

# Trading in Nostalgia: Tourist Habitus and Tourism Governmentality at the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve

Kyeann Sayer

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*This article describes the author's post-subcultural, post-tourist experience in Southern Mexico. It explores the negotiation of a guilty, elite habitus in motion with the discursive notion of tourism as an effect of governmentality. Nostalgia for anticapitalist and environmental activist certainty emerges as a reaction to the "Other" on a tour of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. The panoptic gaze and interstitial habitus become nostalgia's partial antidote.*

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On New Year's Eve, we drifted down a canal in the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, a World Heritage Site near Tulum, Mexico, in the part of southern Mexico known, by its newly coined name, as the "Mayan Riviera"—my brother, his girlfriend, my mother, and I. Our guide, Miguel, offered a variety of techniques for using our life jackets as flotation devices. The fresh water never became deeper than five feet and its clarity allowed a full view of the light brown floor. If we kept floating this way, the gentle current would eventually have pulled us into the large estuary and then out to the Caribbean.

Other forces pull at me, floating. I am a vacillating tourist, embodying a series of effects. Habitus rooted in North American preferences for cosmopolitan vacations in economically disadvantaged nations, identity politics of (white) environmentalism, emerging from decades of global and economic shifts, leading me to reject this habitus. According to Castañeda (2001), I am the effect of tourist governmentality, of decades-old flows of Mexican and international capital producing tourist infrastructure. Discourses locate me within discourses, within ever-shifting matrices of power.

Embedded in vacillation as much as I feel the water, feel my abs stinging from my position in the life vest, catch sight of a flitting mangrove warbler, smell the biodegradable sun screen on my shoulder, hear Miguel pointing out the bougainvilleas and orchids, I wonder at the current's logic of carrying me ahead of the tiny Canadian girl. For years I had resisted joining my family on this trip, and now I mingled with all of the people and places my absence was supposed to protect. How does the guilty traveler, the post-tourist (Feifer 1985) reconcile this embodied effect with the perpetuation of historic injustice and environmental degradation?

John Urry says that his "notion of the tourist gaze is not meant to account for the individual motivations for travel" (2005:145). Here we will start at the subjective level. I use theory interactively: at times my perceptions are based on it and in other cases it explains them.

## **Holiday habitus explained**

We are situated as tourists of a particular variety with particular desires and particular requirements for distinction. According to Urry's (2005) use of

Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, distinctions based on taste result from one's habitus:

Each social class possesses a habitus, the system of classification which operates below the level of individual consciousness and tastes and distastes [...]. The cultural realm has its own logic, currency and rate of convertibility into economic capital. (2005:79)

The position in which one is socialized, then, to a large degree determines taste. Urry identifies the postmodern changeability of class, relating it to economic shifts redefining British social structure. Though in the U.S. we don't use the same strict language to describe the minute variations of class, my family's positioning seems to fit into Urry's discussion of the middle-class postmodern malleability of habitus resulting from media exposure to varying lifestyles (2005:82). As more financial capital became available, we were able to fulfill the enjoyment of tastes piqued by that media exposure.

As a child, I spent vacations at either grandparents' farm or ranch. Often this meant leaving Colorado and driving up to 14 hours straight, pulling a horse trailer and stopping only to eat at fast food restaurants. These vacations were not movement for the sake of movement: we might have been hauling a horse for an economic purpose, or participating in seasonal rituals, like branding cattle. We traveled to Disneyland when it coincided with one of our horses running a race in Southern California and took a trip to Hawaii off the winnings of a different horse. When I was 13, my grandparents helped to finance a 12-day bus tour of France sponsored by a junior high school French teacher. When my brother and I simultaneously graduated from college and high school, respectively, the two of us went on a backpacking trip through Europe with our mother; I'm not sure how she financed it on her \$22,000 single-mother recession-era salary. No one we knew in our community had done this; the interest resulted in part from my brother's exposure to different people and possibilities at college.

My family for the most part would be considered solidly middle class in terms of income, but deeply involved in a livestock livelihood subculture. We were part of the Colorado horse world elite for a while, but an oil-based world of quarter horses rather than thoroughbreds. Both of my parents had been in rodeo and survived for a while by showing horses. With our "redneck" roots we were worlds away from elite families in Cherry Creek or Boulder, but definitely held higher status than the Mexican migrants workers who worked as grooms or in the surrounding fields.

My mother made education and the acquisition of cultural capital a top priority, taking us to museums, plays and art-house movies. Because we weren't evangelical Christians like most of the rest of our community, we shared a sense of alienation and difference that opened up the possibility of potential lives elsewhere. The imagined lifescapes so far away from horse manure and cowboy boots and fed by fashion magazines, catalogs, television and film seemed infinite and attainable.

