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## **In/Secure Conversations**

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*Published in:*  
Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism

*DOI:*  
[10.1215/07990537-7249174](https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-7249174)

*Publication date:*  
2018

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Mains, S. (2018). In/Secure Conversations: Retheorising Life and Debt, Tourism and Caribbean Geopolitics. *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 22(3 (57)), 90-104. <https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-7249174>

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## **In/Secure Conversations: Rethorising *Life and Debt*, Tourism and Caribbean Geopolitics**

Susan P. Mains

The Caribbean has figured prominently in narratives of security, mobility and transnational connections. Referred to as the ‘Third Border’ in US foreign policies, and inhabiting contradictory geopolitical spaces between North and South America, the region also negotiates narratives of in-betweenness and in/security in relation to more ‘leisurely’ pursuits, notably tourism. This paper analyses the ways in which representations of in/security have framed media images of Caribbean tourism by revisiting two case studies: the critically acclaimed documentary film, *Life and Debt* and recent security discussions around tourism in Jamaica.<sup>1</sup> While geopolitics and tourism studies have largely tended to remain distinct areas of research, *Life and Debt* illustrates the significance and urgent need to exhume the interdependency of both. Media representations, Caribbean literature and policy decision-making are part of ongoing conversations that illustrate the limitations of over-generalised notions of security, time and space. Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s concept of ‘repeating islands’ is drawn upon to critically analyse how representations of geopolitics in the Caribbean are part of a series of interconnected and multi-layered conversations.<sup>2</sup> The Caribbean is an archipelagic region that has often found itself in uneven and contradictory conversations about security, mobility and control, and as such affords an important context for analysing the compromises and negotiations involved in national, regional, and global conversations around in/security. Critically engaging with how we conceptualise conversations, and examining their repetitive and contradictory nature, also opens up new possibilities for interrogating the ways in which tourism narratives have reinforced, recreated, and stifled diverse, secure and inclusive social spaces.

Two key questions provide the focus for this paper:

- 1) in what ways can the concepts of conversation and repetition enable a critical analysis of the connections between popular media and geopolitical discourses of Caribbean in/security and tourism?
- 2) how are the connections and contradictions of geopolitical discourses and national tourism strategies illustrated through media and policy images of place, specifically *Life and Debt* and official Jamaican tourism statements?

To tease out the ways in which these Caribbean conversations offer a provocative and productive forum for engaging and mobilising more inclusive understandings of security the following analysis is divided into four sections. The first section provides an overview of the conceptual framework for the paper and sets out the ways in which we may think of conversations as social and strategic tools. The concept of repeating islands is also introduced as a device for framing Caribbean identities. The second section contextualises *Life and Debt*

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Black, *Life and Debt* (USA: New Yorker Films, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (London: Duke University Press, 1992).

and analyses the film's relevance for wider stories of Caribbean in/securities. The conversations emerging from these earlier sections are then developed further in the third section, which examines their importance for interrogating the dynamics of geopolitics and tourism studies in a Caribbean-global context. The fourth, and final section, reflects on the implications and possibilities for thinking and working through creative and constructive Caribbean conversations.

### **Conceptualising Conversations: Storytelling and Repetition**

Conversations are storytelling and map making practices. They are components of unequal, passionate, halting, and interrupted dialogues, all of which involve varying degrees of negotiation. A central dynamic of these negotiations involves a range of voices attempting to express their feelings, to share their relationships to places and events, and to make sense of and/or justify injustices. During national policy discussions and media coverage of migration and economic policies, many voices are marginalised or silenced. Those who are not seen as central to political debates are often denied the possibility of actively and meaningfully participating in discussions affecting critical decision-making. Dominant ideas may be repeated by elite groups in order to normalise them and to make them appear ubiquitous and, therefore, 'common sense.'

Despite this frequent process of 'shutting down' diverse conversations through activities such as selective media reporting, overly narrow policy decisions, or excluding community organisations during important decision-making periods, at key moments there are specific practices and places that act as catalysts for closer scrutiny and social change. These key moments may come in the form of unexpected disruptions: street protests about unfair economic conditions, legal challenges to coastal activities that contravene existing legislation, poetry and film that communicates the views of underrepresented social groups, or arts festivals held to celebrate creativity and diverse communities in a time of increased state repression or discrimination. The presence of activities such as those mentioned above, offers the opportunity for people to come together physically (at streets, parks, courtrooms, schools, universities, verandas, studio discussions) and socially (through the sharing of previously unspoken experiences, collaboration on projects, increased media attention, support networks, and greater awareness and openness). The presence of community organisations in a courtroom or on national terrestrial news coverage, potentially widens the conversations being created, and can offer a useful opportunity to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about what a 'wider public' desires.

