Feb 13th, 9:30 AM - 10:35 AM

Caribbean Commodity: The Marketing and Consumption of Black Bahamian Female Identity

Dellareese Higgs

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/africana_studies_conf

Part of the African Languages and Societies Commons

https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/africana_studies_conf/2015/001/1

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Events at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Africana Studies Student Research Conference by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@BGSU.
With the advent and development of tourism throughout the Bahamas, whiteness has become the protracted mode for which Bahamian progression is assessed (Johnson 1994, 19). The minority white elite in the Bahamas benefit financially from the tourist industry, building an economy and a country where rich wealthy whites can be served by the majority of the black populace: hence, the development of a ‘white tourist culture’. The Bahamian government and managers in the Ministry of Tourism construct and present Bahamians to the world as perennially willing, hardworking people, “warm and genial Bahamians” (Saunders 1994, 9) who are indeed ready and willing to serve. Picard (1996) has called this development a “touristic culture,” or becoming “touristified servants” through the process of tourism production (86). To support the perception of a constructed “white tourist culture,” I turn to Caribbean historian Dereck Walcott. On accepting the 1992 Nobel Prize in Literature, Walcott expressed his outrage at the process of tourist development in the Caribbean, a region that in his words is in danger of being reduced to sun, sand, sex, smiles and servility by multinational capitalism and with the eager cooperation of its own local and economic elites. He writes:

repletion of the same images of service that cannot distinguish one island from the other, with a future of polluted marinas, land deals negotiated by ministers, and all of this conducted to the music of Happy Hour and the [proverbial] smile. What is this earthly paradise for our visitors? Two weeks without rain and a mahogany tan and, at sunset, local troubadours in straw hats and floral shirts beating “Yellow Bird” and “Banana Boat Song” to death (cited in Strachan 2002).

For Walcott, folk culture has become a marketable commodity, readily and monotonously packaged. The Caribbean has merely replaced one form of slavery and exploitation with another; only this time it’s the region’s nations that encourage its people to promote and create the fantasy, the exotic, for the tourist who wants to experience the “so called nativeness” (Strachan, 16) that is packaged and sold as Caribbean or Bahamian culture. With this process, the people of the Caribbean must negotiate new identities for themselves while relating with foreign tourists. Cultural invention and perpetuation then becomes an integral part of Bahamian and Caribbean social history in the region’s quest to capitalize from mass tourism (18). The sun which had once been a coarsening threat to white skin (Pattullo 1996) has become the new icon, and the age of the sun, sand and sea have replaced, silver, gold, tobacco, cotton and sugar. The people of the Caribbean again struggle with claiming an identity, but through re-inventing themselves, they have become mere caricatures in the region’s attempts to parcel experiences of paradise.

In this essay, I explore the Bahamas’ connection to tourism, tracing and defining how it became the central aspect of the country’s economy, and how whiteness was re-deployed in this new era of tourism. I examine the impact of these phenomena on the identity constructions of the local culture, and articulate women’s placement in the effort to re-invent the Bahamas as the ultimate tourist destination. While the essay specifically documents the nature of tourism in the
Bahamas, it focuses primarily on the women within tourism’s many fronts of cultural change and marginalization. The social and economic contradictions I explore in this work constitute the present experiences of the women in the Straw Market, and all Bahamians working in the tourist trade. But the experience is not easily understood, nor easily defined. History provides a concrete means of understanding that the contradiction exists as a social process of “Othering” that has its roots in slavery and colonialism, and is expressed in the tourist trade today. Further, an examination of the history of the Bahamas and how it is marketed will help to understand how current patterns of tourism in the Bahamas emphasizes tourists’ comfort over Bahamians’ productive constructions of self. We begin this exploration with a short history of tourism in the Bahamas.

**History of Tourism: A Path to Modernization**

The institution of slavery for African captives was established in the Caribbean shortly after Columbus’ exploration brought him to the Bahamas in 1492. Although the islands lacked the natural resources important to the royal coffers of Spain, the Arawak Indians constituted a valuable labor source and, as such, were rapidly pressed into slavery throughout the Caribbean (Saunders 1994). Many died from exposure to European diseases and, by 1520, the Bahamas had been all but completely depopulated. However, the British settled the Bahamas in 1649, and by the late 1700s, the population of the Bahamas had grown. Slaves and free blacks made up the bulk of the population (Rommen, 1991, 12).