After graduation my brother would leave the Colorado life behind. His experience with horses turned into an interest in polo. He landed a job at an investment firm on Wall Street after putting himself through the University of Colorado. Soon he spent weekends in the Hamptons. After "paying his dues" on Wall Street, he landed a secure job at a leveraged buyout firm that paid more in one year than I will make in 20, and eventually would become CFO.

Around the same time, my mother's rancher father died and left her a substantial sum. He had built a ranching operation from nothing with a fourth-grade education, embodying the "American," masculine, "pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps" entrepreneurial spirit. Of course, he wouldn't have had the opportunities had he been an Other in his context: Chinese American, Black, or Native American. His uncanny intuition about the stock market and his miserliness allowed him to pass on wealth to his children. It was around this time that my mother's openness to investment property and my brother's expertise and need for rest exposed them to Tulum. It would be five years before I joined them.

The effect of our cumulative positioning on the brink of a meritocratic/intellectual/upper-class divide and the desire to be a part of my family's joys and pleasures resulted in my belated decision to fly to Cancun and drive south to Tulum. Before arriving, I primarily imagined the area through the expectant lens of postcolonial-tinged exploitation and degradation. I had no visual sense of it beyond what my brother and mother had recounted—that, and an internet image of the perfect sandy beach bordering our eco-hotel. My mother had been introduced to the area through a friend from a New Age group and the two of them planned to build a time-share house a few kilometers up the coast. My brother, an investor in the property and an expert on all things financial, joined my mother a few times. For her, the Yucatan represented a beautiful, spiritually charged retreat. For my brother the area provided a quiet, low-key, cosmopolitan place to recover from a nonstop commitment to his work.

The trip fits best into the Urry's taste category of the "intellectual class" (2005:81), with its emphasis on simplicity and lack of ostentation and its motivation by a romantic quest for pleasure. We expected to have fun, relax and consume off-the-beaten-path novelty (2005:82). For me this meant ambivalently stepping into elite, fantasy gazes and sensations I had once craved.

### Hotel habitus exposed

After guarding for years against fascination with the exotic, bound with colonial implications, I became very observant of my sense of wonder at our tiny hotel off of bumpy Boca Paila road. I remembered the first time I unearthed a bit of the curiosity that paralleled conquest: reading *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* (Weschler 1995) and its descriptions of how everyday Europeans had been so fascinated by reports of difference, by a world of plants, animals and people outside previous imagination. Reflecting on it made me feel as though enjoying the newness wouldn't necessarily equal dominating it.

Novelty surrounded me: lizards skittered across my path back to our room, a deep purple Portugese man-of-war washed up on the sand, and pelicans dove

for their breakfast. My favorite new foods became *salbutés* (corn cakes topped with chicken, vegetables and tangy sauce) and *chaya*, a spinach-like vegetable used in empanadas and soups. Then there was the general Technicolor brilliance of sea, sky and vegetation. Our small, solar-powered hotel sat against the most spectacular and sparsely populated beach I had ever seen. I kept reminding myself how lucky I was to have the opportunity to take it all in.

I wondered if I found the beach so beautiful because I've been conditioned to equate this foreign-tropical landscape with relaxation. I imagined myself in the position of seeing explorers arriving for the first time or a hurricane on the horizon. Could I now interpret this surf under cloudless sky not as soothing but as imposing or jarring? No. While recognizing it as a constructed antidote to my world of schedules, deadlines and work, I loved it, and the opportunities to relax, read and listen to it.

My habitus floated into view. The hotel fit perfectly with its hiddenness down the formidable Boca Paila road and its understated cachet. It sometimes hosts Susan Sarandon and Tim Robbins, Jessica Lange and Sam Shepard, or Julie Taymor, director of *Frida*. All of them are building houses in the Biosphere Reserve, and our European proprietress, Genevieve, casually released intimate stories about them as she flitted from table to table.

This association with left-leaning creative intelligentsia created an aura that appealed to a part of me. The current guests made up a cosmopolitan but mostly white and/or European crowd of UN Workers, film makers, fashion designers, and psychoanalysts. Relative wealth was assumed because of the patrons' ability to pay up to \$400 per night for modest and secluded relaxation. Any ostentatious display, however, would have seemed garish.