It is worth noting that while potentially enabling a time and space for dialogue and the exchange of ideas, conversations may also mask an inability to move beyond discussion towards further forms of social change and activism. This is not to say that conversations in themselves are not significant—giving voice to unrecognised concerns or bearing witness to events can be a politically potent act—but, as will be examined in relation to *Life and Debt* and discussions around tourism and security in Jamaica below, the process of translating conversations into inclusive forms of praxis is lengthy and fraught with unequal power

dynamics. Efforts to control conversations can result in the repetition rather than diversification of ideas.

This repetitive nature of language and in/security is a significant feature of mainstream media and policy discussions. In his seminal exploration of the Caribbean, *Repeating Islands*, Benítez-Rojo states, ‘This work, as its title indicates, aspires to be repetitive rather than definitive; it is part of a flow of words that has neither a beginning or an end—a never-ending tale.’<sup>3</sup> Through his exploration of a wide range of literary representations of the Caribbean, Benítez-Rojo also illustrates that what may initially appear separate and discontinuous (islands, languages, power struggles), under closer scrutiny reveal themselves to be—like the Caribbean—archipelagic. Benítez-Rojo’s concept of repeating islands is helpful for understanding the recurring themes of security, inequality and the power to represent: he highlights the diversity of Caribbean geographies and histories and rather than representing a predictable pattern he explains that the idea of repetition may also lead to unpredictable (regional and global) outcomes:

...within the sociocultural fluidity that the Caribbean archipelago presents, within its historiographic turbulence and its ethnological and linguistic clamor, with its generalized instability of vertigo and hurricane, one can sense the features of an island that ‘repeats’ itself, unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth, while at the same time it inspires multidisciplinary maps of unexpected designs.<sup>4</sup>

The latter point is particularly salient in relation to the legacies of colonial relationships, and policy decision-making, where the movement of people, ideas and policies may become ‘bifurcated,’ inspiring and/or problematic depending on their relative social and political context.

Taken literally, archipelagos suggest distinct and clearly delineated physical landscapes that are subterraneously connected: while appearing separate on the surface delving deeper reveals ongoing and longstanding physical connections between islands. But, as Benítez-Rojo suggests, these material bridges may not necessarily suggest political or social consistencies or alliances. In a parallel vein, it could be suggested that ongoing conversations about trade, migration and sustainability between Caribbean governments may have some commonalities, but are not organically or naturally destined to do so. These repeating conversations may improve subterranean connections, but they may also simply produce the illusion of collaboration through mainstream media rather than an active engagement through lived experiences.

The repetition of exclusionary discourses is brought into relief via *Life and Debt, A Small Place* and a wide range of critical Caribbean literature. Critical media, and political discussions around security and tourism in Jamaica, are just two examples of more intensified efforts to reclaim and represent Caribbean identities and places. The following section

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<sup>3</sup> Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, 2nd Edition. London: Duke University Press, 1996, xi.

<sup>4</sup> Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, 2nd Edition. London: Duke University Press, 1996, 3.

examines how *Life and Debt* continues to be part of much wider, and contested conversations, while directly engaging with individual voices that are often excluded from official policy debates.

### **Revisiting *Life and Debt* and Repeating Conversations**

It is seventeen years since *Life and Debt* first screened in film festivals, Caribbean campuses and various venues globally. The film was selected for further analysis as part of this paper, partly due to the resonance it has had with Jamaican and Caribbean audiences, as well as its critical success internationally via film festivals and terrestrial television broadcasts. The film has also become part of pedagogical exercises in higher education classes and via online teaching resources.<sup>5</sup> Largely set in Jamaica, the documentary maps out the stories, journeys and problematic narratives of globalisation, colonialism, tourism and debt through the experiences of a parallel series of central characters; visiting tourists, small scale farmers, hotel and factory workers, Jamaican government officials, leaders of the International Monetary Fund, Rastafarian elders, and environmental conservationists, among others. These interweaving, and contradictory figures highlight that while Jamaican coastal resorts offer the opportunity for overseas visiting tourists to ‘escape’ from the ‘banality’ of their life, they simultaneously symbolise a failure of politicians and multinational agencies and organisations (international and domestic) to fundamentally address the restricted mobility and ongoing insecure circumstances of a large proportion of the Jamaican (and by extension, global population). As tourist resorts expand there is increasingly limited access to many beaches that were once open to Jamaican residents, domestic economic policies are largely determined by the IMF, and there seems a lack of proactive policy making to ensure the representation and safety of the wider island population. The film’s director, Stephanie Black, contrasts picturesque views of relaxing tourists and an ‘impossibly’ blue Caribbean sea, with slow pan shots of low income West Kingston streets from the vantage point of an ‘urban safari’ tour arranged by an all-inclusive hotel. The voiceover is adapted from Jamaica Kincaid’s novel, *A Small Place*, which succinctly critiques the legacies of colonialism and corruption in Antigua.<sup>6</sup> At key points in the film the narrator speaks directly to the viewer: she emphasises that like the (seemingly blissfully unaware) tourists, the residents who you, the viewer, are also watching with curiosity, “are too poor to escape the reality of their lives; and they are too poor to live properly in the place they live, which is the very place you, the tourist, want to go.”