Poverty was endemic and life for the majority of the Bahamian people was harsh. Most of the people fished or farmed (or did both) for a living, but the soil to a large extent was unyielding, and so agricultural conditions were difficult. By the 1800s, salt was the principal staple of the Bahamas, and its production was supplemented by sponge fishing, both of which sustained the Bahamian economy for three-quarters of a century (Johnson Year, 1996, 98). In 1861, very soon after the U.S. Civil War began, U.S. President Lincoln ordered a blockade of the southern ports of the United States. Britain declared its neutrality and promised severe punishment to those British subjects who violated it. However, the southern states needed to trade their cotton for goods, including guns. Due to its strategic position and its proximity to ports in the south, Nassau, the capital of the Bahamas, became a trans-shipment area, where goods bound for Europe and Confederate ports were traded. For the Bahamas, blockade running increased trade significantly. The number of ships entering and leaving Nassau increased by over one hundred percent (Saunders 1993, 97). As Elijah Stark stated of those years fewer than three decades later:

> Everyone was wild with excitement during these years of the war. The shops were packed to the ceilings, the streets were crowded with bales, boxes and barrels. Fortunes were made in a few weeks or months. Money was spent and scattered in the most extravagant and lavish manner. The town actually swarmed with southern refugees, captains of crews of blockade runners. Every available space in or out-of-doors was occupied. Not since the days of the buccaneers and pirates had there been such times in the Bahamas (cited in Hughes and Saunders, 1994, 6).

It must be mentioned that it was Nassau, the capital, and not the Bahamas in general, that benefited. Only a few violators of the blockade were Bahamians. Those who profited most were outsiders, some white merchant class, which included Nassauvians, and British residents and land proprietors benefited locally. However, the vast majority of the population, who were mainly black and small number of poor whites, remained extremely poor (Hughes and Saunders 1994). No efforts were made to develop farming on a systematic basis, and most black
Bahamians, locked out of ownership of land because of inflated prices, were to suffer for many years to come. With the gradual decline in the traditional agricultural and sponge fishing industries, and the possibility of quick money, the colonial administrators and House of Assembly were encouraged to embrace the tourists industry. For the local elite, there was nothing more valuable in the Bahamas than the beautiful beaches, marvelously variegated seas, and a pleasant climate conducive to the promotion of international tourism. Therefore, during this time, fundamental changes took place in the Bahamas and throughout the Caribbean. Many former colonies were becoming independent, and sought to develop their own political, economic, and cultural patterns. During this process, the tourist industry became part of the landscape. By the early 1900s, all Caribbean territories were in the tourism business, as the politicians proclaimed it “the engine of growth”. Images of movement and acceleration, of power and prosperity had been touted to launch Caribbean peoples into “development” and “modernity,” away from the impoverished periphery of the world (Pattullo 1996, 5). However, it was during the U.S.’s interwar years (1919–1939), that a tremendous growth in tourist travel internationally occurred. By this time, the Bahamas had gained a reputation as a winter and health resort for “invalids” and others from the United States and Canada seeking a change and warmer climate (Saunders 1994, 65). The Bahamian government began actively to promote tourism. The Caribbean, a paradise in European imagination, had come full-circle “from Paradise to wasteland and back again” (Strachan 1995, 38). Accordingly, by the early twentieth century, the Caribbean, particularly the Bahamas, began to be transformed into playgrounds for the itinerant Europeans and Americans in search of “health and enjoyment” and the once tropical plantations, thought to be unfit for whites, “were being touted as veritable gardens of Eden” (36). Infrastructure, including communication and hotel accommodations, was improved, and the Bahamas was well on the “path to modernization”.