Dinners became sangria- and tequila-infused feasts of conversation, usually boisterous and often intellectual. We variously discussed France's head scarf issue, the fascist impulses of Italian PM Berlusconi, Bush and the Iraq war, African development issues, tales of travel, and occasionally intimate family disclosures. As I drifted among the surprise of unexpected responses and delight at points well made, the surf occasionally carried me to thoughts of all that lay beneath the night sea. Breezes sporadically eased through the thick and salty air enclosed by turquoise, yellow and green dining room walls. I might lose myself for a moment in coconut sauce or chocolate torte and then rejoin the table in laughter.

Pleasure mixed with skepticism of my newfound love of cosmopolitanism. I passed relatively comfortably in this crowd, as though I had been born into such a context; transcending the "Ugly American" stereotype accentuated my enjoyment. Few would have guessed how hard my brother and I had worked to erase the provincial tinge of our roots. Any stories my mother might have told about ranch life would seem exotic now that we had clearly surpassed any of its binds.

Some of the elitist attitudes buttressing our arena of intellectual exchange further betrayed my enjoyment. Part of passing involves displaying a comfort with being served. My mother is not accustomed to being waited on, or to believing that a delightful day waits. She displays gratitude for every effort of the staff, every ounce of deliciousness or beauty. Her obsequiousness towards Genevieve

made me feel "outed" as new to all of this. She didn't behave as though she deserved to be there, as though all of offerings were par for the course. My brother and I at times compensated by becoming hyper-illustrative of our own mastery. Though I reveled in every ounce of sensory stimulation, I tried to perform nonchalantly.

Genevieve's colorful stories about the "help" particularly charmed Mom. Enthusiastically sharing her knowledge of the place, she retold Genevieve's renditions of the difficulties that Mayan cultural differences impose on running the hotel and restaurant. Apparently, Mayans' combination of pride and earnestness can mean a new employee not wanting to admit to never having seen a dishwasher before, and staring at it for hours rather than asking for help. The idea of minds not oriented to "modern" technology or service fascinates my mother, who accepts these stories at face value, believing she is receiving genuine insight into the Mayan mind. Since Mom attended a Cheyenne Indian Mission boarding school near the ranch from the age of five, she feels she absorbed her lack of materialism, rebellion against authority, and communication style from this socialization. These types of "native"—modern dichotomies of mind captivate her. Meanwhile, I found them horrifying and absurdly amusing. My strategy was not to reject the stories entirely but to inject destabilizing comments.

Genevieve's ethnocentric tales appeared partially as an effort to create an aura of *A Year in Provence*-style charm (Mayle 1991) and partially a means of extricating herself from potential customer dissatisfaction. Later I would hear her exasperated account of losing staff in the middle of the night to the vicissitudes of love ("That's Tulum", she shrugged), and losing income to the vicissitudes of local tax collectors. Untrained local Mayans and Mexican elites seemed equally beleaguering.

My vacillating habitus dislodged me. I confronted a simultaneous discomfort at this unflinching exoticizing and normalization of inequality, and the desire to acknowledge the pleasures of the surroundings and fitting in. Would contradicting Genevieve allow more justice into the situation? Would refusing to engage in interesting conversation while served by underpaid wait staff remedy the inequality? Would clearing the dishes myself not insult the staff? Once embedded, what is ethical behavior?

### **More habitus in my luggage: toward post-subcultural and post-touristic tastes**

There are not many experiences that my mother and brother insist on sharing, but the float through the Reserve held the status of must-do. My mother's enthusiasm seemed odd since she can't swim and has nearly drowned every time she's tried to negotiate anything larger than a bathtub. When I expressed a preference for more beach relaxation over a day tour, my brother raved about the floating experience. Discovering that the tour organization received support from the RARE Center expanded my enthusiasm. We had originally planned to go with the American-owned company, but chose this one because a young woman from Punta Allen came to us at breakfast and handed out flyers that in-

licated that locals ran and benefited from the operation. I had met the founder, Paul Butler, nearly ten years before at a conference for grassroots environmental activists in Utah. A Brit who had relocated to St. Lucia, he created the St. Lucian Parrot mascot, and subsequent campaigns to preserve the species and its habitat. He taught us how to use similar campaigns in our own U.S. communities.

That weekend among the activists at a comfortable forest resort created temporary social arrangements not unlike those at our Caribbean hotel. Instead of enjoying the sponsorship of my family, there Patagonia®<sup>1</sup> sponsored me. Unlike Tulum, I had little hope of passing in Utah. I believe I was the youngest attendee at the conference, sent because no one else in our organization could go, and compensated for my discomfort and lack of rank by standing in judgment of the dearth of activists of color and eco-feminism workshops. When we all met for meals between meetings, I spent much of my time observing the displays of status in terms of insider knowledge about defeats of corporate polluters, quips about strychnine-drenched strawberries at the salad bar, and braggadocio resulting from outsmarting “freddies,” or Forest Service employees, at logging sites. There the currency had been subcultural capital, identification against mainstream cultural excesses that disregarded environmental consequences.