*Life and Debt* is striking in its ongoing relevance to Caribbean and wider struggles with globalisation, inequality and debt. The film provides an emotive reminder of the ways in which uneven conversations about security and mobility continually resurface and intersect. One example of these recurrences is shown through a conversation with the late Jamaican Prime Minister, Michael Manley, as he recalls being forced to come to an agreement with the IMF over the course of several meetings in order to access essential funds for the country

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the integration of a range of fieldwork and media materials in Susan P. Mains, “Fieldwork, Heritage and Engaging Landscape Texts,” *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 38, no. 4 (2014): 525-545.

<sup>6</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place* (London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988).

during a period of global economic turmoil. This experience of giving up a significant degree of financial sovereignty, via a global financial system established by former colonial powers (particularly the World Bank), is one that shows the emotional context to political negotiations, and continues to frame ongoing economic relationships between many Caribbean nations and international financial institutions. Although globalisation has frequently been depicted as following a narrowly (western) defined linear trajectory (as Arturo Escobar<sup>7</sup> also shows in relation to discourses of ‘development’), the film, and the intertextual narratives it draws on, challenge such constrained images of time and space. Kincaid’s novel, the evocative musical soundtrack (a key component of this filmic landscape that draws on a range of Jamaican-based musicians), face-to-face interviews, and archival and television news footage, are interwoven to illustrate the impossibility of simplistic policy solutions. In these resistant narratives, globalisation (and the opportunity that tourism apparently offers), does not simply do its work then ‘deliver.’

Since the release of *Life and Debt* Jamaica has experienced dramatic levels of indebtedness, crime and a growing reliance on tourism as a potential escape route. It has been estimated that (direct and indirect) travel and tourism related activities contributed approximately 32.9% to the country’s GDP in 2017 (the figure for the Caribbean as a whole was 15.2%).<sup>8</sup> The country remains on an IMF staff monitored programme: a renegotiated relationship that could perhaps be described as another example of Benítez-Rojo’s repeating islands: the loan programme at certain times becoming more strategic and having varied consequences. Two of the largest earners of foreign exchange (viewed by many as a critical resource due to the fluctuation of the Jamaican dollar, and part of an ongoing requirement of ongoing and new structural adjustment loans), are remittances and tourism. These latter sectors highlight the ongoing importance of mobility via emigration, international money transfers, and service industries and developments targeting potential overseas visitors and investors. Although Jamaica’s level of total government indebtedness has decreased from a high of 145% of GDP in 2012, it is still a significant burden (most recently calculated as 114% of GDP in 2017), and has been accompanied with slow GDP growth levels (0.5% in 2017).<sup>9</sup> In addition, both Jamaica and Antigua (the settings for *Life and Debt* and *A Small Place*, respectively) have received criticism for ongoing issues related to corruption and a lack of accountability for irregular economic and political decision-making. Selected Caribbean states have also been viewed as part of global archipelagos of offshore finance for wealthy individuals and companies seeking to escape higher taxation in their ‘home’ countries.<sup>10</sup> This occurs through a series of irregular practices frequently linked to the movement of capital out of high income countries: rather than the buried treasure of the past, the invaluable subterranean materials connecting people and places may be hidden finances, social networks and obfuscating legislation. The Caribbean is part of a financial archipelago used to hide global wealth, while

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<sup>7</sup> Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> World Travel and Tourism Council, “Travel and Tourism Economic Impact: Jamaica” (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2018), { HYPERLINK "<https://www.wttc.org/economic-impact/country-analysis/country-reports/>" } (Last accessed: 29/06/2018).

<sup>9</sup> The World Bank, “The World Bank in Jamaica: Overview” (The World Bank, 2018), { HYPERLINK "<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/jamaica/overview>" } (Last accessed: 29/06/2018).

