordability and accessibility for national and multicultural corporations in charge of constructing mass tourism destinations. Furthermore, the constant large number of guests lends itself to competition among hotels, restaurants, retail outlets catering to tourists. Such businesses can therefore offer the lowest possible rates and prices which creates a competitive economic atmosphere driven by neoliberalism. Like the cruise ship industry, the continuous flow and volume of customers combined with competition among businesses makes such vacations extremely affordable to Western consumers. This widespread affordability is what makes mass tourism one of the most popular and profitable of tourism genres. Cheap to build, cheap to vacation, and cheap labor pools are foundational to the industry's success. As the U.S. and most of the world face uncertain economic trajectories presently, this genre will continue to be a sensible option to most people looking for an inexpensive getaway.

Implementing Dean MacCannell's tourism theory of "frontstage" and "backstage" spaces in the tourism industry, the "backstage" of the industry is purposefully hidden from tourist's view. MacCannell asserts, "toureers - the host population confronted with the arrival of tourists in their midst - protect and insulate their culture by dividing their lives into 'backstage' areas, where they continue meaningful traditions away from the gaze of tourists, and 'frontstage' areas, where they perform a limited range of activities for a tourist audience. This makes available portions of host culture for guest consumption, while it protects other parts from commoditization" (Medina 354). Wage labor in mass tourism blurs the lines between front and back stages. In Cancun's rigidly structured labor hierarchies, the mainly indigenous work force are confined to the backstage because they do not fit into the idyllic representation the hotels want to project and tourists pay to see. Racialization of wage labor in mass tourism forces the bleaching of bodies working in the frontstage. Unless specified as a commodity and controlled by managerial standards, indigenous traditions are all but stripped from tourist's view while performing wage labor work. Each stage of wage labor is manufactured and regulated by the managers, owners, or corporations of mass tourism.

Negotiation in wage labor migration is a foundation of flexible citizenship. Aihwa Ong describes flexible citizenship as the "cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subject to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions" (Ong 1999). Disaporic rural communities around Cancun are responding to migration with increasing agency. Ethnographic evidence of the communities of Kuchmil and Chan Kom (Castellanos 2007 and Re Cruz 1996) are changing the traditionally dichotomous system to better suit themselves.

In response to transnational power structures established by mass tourism, increasing female independence and decision making through migration is representative of modes of flexible citizenship. Remittances used to support and construct small business increase local economic stability. Migration patterns are producing widespread kin networks that create more stable relationships throughout mass tourism destinations. Migrant population's greater access to goods and services through mobility and circulation is strengthening Cancun's peripheral regions. Yet, one must question if this seemingly increasing negotiation for migrants participating in Cancun's mass tourism industry is representative of a constant re-imagined, renegotiated, flexible space. What about those who simply cannot participate in migration flows or in the tourism service industry? What are the forces controlling those who can participate or cannot? "Flexible citizenship" is a term that only applies to a certain segment of the population in mass tourism regions. Unfortunately, their voices are traditionally the most silenced and more ethnographic data is needed to adequately address this question of circulation.

### *Conclusions*

International and national tourists and migrants combine to form a clear example of transnationality in Cancun. The region is representative of mobility and inherit circulation that people share, in that both tourist and host are simultaneously living and moving frequently across borders. "Transnationalism to tourism also permits us to consider interconnections and social networks and relations not only between 'hosts' and 'guests' within tourist poles, but also extends our analysis to include those multiple actors and places that are intimately linked to, affected by, and playing a critical role in the construction and (re)production of transnational tourist space" (Torres 2005). Holding the marionette strings of all the people involved in Cancun's mass tourism industry, the actions of those in power are uncovered when framing a discussion around transnational forms of tourism. The dominating themes of circulatory flows in mass tourism are highlighted by the fact "Transnationalism not only reshapes local realities, but local factors also mediate transnational practices" (Torres 2005). The local and global, national and international are in constant motion, mixing and combining to form a dynamic social space in Cancun.

What does this mean for our concepts of transnationality and circulation when identities are *forced* to become fluid? While there is still mobility in the literal act of migration, vestiges of colonialism continue to be exemplified in the inequalities of tourism's labor hierarchies. Tourists in search of exotic representations of paradise, not limited to bodies and drugs, also permeate Cancun's transnational landscape. The rigid structural component in mass tourism creates dichotomies that are not as easily malleable: host and guest, center and periphery, formal and informal economies, Global North and South.

Further questioning of transnationality of tourism lends itself to asking when is it appropriate (or not) to "show" or "expose" one's identity in the industry? This is evident in the downplay or up-play of Mayaness for the limited lucrative jobs available in directly working with tourists. The fluid nature of identity in transnational space, like Cancun, indicates its hyper-consumerist culture. Tourist seeking representations and/or bodies of exotic Mayaness constitute many vacationers in Cancun's environment. "Cancun, or Gringolandia, is arguably a product of Disneyfication of the Yucatan environment and pre-Hispanic Mayan heritage. According to Relph, 'the products of 'Disneyfication' are absurd, synthetic places made up of a surrealistic combination of history, myth, reality and fantasy that have little relationship with particular geographical setting'" (Torres 2005). Cancun as a primarily Western/White-dominated, theme park reconstruction of Mayan culture was created for and continues to be marketed for tourist consumption. The varying degrees of authenticity that are constantly competing for tourist dollars represent the basis of twenty-first century transnational mass tourism. The environment has been commoditized, reproduced, and packaged for large-scale, global tourism consumption.

Lastly, with the continual popularity of deterritorialized spaces in mass tourism, what will its effects be on the environment and people involved? The vast amount of goods and people circulating throughout these zones is likely to have a lasting impact. As national and international corporations and networks continue to strengthen with revenues from mass tourism, will local livelihoods strengthen as well? Will this cyclical entanglement of transnational identity and movement ever break? Hypothetically, commoditization, migration, and negotiation will all remain vital components of mass tourism. So, will the industry respond with sustainable practices encouraging an equitable and respectful relationship for all involved? The lens of transnationalism and circulation will no doubt be essential in garnering answers to the complex nature of mass tourism in Cancun. 🌍

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## The identities of ethnic communities in São Paulo: An investigation of the Armenian community in Bom Retiro

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Joshua Shake

*Abstract: This article explores the geo-spatial identity of the Armenian community in São Paulo. Beginning with a foundation in prominent theories of ethnic communities, it then presents the political contexts and historical diversity of both Brazil and the city. The article then discusses the history of Armenian immigration to São Paulo which sets the context for the field research. After presenting the research and results, conclusions are given for this and other ethnic districts, including those regarding the use of collective memory and the continued presence of important community organizations in preserving neighborhood identity*

São Paulo is known as one of the most diverse cities in the world. For example, in this city one can find some of the largest Japanese, Italian, and Lebanese communities outside of their respective countries. Historically, these groups arrived in waves and created their population centers and concentrations. However, like many cultural phenomena, these centers also changed. In Bela Vista there are still the best Italian restaurants in the city, but it is not just an Italian neighborhood now. The same can be said of Liberdade and its population concentrations, which are no longer just Japanese. São Paulo is not only limited to those groups. Thus, this research will explore a specific area of the city that has already gone through these changes various times.

Just as the Metro Blue Line passes through the Armenia Station on its trajectory north of the city center, this area that historically concentrated populations of its namesake group is marked by the temporal circulation of Armenian-Brazilians and numerous other populations. While it may have once been a