“*It’s Better in the Bahamas*”: Creating Paradise

Figure 1: Performing Tourism

With the development of tourism, like most of the Caribbean, the islands of the Bahamas had to create a brand that would sell the islands and attract tourists’ dollars. Thus, the Bahamas was packaged as a place where white tourists can luxuriate on the many beaches while black Bahamians cater to their every need packaged for the consumption of visiting tourists. Walcott (1974, 9) links this packaged creation of paradise to an extension of the colonial plantation. In fact, the legacy of slavery and colonialism underpins much of contemporary culture and the expression of it pervades many aspects of tourism. Consequently, because of this ‘branding’ and packaging of the Bahamas for tourist consumption, a culture of servitude was created, where women are used to mimic whatever brand of tourism is popular at the time. Hence, the economy of the Bahamas is scripted upon the many bodies of the women who work in the tourism industry and endure the sweltering heat of markets built for the sale of souvenirs. Consequently, these markets, “straw market” as it is called in the Bahamas, highlights the economic conditions of workers in the Bahamian tourism industry: they embody a new version of indentured servitude. We argue that this constructed packaged branding creates fluid identities, which are determined as a result of black Bahamian peoples’ interactions and encounters with tourists and that, as such, tourism produces, rather than reduces, difference: a production that helps to create, sustain, and reinvent racialized tropes of marginalized people.
To illustrate, we use as cite of evaluation, Port Lucaya, in Freeport Bahamas, a
tourist port where people from all over the world dock their boats for a period of time, and enjoy
the wharves and hotels of the island. The locals do not live in this area; they only come to Port
Lucaya to work, operating local Bahamian eateries, bars, clothing, crafts and souvenir stores and
other businesses. Port Lucaya is designed to house and entertain tourists. However, here is
where the locals transform themselves into salespeople to attract tourists’ money. Many of the
women working in the market make themselves into the Bahamian Tourism Board’s idea of
Bahamian culture. Specifically, they adopt behaviors that appeal to the tourists. Abram and
Waldren (1997) explain this behavior in *Identity with People and Places*, where the
commodification of tourist culture is played out by “locals” roles of perpetuating and buying into
constructed misconceptions of culture. Comparatively, as Jane Desmond (1999) notes, “public
display of bodies and their materiality, (how bodies look, what they do, where they do it, who
watches, and under what conditions), are profoundly important in structuring identity categories
and notions of subjectivity… when commodified, these displays form the basis of hugely
profitable industries” (xiii). In the case of the Bahamas, faced with tourists’ demands for
“authentic culture,” the Bahamian government responded by constructing a pastoral identity of
people living in areas largely untouched by modernity and change, where both hosts and guests
conspire together in the production of authentic Bahamian cultural identities. These identities are
staged daily, as most tourists visit the Bahamas to experience “difference,” physical differences
like race, language, song and dance.

As part of displaying what is hawked as “authentic Bahamian culture,” Port Lucaya stages
a cultural show where women dress in “traditional” brightly-created Caribbean outfits, and sing
and dance for the tourists. The entertainment at Port Lucaya’s Count Basie Square includes
frequent visits from Calypso groups, solo artists and steel bands, not to mention local floor
shows with limbo dancers and fire-eaters. These live performances authenticate these packaged
differences and allow tourists contact with them (Desmond 1999, xii). Thus, these shows and
performances become the real Bahamian culture, and result in large profits for the creators and
benefactors of tourism in the Bahamas. These performances of culture through song and dance
are then etched on the minds of the consuming tourist, who then expects all of the locals to be
performers. As a poster in *Dominica* in the early 1980s put it: “Smile. You are a walking
tourist attraction” (cited in Patullo 1996, 62). That such forms of entertainment are purported to
represent indigenous culture is stereotypical in itself. However, generalizations that lead to
stereotyping become even more explicit when supposed national characteristics are linked to
entertainment (Dann 1996, 74). As we will delve into more fluently in the following section of
our exploration of the women of the straw market, tourists, on a daily basis, come to expect
the women in the straw market to perform this packaged, constructed culture. The people of the
Bahamas must stage their “identities,” and must force themselves to “smile” on a daily basis.
This performance is not simply an assumption of identity, but a violently psychological, and
contradictory, script to band, and mold identity.

**Caribbean Treasure: The Construction of the Bahamian Market Woman**

As we have discussed, tourism in the Bahamas represents a crucial element of the dynamics
of change, particularly in that it affects social structures, institutions, and women’s placement in
the political and economic configurations of the country. Tourism had introduced to the islands
of the Bahamas not only the possibility of new sources of income, but also new ways of looking
at the world, different values and modes of behavior. As a world discovered by colonial
entrepreneurs, packaged and then marketed to the wealthy, the curious and the seekers of
difference, tourism displays explicitly the process of marking difference. Cohen (1972) contends
that “modern man is interested in things, sights, customs and cultures different from his own,
precisely because they are different (165). Cohen continues by arguing that novelty and
strangeness constitute essential elements in tourists’ experience, and as such were primary
motives for promoting tourism (166). Marketing tourism and difference is but one strand of
contemporary colonial societies, a society dominated by historical, social, economic and cultural
relationships which favor particular groups and particular perspectives. At the same time, it is a
product of those very relationships—the essence of consensual marketing. People and places
thus become constructed through limited and circumscribed representations to appeal to
particular groups as in the case of Port Lucaya, where tourists come to be entertained. This
process of representation for tourist consumption thus constructs and presents one culture for the
consumption of another (38), essentially creating a false image from a fallacious mold.