<sup>10</sup> Nick Hopkins and Helena Bengtsson, “What are the Paradise Papers and what do they tell us?” *The Guardian*, November 5, 2017, { HYPERLINK "<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/nov/05/what-are-the-paradise-papers-and-what-do-they-tell-us>" } (Last accessed: 29/06/2018).

also being a region often struggling to assert economic autonomy and political sovereignty. These economic contradictions of security and stability can also be seen in relation to tourism in Jamaica. The island came under recent national and international media attention when a state of emergency was declared in the Parish of Saint James (home of the key tourist destination, Montego Bay) in January 2018. As the declaration was made, government officials attempted to reassure potential tourists that this measure was undertaken in order to address escalating concerns about rising levels of violent crime, stating that the increased presence of security forces should encourage a greater sense of safety for tourism stakeholders and visitors to the island.<sup>11</sup>

Narratives of security, globalisation and tourism are anancys: they are tricky and dynamic. These stories re-present the past while also appearing to include people in a discourse, or conversation, about improving mobility and ‘global goals.’ For example, during *Life and Debt* we are shown residents of coastal communities at town hall meetings with hotel executives where the former are questioning the environmental impacts of resort developments in sensitive ecosystems. By broadcasting scenes of public meetings, *Life and Debt* disseminates dissenting voices to a wider audience, while also highlighting that despite appearing to provide a setting for public discussion, the Town Hall setting is not one of constructive conversation, but one in which critique is strongly resisted and controlled. *Life and Debt* highlights that narratives of globalisation and social mobility are slippery to keep hold of and they are *insecure*. In the film, small scale farmers, Jamaican politicians, children playing in the street, vacationing tourists, factory workers, are all part of these landscapes of globalisation, but through unequal relationships that effectively amount to what could arguably be called a situation where the vast majority (individuals, nations and regions), are ‘living in arrears.’ While the narratives of political trade agreements (such as the archival footage of the 1944 Bretton Woods trade meeting shown in the film) suggest ‘forward looking’ agendas, economic security, and social mobility, the outcomes appear to suggest ongoing (social, military and economic) struggles over the power to represent and control Caribbean identities and spaces.

Within the Caribbean, repetitive and archipelagic representations and relationships are demonstrated through simultaneously connected and bounded experiences of security: monitored migration between islands; the ability to travel as a tourist; the livelihood challenges of poverty; the difficulties of negotiating racial, gender and national and regional stereotypes; the opportunities of writing and creating transnational collaborative art and literature (as can be seen from the interweaving of *A Small Place* (set in Antigua) and *Life and Debt* (based in Jamaica). Based on proximity and the potentially shared experiences, archipelagic thinking suggests the possibility of fostering closer alliances, however, as the stories revealed in *Life and Debt*, trade and policy negotiations within CARICOM, and regional and global economic disparities highlights, archipelagic securities may be more frequently embodied through broken conversations and reterritorializing of uneven power cartographies. Although sharing similar geopolitical concerns, regional socio-economic collaborations and narratives frequently fall victim to individual nation-state anxieties about

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<sup>11</sup> Shanica Blair, “Update: Holness says tourism stakeholders in support of state of emergency in St James,” *Jamaica Observer*, January 18, 2018, { HYPERLINK "[http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/latestnews/UPDATE:\\_Holness\\_says\\_tourism\\_stakeholders\\_in\\_support\\_of\\_state\\_of\\_emergency\\_in\\_St\\_James?profile=1228](http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/latestnews/UPDATE:_Holness_says_tourism_stakeholders_in_support_of_state_of_emergency_in_St_James?profile=1228)" } (Last accessed: 29/06/2018).

control and sovereignty. Rather than encouraging intra-regional projects, shared histories and geographies may languish while preference is given to nationalistic narratives and a focus on large scale projects that hold the promise of international investment beyond the Caribbean.

It is twenty nine years since *A Small Place* entered the public imagination, directly challenging readers to reflect on their own complicity as tourists and/or beneficiaries of inequality. Just as Kincaid's narrator addresses the reader directly, in a frequently accusatory manner, so too does Black's voiceover in *Life and Debt*. The gentle tone of the film's narrator, however, suggests the welcoming voiceovers heard as part of idyllic tourism advertisements, lulling the viewer into a presumed comfortable space. Yet it soon becomes clear that the content of the audio and visual narrative is emphasising the contrasting experiences of tourists and residents, where the former have access to a vast range of resources as the latter work to service those needs. The film then moves beyond the Caribbean to highlight the ways in which those inequalities are repeated in wider economic and political inequalities globally. The film's voiceover acts as an archipelagic arc that brings a narrative continuity, echoing its opening welcome while returning to the final statement: "If you come to Jamaica as a tourist, this is what you will see." And the depth of the arc of events, voices and images that have been encompassed within the film, forces us to question, what that future vista might entail.