Exemplifying the processes of subcultural division, Thornton (1996) draws on Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital to identify fields of British club cultures that establish relations of subordination through hierarchies of taste. These subcultural distinctions are objectified and embodied (through hair cuts, record collections, and being “in the know”), replacing class-based distinctions in the “classless” world of youth. Most importantly, the distinctions made by the club kids replace class distinctions. Alternate relations of subordination based on locally-defined classifications of taste replace class-based hierarchies.

Subcultural capital worked similarly in my activist context. As my identity became tied to environmentalist discourses, I learned to wear the right clothes, belong to the right organizations, and reject the right capitalist impositions. Soon I would learn about the hierarchy of gear: “trustafarians” (trust fund kids trying to be hippies) would wear new Northface®, whereas hardcore “lowbagger” types might display used Patagonia®. Worn-in Carhartt® work pants showed the proper concern for utility and evidence of activity, and garnered bonus points for their availability in hardware stores rather than malls. Achieving authenticity meant having the right equipment with the right patina. No one wanted to look like a “weekend environmentalist.”

While there may have been overlaps with the “intellectual class” emphasis on the “natural” (Urry 2005:86), and the consumption of independent publications like *The Nation* or *Harpers*, the subcultural rejection of the mainstream went beyond mere anxiety about environmental issues. There was a strong emphasis on individual responsibility that made nearly every lifestyle decision political.

As a result of exposure to a nexus of feminist, postcolonial and queer discourses in addition to environmental ones, at the time of the conference I saw myself as an elite, white, First-World polluter whose very existence perpetuated racism and exploitation of Third World peoples. “Culture,” to me, was some-

thing that had been imposed onto a “true self.” It was my job to chisel it off and resist further contamination. I remained constantly vigilant against engaging in sweatshop and environmentally destructive consumption, becoming deluded by mainstream media, and holding self- or other perceptions that would perpetuate racism, sexism or heterosexism.

I now see my former “anti-” orientation in the context of effect, of what Brown describes as the revelation of the state’s “companion powers” of capitalism and disciplinarity, especially as revealed during the rise of identity politics in the last 30 years. According to Brown, subjects were not affiliated with political life because of its distance from practices affecting their lives and because of economic and political shifts resulting in

detritorializing demographic flows; the disintegration from within and invasion from without of family and community as (relatively) autonomous sites of social production and identification; consumer capitalism’s marketing discourse in which individual (and sub-individual) desires are produced, commodified, and mobilized as identities; and disciplinary productions of a fantastic array of behavior-based identities ranging from recovering alcoholic professionals to unrepentant crack mothers. (1995:204-205)

The disciplinarity that produces this profusion of capitalist desires and behaviors also produces the array of distinctions that multiply in anti-capitalist identification. Brown argues that identity politics effectively replaces class-based identification. When capitalism-caused injuries to the body and psyche, such as “alienation, commodification, exploitation, displacement, disintegration of sustaining albeit contradictory social forms such as families and neighborhoods,” are depoliticized, then other markers bear disproportionate weight (1995:206-207). Though she does not mention environmentalism as an identity, the environmental identification I experienced, in most forms it has so far been known (excluding still marginal eco-feminism and environmental justice), could be considered a kind of white identity politics. Without other markers of difference, whites like me were in a position to seize upon unprotected and excluded habitats, species and bodies. Much of the subcultural disciplinarity dictated explicitly anti-capitalist tastes without creating class-based identification. Though articulated as anti-corporate, and environmental, on a day-to-day level, one identified against bourgeois excess as well as petty bourgeois striving and skewered anyone for ignorance of lifestyle-caused damage.

Over a period of years, I gradually lost the energy to live constantly in reaction, defining myself through negative identification. Judging the actions of polluters and consumers I encountered in daily life exhausted me, but that judgment was necessary for the maintenance of my identity. According to Brown (1995), identity politics emerging from the effects of capitalism and disciplinarity lead to a “slave morality.”

Insofar as what Nietzsche calls slave morality produces identity in reaction to power, insofar as identity rooted in this reaction achieves its moral superiority by reproaching power and action themselves as evil, identity structured by this ethos becomes deeply

invested in its own impotence, even while it seeks to assuage the pain of its powerlessness through its reproach of power as such. (1995:217)

Most of my perceived power had come from the ability to identify the effects of power and reject them. The flip side of reproach revealed guilt over the fact that I could pursue my ambitions with ease compared with many people in the U.S. and throughout the world because of my whiteness, education, and economic position. Also, at some point I had to acknowledge that the pleasures I had developed through imagining various lifescapes during my agrarian childhood on some level constituted me as much as the horse manure did. How long could I live a marginal, ascetic life?