To this end, the creation of the straw market helped to craft the image of the black Bahamian “market woman,” and force women to assume roles that keep them at the bottom of
the economic and social strata. As tourism developed in the Bahamas, the need for Bahamian
souvenirs was in demand, and who better to sit outside shanty huts made of plywood and straw
to sell these artifacts than black Bahamian women? In her essay, Report from the Bahamas, June
Jordan’s observations of class consciousness and the position of black Bahamians in the
economic and political structures of the Bahamas are evidenced in her experiences with black Bahamian workers at the straw market. Jordan notes,

Figure 2: Local Straw Vendor

… It matters not that these women do not live in these windowless dens that lack bathrooms, no
matter that these other black women incessantly weave words and flowers into the straw hats and
bags piled beside them on the burning dusty street. No matter that these other black women must
work their sense of beauty into these things that we will take away as cheaply as we dare, or they
will do without food. Positioning black women outside them with their crafts perpetuates the
image of the Bahamas as a place that has not only sun and sand, but also offers glimpses of the
‘native[s]’ in their natural surroundings (116).

The straw market, then, has been constructed to fit tourists’ expectations; the women in the straw
market have become the so-called “authentic” Bahamian experience as a way to fulfill tourists’
need to experience visual and cultural differences. This reality makes one fact clear: the vestiges
of colonialism remain, and are played out in a neocolonial context as women’s bodies continue
to serve as sites of oppression. As Hill-Collins (2000) contends, “These … images are designed
to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal,
and inevitable parts of everyday life” (69).

Remarkably, today, tourists who enter the airport and seaports in Freeport or
Nassau are greeted by this portrait of the happy native woman, ready, willing and able to serve
them. She is always dressed in colorful “indigenous” wear depicting sun, sea and sand; she
holds baskets filled with hand-made dolls and fruits. Both this woman and the wares she
distributes are intended to remind visitors that they are in an island paradise, one that is marketed
to fit tourists’ expectations. Black feminist theorist, Carole Boyce-Davis (1994), who grew up
on the island of Trinidad, refers to the so-called “market woman” as “Tourist Annie” (107). One
of the few scholars to explore the lives of Caribbean women, Boyce-Davis’ focuses on migrating
narratives. In her scholarship, she addresses black women’s objectification in oppressive
Caribbean societies.
Visions of Tourist Annie of my childhood surface and I remember now how she costumed herself exaggeratedly in stereotypical Caribbean folk dress, with big colorful skirts, bright make-up, large earrings and several necklaces, shack-shacks, baskets with fruit and dolls which she sold to tourists as she welcomed them to the Caribbean. Hers was an elaborate mask, a performance which allowed mostly white tourists to photograph themselves with her in the Caribbean, to see her dance for them. Her costume based both on Afro-Caribbean historical dress and tourists’ constructions subsequently became part of what is often exported with Caribbean dance (24).

Boyce-Davis’ “Tourist Annie” illustrates how the marketing of images become established as part of one’s culture, specifically to the extent that Tourist Annie’s existence on the tarmac of Bahamian airports shows that she plays such a relevant role in contemporary Bahamian tourist culture. Similar connotations exist for the women in the straw market. The modern Bahamian brochure favorite, the straw market vendor:

Figure 3: Tourists views products, while straw vendor looks on

always she sits on her chair, smiling broadly, her wares hanging around her or at her feet … this heavyset market woman presents herself in all her matronly glory. Many of the market women depicted in the earliest illustration and photographs [marketing the Bahamas as ultimate tourist destination], were not smiling visions of contentment. But by the time the modern brochure comes along, such license is revoked, and the vendor must put forth the proper face for the camera (cited in Strachan 2002, 108).