*Life and Debt* encourages an engagement with what Carolyn Pedwell terms, 'alternative empathies.'<sup>12</sup> While analysing *A Small Place*, Pedwell notes the usefulness of confrontational narrative strategies in emotionally engaging the reader (or, in this case, viewer), not simply to gain sympathy, but rather to challenge hegemonic narratives that simplify our understandings of post/colonial time and space:<sup>13</sup>

Taking inspiration from Kincaid, we might therefore understand empathy not only as an emotion that connects (or distances) human subjects in the 'here and now', but also as an affective relation that enables us to engage critically and imaginatively with our very understandings of time and space. If dominant liberal articulations of empathy project a teleology of affective (and moral) progress which figures some subjects and places as progressing forward and others as 'stuck in the past', alternative empathies might be distinguished in part by their openness to thinking and feeling time as something other than progressive and space as something other than self-contained. From this perspective, empathy might be understood not as a 'positive' emotion that might be cultivated to overpower 'negative' emotions, but rather as a critical receptivity to being affected by ways of seeing, being and feeling that do not simply confirm what we think we already know.

Black uses an adapted version of Kincaid's text, and in doing so continues the repeating conversational deictic strategy, as she interweaves the impacts of slavery with dispossession at the hands of foreign tourist developers and local corrupt politicians. The film highlights events that initially appear distinct and disconnected, but which are shown to reveal the ongoing structural inequalities that create longstanding archipelagos of pain. By shifting from

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<sup>12</sup> Carolyn Pedwell, "Affect at the margins: Alternative empathies in *A Small Place*," *Emotion, Space and Society* 8 (2013): 18-26.

<sup>13</sup> Pedwell, "Affect at the margins: Alternative empathies in *A Small Place*," 26.

the novel's Antiguan setting to that of Jamaica, *Life and Debt* also highlights the ways in which the geographies of corruption continue to shift, evading accountability and thus requiring ongoing scrutiny and conversations about what kind of Caribbean cultural and political landscapes are possible. The film is not without its own generalisations: rural communities and friendships seem somewhat idealised, while urban landscapes are signified through shots of impoverished neighbourhoods and children in the streets. But nonetheless, Black is directly questioning the viewer by probing their conscience and (social and physical) place, stressing the ways in which the colonial past is part of the postcolonial present, and pushing audiences to challenge the inevitability of these repeating inequalities within Caribbean landscapes.

### **Rethorising Security, Geopolitics and Tourism**

We recognize that threats to our security, concerns, and other challenges are diverse in nature and multidimensional in scope, and that traditional concepts and approaches must be expanded to encompass new and non-traditional threats, which include political, economic, social, health and environmental aspects.

The objective of the Third Border Initiative is to focus US—Caribbean engagement through targeted programs that comprise both new and ongoing activities designed to enhance cooperation in the diplomatic, security, economic, environmental, health and education arenas without prejudice to additional areas of collaboration that may be agreed upon in the future. The Third Border Initiative provides the opportunity to focus funding and assistance on those areas where we see the greatest increased need.<sup>14</sup>

“I am going to be announcing shortly a new regime for safety and security in the tourism sector. We are working on that now, and by the time I get to budget [debate], we will be ready to roll out that new concept,” said Bartlett. “It is going to, I am telling you, say to the world, this is a friendly, wonderful place to come [Jamaica], but we have a strong hand on your safety and security.”<sup>15</sup>

Geopolitics and tourism depend on, reinforce, and contradict concepts of security and mobility. Geopolitics explicitly involves analysing the relations between power, identity and space in light of topics such as, monitoring borders, multi-lateral trade agreements, civic participation, nationalism, migration, censorship and media images of conflict. Tourism studies includes the examination of the ability to access recreation and travel, the marketing of places, visitor experiences, the development of resorts, and images of places and

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<sup>14</sup> Adam Erel, “Joint Statement by the United States of America, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Dominican Republic on the Third Border Initiative,” *US Department of State*, 2004, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2004/28136.htm> (Last accessed: 26/01/2017).

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Lewis, “Bartlett to announce new security programme for tourism industry,” *Jamaica Observer*, April 30, 2016, [http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/Bartlett-to-announce-new-security-programme-for-tourism-industry\\_59389](http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/Bartlett-to-announce-new-security-programme-for-tourism-industry_59389) (Last accessed: 25/01/2017).

destination cultures. Central to both of these (diverse) bodies of work is an increasingly explicit awareness that an ability to move, and represent movements, is a central component of how we understand, challenge and rethink relationships to people and places. In both of these (not necessarily mutually exclusive) areas of study, there has been a growing recognition of the need for a critical analysis in order to unearth several areas of concern: how certain political and cultural landscapes are produced; the role of representation in policing security and space; and, the ways in which discursive practices (e.g., television news, tourism advertising, novels, investigative documentary films, economic policies) mediate our understandings of space. It could also be suggested that the production of tourist destinations and the discursive and material contexts in which they exist, provide an understudied and invaluable window into the ways in which geopolitical discourses of security are becoming increasingly embedded in discussions of specific Caribbean tourism policies and destinations. These interconnections could be seen as emblematic of Benítez-Rojo's 'features of an island that 'repeats' itself' through discourses that aim to present a homogeneous region, but which are often complicated by the particularity of social, historical and spatial relationships.<sup>16</sup> In the example of Jamaica discussed above, the active integration of a 'militarised' language that has traditionally been used towards international monitoring of activities such as, drug-trafficking, arms trading and/or international policing of maritime seas more broadly, reflects anxieties about 'securing' island states and a desire to formalise tourism's path towards a specific development trajectory.

Security and mobility are inherently contradictory. The two statements at the start of this section—the first from the launch of the (still in existence) Third Border Initiative, commencing during the Bush Administration in 2001, and the second from a recent announcement on Tourism strategy by the Jamaican Tourism Minister, Edmund Bartlett—hint at a tension between collaboration, support, policing, potential threats and enjoyment. These are not only Caribbean concerns, but they are particularly pertinent for a region in which tourism is an integral part of often vulnerable and insecure economies, and where a US presence has been viewed as a lingering neo-colonial influence. As Patricia Noxolo and David Featherstone have noted, 'the Caribbean has been produced as a region with a dense network of international connections—it is a global 'crossroads'... Most obviously, the region's geopolitical significance as the USA's 'backyard' has made it a recurring focus for western anxieties.'<sup>17</sup>

As Noxolo and Featherstone also point out, in addition to understanding regional/global connections the specificities of place (historically, culturally and physically) are worth noting.<sup>18</sup> For example, specific economic practices and structures have relevance when analysing broader contemporary policy place/decision-making. How does the structure and requirements of the IMF, for example, shape lending policies and public spending in different Caribbean nations? In what ways do security agreements between Jamaica and the US, impact investment and promotion of the island as a tourist destination? The parallel conversations around tourism and foreign policy succinctly highlight the need for attention to

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<sup>16</sup> Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, 2nd Edition. London: Duke University Press, 1996, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Noxolo and David Featherstone, "CoProducing Caribbean Geographies of In/Security," *Transactions* 39 (2014): 604.

<sup>18</sup> Noxolo and Featherstone, "CoProducing Caribbean Geographies of In/Security," 603-607.

historical and geographical strategies used to define and ‘manage’ the security of Caribbean landscapes and political narratives.

While *Life and Debt* casts a critical eye on globalisation and Caribbean/transnational geographic narratives (via a novel, development discourse, urban and rural vistas, reggae and dancehall music, statements made on behalf of international financial institutions, and conversations with residents and environmental NGOs), it also prompts further analysis of wider narratives that are less frequently viewed as cartographic fictions, but are nonetheless creative place-based constructions. These statements form part of official performances and can also illustrate the fictional dimensions of organisational conversations that appear to be about collaboration and negotiation, but are instead being deployed as a means of claiming space (or air time) rather than sharing it. Trade agreements, public speeches, television news coverage, and national development plans are all signposts at junctions that highlight the fictional character of geopolitical and tourism cartographies. Organisational, governmental or ‘expert’ claims of neutrality and benevolence may be used to mask or even reduce already marginalised voices, and equally important stories of the already disadvantaged—through efforts to secure space and project a positive external image that overgeneralises place identities and simplifies longstanding inequalities. Public statements in support of international trade agreements, restrictions on immigrant visas, or large scale building projects, rely on storytelling to create a sanitised narrative where requests for attention to diverse individual needs is often depicted as too complicated and necessarily subordinate to ‘the greater good’ of international investment, ‘stability,’ and fixing place. However, such discourses of the potential security for nations as a whole, may result in greater insecurity for the individual, through this ‘tyranny of experts.’<sup>19</sup> As William Easterly notes,

we must not let caring about material suffering of the poor change the subject from caring about the rights of the poor. It doesn’t mean that we care less about the material suffering; it means that we understand that the autocrats have offered a false bargain to meet material needs while we overlook the suppression of rights.<sup>20</sup>

That false bargain may be hidden by linguistic strategies, such as the ‘megarhetorics’ examined by Rebecca Dingo and J. Blake Scott, which refer to narratives embedded in abstract discourses of development, globalisation, security and the promise of tourism.<sup>21</sup> Dingo and Scott argue that rhetorical devices—such as the promotion of debt financing in the Caribbean, or the language of the Third Border Initiative—are important not only as a means of selling a story of potential success (with a temporal location set safely in the future), but for the many (sometimes unintended) material consequences and insecurities with which they are associated.

These conversational ellipses and disruptions continue to fuel Caribbean media representations of tourism. Public media debates in Jamaica around recent comments made by Taleb Rifal, Secretary-General of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) at a November 2017 Global Conference in Montego Bay, were viewed by many

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<sup>19</sup> William Easterly, *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Easterly, *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*, 339.