Such images allow for black Bahamian women to be cast in the role of matronly servant and it also serves a symbolic function in maintaining oppression of gender. In the Bahamas, women in positions of service, such as maids, or the women working as vendors in the market, are viewed as substandard citizens, and their jobs are considered unskilled and socially inferior. Moreover, the working conditions in the markets are hard: the hours are irregular, there is a seasonal overload, overtime is more compulsory and workers are at the mercy of the guest. Working in the tourism industry, in particular, the Bahamian woman is rendered by the straw market as being socially and economically inferior in her own country. Because of the calculated construction of the so-called “market woman” created through visual media that market the Bahamas, the straw vendors in the market have become a staple of the tourist brochure, the type of advertising media which has become the yardstick by which some women in the Bahamas are measured. This social location reinforces feelings of inferiority in locals and superiority in tourist. In the following section, I provide an example to illustrate this point.

Tourist-Imposed Images of Black Bahamian Womanhood

In the process of marketing the Bahamas as the ultimate tourist destination “paradise,” mediated images of a privileged white body appear to be the strategic focus for marketing the Bahamas to wealthy North American tourists. In fact, the many postcards and brochures produced by Bahamian Tourism show white couples and white women engaged in leisure, relaxation, and romance, implying that whites can enjoy these possibilities. Many of these postcards also contain images of white couples in wedding attire, white women in hammocks, white women walking along the beach, and white men playing golf.
One postcard advertises the Bahamas as “a great place to say ‘yes,’” and pictured above the caption is a white man in a tuxedo as he carries his bride: a white woman in a white wedding gown. One of the most popular postcards frequently found in stores throughout the Bahamas contains an image of a completely nude (with the exception of a straw hat on her head) dark-skinned black Bahamian woman with her arms covering her breast, and her legs crossed in a way that covers her vaginal area. She is positioned to draw the viewer’s attention to her vaginal area: the way her legs are crossed leaves a gap of darkness so that it appears that her legs are opened. Above her head, the caption reads, “It’s better in…” and below, where she sits, continues, “The Bahamas.” This card invites public access to her private parts. Implied in “It’s better” is the possibility of sex. Such language, coupled with the image, the hyper-sexualization of her nude body, becomes an invitation for sexual use of her body at will—because, after all, she can do it better.

Comparing these images offers valuable insight into the logic of tourism-generated images: the Bahamas is both a travelers’ paradisiacal getaway, where the white woman is seen walking leisurely with her romantic partner or reading a book while reclining on a hammock; the black Bahamian woman is naked, waiting to be used physically, just like investors and white capitalists use Bahamian land to gain wealth. It has been suggested that the relentless celebration of sexual imagery—here, the phallic imagery is suggestive—is in part a playful response to white stereotypes in that primitive black female wantonness signifies on the erotic tropes of racial imagination (Alexander 2000). However, the stark contrast in these images (as well as their consumption) embodies the same historical connotations colonialism ascribes to: images of black women are used for sex tourism, while images of white women symbolize a wholesome, pure vacation—marriage, romance and love.

It seems like a contradiction, then, when the Bahamas, a predominantly black nation with women of many hues, chooses to use white women in their ads to promote tourism. The logic of capitalism and tourism, however, rationalizes the contradiction: white female bodies are pampered while black female bodies are regulated to working status, sexual or domestic. Although the government and members of Parliament are primarily black, the racism and sexism which accompanied colonial rule clearly lingers still, as the government’s tourism advertising strategy shows. Fanon writes, “Colonialism is the business of adventurers and politicians” (Fanon 91). He further states, “There is a fact, black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect. How do we extricate ourselves?” (Fanon 11). Is the predominantly black government still, after thirty years of independence, using such tourism-driven images to prove that it is equal to its former colonizers? If so, what is the cost of this strategy for black Bahamian women?

Implicitly, this exploration marketing tourism suggests that black Bahamian women bodies are canvases on which the exotic proletariat is inscribed and expected to be performed. As Johnson (2005) explains:

Since the emergence of race as a social construct, black bodies have become surfaces of racial representation. To say it bluntly, race is about bodies that have been assigned social meanings … The body was legibly encoded and scripted as an object of secularity
and, consequently, became its own discursively-bound identity politic. This politic is embedded in white supremacist ideology and black corporeal inscription (38). This implication that black bodies are amoral and their roles scripted throughout history also legitimates an unspoken assumption about the virtues that come with white bodies. As used in the Bahamian tourism industry, this construction of black Bahamian women’s bodies as cultural tourist attraction furthers the exploitation of black Bahamian women. Their “blackness” and their bodies become a part of the commodity in which they must market.