<sup>21</sup> Rebecca Dingo and J. Blake Scott, “Introduction: The “Megarhetorics” of Global Development, in *The Megarhetorics of Global Development*, edited by R. Dingo and J. B. Scott, 1-28. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012.

as a significant direct critique of all-inclusive resorts and dominant narratives reproduced as part of destination promotions. Rival stated “We cannot continue to promote modern-day plantations in our own countries, called exclusive resorts. That is not the model we are looking for at all.”<sup>22</sup> The statement was received with significant public commentary, later tempered by Rival in response to extensive press coverage, when he later stated:

...maybe the use of the word [plantation] may have been a tad too dramatic... I have great respect to all-inclusive resorts, I have great respect to all the investors and all the good people that came and invested and changed lives and changed destinies and developed areas in this country and many, many parts around the world.<sup>23</sup>

Many online commentators felt the initial comments were apt and timely, reflecting a concern about the exclusion of residents from upscale resort development decision-making processes and their limited ability to afford access to these substantial spaces geared towards overseas guests.<sup>24</sup> The subsequent tempering of Rival’s remarks suggests private conversations where the sentiments of large investors and government officials are given greater importance than that of less economically powerful citizens. Yet the use of ‘plantation’ is not out of place or time: a brief survey of holiday home landscapes on Jamaica’s North Coast reveals (amongst others) a ‘Plantation Village,’ clearly visible from a key public highway. A focus on tourism visitor numbers and ‘secure’ resorts fails to recognise the ongoing iconic and material significance of the plantation, and how, as Katherine McKittrick notes, the latter communicates a particular understanding of ‘a black sense of place’:

With a black sense of place in mind, the plantation notably stands at the centre of modernity. It fostered complex black and non-black geographies in the Americas and provided the blueprint for future sites of racial entanglement. Diverse spatial practices—wherein the structural workings of racism kept black cultures in place and tagged them as placeless, as these communities innovatively worked within, across, and outside commonsense cartographic and topographical texts—help form a black sense of place. Thus, that which ‘structures’ a black sense of place are the knotted diasporic tenets of coloniality, dehumanization, and resistance; this is a sense of place wherein the violence of displacement and bondage, produced within a plantation economy, extends and is given a geographic future.<sup>25</sup>

This geographic future is glimpsed through the language of security and austerity, and variegated efforts to monitor/facilitate mobility for specific social groups, while reinforcing

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<sup>22</sup> Horace Hines, “UNWTO boss says modern-day plantation reference not attack on all-inclusive model,” *Jamaica Observer*, November 30, 2017, [http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/unwto-boss-says-modern-day-plantation-reference-not-attack-on-all-inclusive-model\\_118572?profile=0](http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/unwto-boss-says-modern-day-plantation-reference-not-attack-on-all-inclusive-model_118572?profile=0) (Last accessed: 29/12/2017).

<sup>23</sup> Hines, “UNWTO boss says modern-day plantation reference not attack on all-inclusive model,” November 30, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> In a 2016 report examining the disparity in hotel prices versus destination employees’ salaries, for example, Katherine Alex Beaven notes that a selected Jamaican all-inclusive nightly hotel room rate was the equivalent to approximately \$700US (a not uncommon rate for that period), while the monthly salary for a waiter working six days a week was recorded as \$332.93US. Katherine A. Beaven, “The Staggering Difference Between Average Hotel Rates and Minimum Wage in the World’s Most Popular Destinations,” *Oyster.Com: The Hotel Tell-All*, January 19, 2016 (Last accessed: 29/06/2018).

<sup>25</sup> Katherine McKittrick, “On plantations, prison, and a black sense of place,” *Social and Cultural Geography* 12:8 (2011), 949.

the material and discursive exclusion of those who resist “destination narratives” promising economic success. The image of the plantation raised by Rifaal is embedded in tourism imagery throughout Jamaica: tours of colonial great houses are held daily; holiday home developments are promoted with allusions to a ‘luxurious’ plantation landscape; stories of runaway slaves occasionally appear in historical brochures or tours about past events. This neo/postcolonial plantation provokes emotional responses. While being mobilised to secure a sense of ‘history’ and reassuring seclusion in present resort landscapes, the plantation is also profoundly embedded in past landscapes that thrived on insecurity and ‘disposable’ lives. Despite the negative connotations of slavery, persistent inequality, and curtailed mobility, there are still efforts being made to reshape this conversation into a security success story: ““We suffered in the past with a perception of safety and security and the all-inclusive model was a God-send to relieve us of that situation,” Bartlett noted, “And we have grown exponentially over the years with that model.””<sup>26</sup>

While efforts have been made to manage these official conversations through televised press conferences and statements to the print press, they are, however, never fully fixed. The concluding section below reflects on the ways in which representations of Jamaican tourism are ultimately open to creative challenges, and may offer the potential for more constructive conversations.