Politics of Inferiority: Stories from the Market

Working in the straw market has provided me the opportunity to serve the many tourists that came daily to my sisters store. Before working there, I had not anticipate the psychological impact of being an exoticized vendor. The many feelings, doubts and resentments inherent from being a decedent of colonialism welled unexpectedly to the surface as tourists’ eyes pierced and penetrated with superiority my black skin. I knew that they knew that I needed them, and whatever amount of money they decided to spend in my sister’s store that day. And that need in itself made feelings of inferiority to re-surface, feelings I had not experienced for since I was a girl. As I smiled and made small talk with the tourists’, I hated myself for needing their money. I hated the way they looked at me, the way they belittled me with their eyes. I hated the way some of them did not even speak to me when I greeted them; always with a smile. That smile my sister made me practice; that smile that I saw on my grandmothe’rs face and from the many women who worked in the straw market for far too long—that smile that said, “I am here to serve you”. But I hated my country and my government even more for creating this single crop economy where my survival depended upon tourists dollars. I had to sit and let them look at me, look at me with eyes that made my black body occupying this small island country seem invisible. I also wondered what these people saw when they look at me, why was I so curious to them? As bell hooks notes in her analysis of “whiteness in the black imagination”:

Sharing the fascination with difference that white people have collectively expressed openly (and at times vulgarly) as they have traveled around the world in pursuit of the Other and Otherness, black people, especially those living during the historical period of racial apartheid and legal segregation, have similarly maintained steadfast and ongoing curiosity about the “ghosts,” “the barbarians,” these strange apparitions they were forced to serve(165)

Hooks observations here echoes my feelings of becoming the “Other,” as whites in the market made me feel the inferiority of my black body apparent through their gaze. For hooks, this gaze has been a part black civilization and the black imagination in the West since slavery and later colonization. For me in the straw market, this brought hooks’ analysis full circle, as I grapple with the question of they (tourists) made sense of me, and how would I make sense of them. It also made me think of the meaning of woman hood and the placement of my black female body within the embodied ideology.

Moreover, “The cult of true womanhood” constructed women to be virtuous, pious, submissive, and pure. As I sat in the heat of the market and looked around at the women, thinking about me task of writing and trying to interpret these women’s lives and their material conditions, I began to think about women in Caribbean societies, and the meaning of “true womanhood”. I realized that neither I, nor the other women working in the straw market, fit into this mold or category. Bahamian womanhood, however, was constructed in binary opposition to
“true womanhood” because of slavery and colonialization. And in contemporary Bahamas, with their rise of mass tourism, capitalism, and cultural imperialism, and the fact that the Bahamas government has marketed and packaged the exotic Bahamian woman as part of paradise waiting to be tamed, I realized that my black body was constructed and packaged as inferior. And when they—outsiders—look at me, most see me through tourism and I experience my inferiority. In a similar fashion, these feeling of inferiority and invisibility were felt by other women working in the market. One interviewee, Mrs. William, stated, “these people (tourists) don’t see nobody, especially sitting out here in the Straw Market, it just like you invisible, see how they walk pass not even looking at you. That’s because they don’t want you ask them a but anything, so they pretend like you aren’t even there, like you invisible”.

Paradise Lost: Connecting Performance and Touristic Images

In this exploration, I found that theorizing racialized identities as a performance offers several benefits. First, it facilitates the recognition that, as women of color from predominantly black Caribbean countries which depend on the tourist industry for actual survival, black Bahamian women have been performing these inscribed racial and ethnic identities almost all of their lives. Second, it reveals the particular ways black women in the Bahamas are forced to perform these constructed identities to meet the requirements of a racist tourist culture—and in doing so, points to the way that white tourist culture shapes the most intimate parts of their identities as these women struggle to make a living. As Stuart Hall (1997, 23) suggests, identities are inextricably linked to and shaped by both contemporary social positioning and self-constructed narratives. Positions and counter-positions are named and arranged as individuals negotiate their identities while in interaction with others. Hall concludes that self-definitions are complicated by cultural registers and social coordinates, which over time become concretized and situated between the center and the periphery. For these women, performing and positioning their identities within the realm of the gaze of white tourism renders their black bodies mere puppets in the tourist show, a show where their subjectivity is questioned, and cultural objectivity solidified. Put another way, they played out exactly Hall’s assertion that “we may know or suspect that they [identities] are representations constructed by others, but nonetheless we invest in the particular position, recognize ourselves in it, and identify with it” (98).

The significance of Stuart’s analysis is central to this paper: only in critique of identity constructions can any black, colonized person understand the instruments of her own oppression, as it has been manufactured from the beginning of colonialism until today. Connecting the history of colonialism to tourism, then, understanding the ways in which the colonized mind ignores, assimilates to and rejects the legacies of the colonial mentality, and an exploration of how women in the straw market cope with the everyday realities of the tourist economy create the stage by which a usable identity for these women, in their own regional diversities, may be constructed. It is reasonable to conclude then, that, at the very least, playing out the role of tourist-servitor clashes with identity constructions that eschew the logic of tourism. The Bahamian government’s recycled version of paradise thus helps to create and sustain the disparity between whiteness and blackness, wealthy and impoverished. The history of this marketed material, then, plays a large part in determination of roles and expected roles of these women working in the straw markets of the Bahamas. This process, in the end, inadvertently
enables racial discrimination to construct and determine their social, political, and economic self-worth, thus sustaining the old hierarchical societal mode of the plantation system out of which tourism was spawned.

Finally, tourism is a medium that spreads awareness of the Bahamas throughout the world and brings people to the islands. It might seem that tourism creates a palette for Bahamians to display their culture to visitors who could then take home a true knowledge of Bahamian culture. However, this optimistic view is not a reality. The reality is that Bahamian tourism generates a false Bahamian culture through perpetuation of idealistic images constructed through tourism marketing. Marketing the Bahamas through visual media in this sense can be viewed as a means of constructing cultural identity in the Bahamas, which leads to domination of the ideology of the elite class who benefit from tourism in the Bahamas.

Accordingly, as Ian Strachan states, “Tourism requires an almost completely black work force to serve a wealthier, healthier, mostly white clientele, which arrives with notions of their own superiority and many unrealistic, preconceived ideas of the experience they will be getting for their money and ingrained ideas of how ‘natives’ ought to behave towards them”(2000, 9). These advertisements marketing the Bahamas and the Bahamian people as serving mostly white tourists’, suggest a link back to slavery, indicating that white people can come to the Bahamas, relax and enjoy the sand and sea while black Bahamians are at their service. Once these advertisements are created, the government must make sure that tourists receive the paradisiacal vacation. Unfortunately, the goal of tourism media is to promote the Bahamas as a product, not as a country (10). Such use of images by Bahamas Tourism Board traps the Bahamian people, especially women, into stereotypes of being objects that are vulnerable to consumption. It also symbolizes that the bodies of the tourists’ visiting the Bahamas will be taken care of, while black Bahamian bodies are regulated to a working status, albeit sexual work or domestic. Morgan and Pritchard (1998) further clarify this point:

Tourism image (as constructed by … tourism marketers) reveals as much about the specific tourism product or country it promotes. The images projected in brochures, billboards and television reveal the relationships between countries, between genders and between races and cultures. They are powerful images which reinforce particular ways of seeing the world and can restrict and channel people, countries, genders and sexes into certain mind-sets (6).

The greatest injustice that springs from the transmission of a false cultural identity is the depiction of Bahamian women as inferior “natives” that lie in tourist propaganda. The images of the attractive white body, flaunted in the face of the black Bahamian woman by the Ministry of Tourism, indirectly create an inferiority complex for the majority black woman, a complex that hinders the Bahamian woman’s quest for a valued identity. Today, of course, the search for a usable identity is a universal theme found in the hearts and minds of all Caribbean people. However, women of the Bahamas are faced with negotiating the multiple, interlocking discriminations of race, class and gender. Coupled with the negative images produced in the name of tourism, it is difficult to find and accept an identity which fosters pride. The attributes of the black Bahamian woman—kinky hair, broad nose, thick lips and dark skin—are now considered ugly. To echo Nettleford’s deliberations, under colonial rule, the black woman was put in a position of inferiority. Now, in an independent country, the subordinate role of the black woman is still being reproduced daily in the pursuit of the tourists’ dollars. The images of the
role, the assumption of the role and the role itself continue to degrade black Bahamian women, and impede the creation of a usable identity beyond the logic of tourism.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Figure 1: Performing Tourism
Appendix 2