### **Reimagining In/Security and Creative Conversations**

The representational, financial and political geographies of tourism in/security discussions are significant: revisiting *Life and Debt* (its title alone signifying the survive-or-perish realities of insecure lives), does not highlight how far we have travelled, but rather how far the challenges and opportunities of these webs of interconnection continue to contract and stretch. The repetitiveness, exclusivity and urgency of the issues raised in the documentary are also illustrated by: ongoing screenings and audience responses; activist group projects; closer scrutiny of government decision-making; multi-national organization statements; and, non-governmental legal challenges. These are conversations that can never be completely controlled or erased, and through resistant representations (for example, Caribbean literature, activist projects, as well as films such as *Life and Debt*), new opportunities for dialogue can be opened. Further exploration of resistance and repetition is critical for creatively addressing representations of in/security in the Caribbean as part of ongoing conversations addressing tourism, policy and power.

Creativity comes in myriad forms. Benítez-Rojo’s conceptualisation of repeating islands is one that offers an entryway into rethinking the Caribbean as a series of interconnected conversations that represent and negotiate spaces and relationships. Conversations are creative and spatial practices: they produce, reflect and challenge popular stories, identities and connections to places. Conversations help us to make sense of, bear witness to, and

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<sup>26</sup> Hines, “UNWTO boss says modern-day plantation reference not attack on all-inclusive model,” November 30, 2017.

question unintended or unjust relationships. Kamau Brathwaite points to these interactions of back and forth and change—dynamic landscapes—as tidalectic processes through which the past, present and future coalesce in creative and provocative ways.<sup>27</sup> In a poignant interview as part of Black’s exploration into the negative environmental impacts of large scale tourism developments and the limited monitoring undertaken by Jamaican governmental agencies, the late renowned journalist and lecturer, John Maxwell, reinforces this sense of interconnected times and spaces as he explains that the current landscape is not ours to waste, but a shared resource for future generations. Through this understanding of socio-spatial relationships, sustainability cuts across space and time, and necessitates individual and collective responsibility.

Tourism and security are emotional enterprises. The Caribbean embodies contested landscapes and narratives of mobility that are interwoven with geopolitical debates. These provocative landscapes and discussions are also the catalyst for artists and activists who have used creativity in innovative ways that widen and challenge normative conversations, and also illustrate Brathwaite’s shifting and multi-layered place narratives. An example of these creative activities that have emerged out of concerns around environmental issues, is the Jamaica Environment Trust (JET). Formed in 1991 in response to concerns about the condition of Jamaica’s natural environment, this non-profit organisation has undertaken a range of educational, advocacy, conservation and arts activities to raise awareness of topics such as waste disposal, pollution and environmental legislation.<sup>28</sup> The diversity of activities undertaken by the organization highlights the ways in which conversations about environmental security can also be interwoven with discussions around learning, arts-based activities (such as musicals and photography), as well engaging with a range of age, income and geographical groups.

Creative practices in the Caribbean, such as film making, writing, photography, dancehall music, environmental conservation, and dub poetry, offer an important entryway into reframing the identities placed at the centre (and margins) of debates around security, and are an important area for future activism and collaborative research. *Life and Debt* plays on, and challenges, the artistic license utilised in tourism promotions, economic boosterism and political ‘performances.’ These new conversations may take on the role of a progressive trickster where Caribbean borders are challenged and dominant discourses are opened up to new spaces for activism and conversation.

For as Olive Senior states, in the archipelagic cadence of her poem “Meditation on Yellow,” despite the repeating cycles of colonialism, tourism and inequalities in the Caribbean, resistant voices cannot be permanently silenced:

you cannot tear my song  
from my throat

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<sup>27</sup> Kamau Brathwaite, *ConVERsations with Nathaniel Mackey* (New York: We Press, 1999).

<sup>28</sup> Further information about JET activities can be found at { HYPERLINK "<http://www.jamentrust.org/>" } (Last accessed: 29/06/2018).

you cannot erase the memory  
of my story

you cannot catch  
my rhythm.<sup>29</sup>

### **Acknowledgements**

This research was made possible through generous funding provided by the Leverhulme Trust as part of the Caribbean In/Securities: Creativity and Negotiation in the Caribbean (CARISCC) research network. Funding was also provided by the Geography programme and the School of Social Sciences, University of Dundee. Many thanks to Pat Noxolo, CARISCC co-partners, friends and event participants, who have all provided invaluable inspiration, feedback and support. Thanks also go to Phoebe, Gabriela, Santiago, Craig and Vari, for their ongoing invaluable support.

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<sup>29</sup> Olive Senior, *Gardening in the Tropics*, 17 (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2005).