Markell (2003) points out that when faced with ineluctable connections to history:

Neither disavowal nor guilt will do: both postures reassert the ideal of the sovereign agent, one by inventing a world in which the injustice does not exist; the other by pretending to have been its cause. Acknowledgment, here, means accepting these attachments, not in a spirit of resignation, but as one's points of departure in this world, which is the world where justice must be made, or avoided.

Though I like the idea of letting the discourses of disavowal and guilt lose sway to acceptance and the creation of justice, I don't yet know how to do this on an everyday, practical level.

The flexibility of identification is essential to offering oneself up to the most politically salient identification. It presents an appealing antidote to strong political identities that inhibit communication with people who identify differently. For me, however, the everyday life application becomes an experiment in discerning an appropriate line from a cacophony of discourses. When I find myself in a situation I wouldn't have entered before—like at our cosmopolitan hotel—at this point I know only to observe my reactions. I notice my pleasure, elitism and discomfort with exploitation and wonder if the most I can do is to perform my tourist identity badly at key moments. Can I insert some unexpected wrench in a discursive fissure? Will I know when I am performing badly, or do I just hope that justice-centered discourses will work through me to some potentially “better” end?

This distancing shares some characteristics with Feifer's post-tourist (1985). I am aware of having the capacity to enjoy myriad mediated gazes, aware that in the tourist game I can enjoy kitsch and a multitude of interpretations of each site, and consider “authenticity” a constructed notion. Though I don't seek a “real” Mayan, Mexican, or beach, I find myself still preoccupied with discourses of justice and equality. As a tourist it's as difficult to excise what Van den Berghe calls the “guilty liberal syndrome” (1994:121) as it is to deny other aspects of my constitution. What to do with this effect?

I had resolved none of this before taking the Biosphere Reserve tour.

### “Miguel the Authentic” and alterity

RARE has expanded considerably since my mid-90s conference, and now works in close partnership with UNESCO to foster sustainable development in and around the Reserve. Its reach beyond our current Caribbean locality, and its standards for environmental stewardship and community involvement, made me trust in the integrity of the experience we would enjoy. Perhaps the reassurance felt similar to the comfort another traveler might find in the measures of AAA or the ubiquity of Marriott. My perceptions had been shaped by my position in this global governmentality, amidst matrices of corporate funding, U.S. non-profit networking, UNESCO, the Mexican and Quintana Roo governments, and tourist economy.

Castañeda (2001) discusses such nexuses as they relate to the Maya's capacity for self-definition at Chichen Itza. He rejects the notion of a single tourist gaze and instead is interested in the discourses available at tourist sites.

Tourism, given that it is not a thing in itself but rather the historical result and effect of such collusion between state, para-governmental, and non-state institutions, is itself a mode of governmentality; i.e., tourism is a specific kind strategy within the analytically defined set or category of strategies called governmentality by Foucault. It is an “effective strategy” in two theoretical sense [sic]: one, it is itself an effect, not a pre-given entity, and is therefore not an agent, or actor, or subject-position that has agency per se in the mode of a field and style of interaction, i.e., a public sphere in which activities can be designated as touristic; two, it is effective, not in causally determining events/actions or as a subject having causal volition, but is instead a secondary force that effects the ordering, style, and experience of heterogeneous relationships, from consuming beverages, travelling [sic], taking a picture, to producing commodities and selling them. Tourism is an apparatus of manipulating alterity, that is, of differences and identities of self and other, in an expanded public sphere of cultural differences. [...] Processes of political and economic subordination certainly occur, but not by tourism; [...] tourism is instead yet another arena in which Maya can negotiate their skills, resources, and agency for economic prosperity within contexts that are not necessarily or wholly created by them. To gain or suffer economically from tourism has no necessary a priori bearing on the issue of the cultural processes of group identity formation. (2001)

Castañeda thus absolves us of the asymmetric power relations that Van den Berghe identifies as endemic to ethnic tourism (1994:126). Instead, we become immersed in the vast options for self-representation provided within the “scriptural economy” of “tourism governmentality”—that is, the ability to create meaning from discourses available at a particular tourist site.

The RARE web site provides discourses for use of the tourist. Its description of the Reserve articulates preservation of ancient Mayanness with the preservation of non-human species.

#### Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve

In the language of the Maya people, Sian Ka'an means “Where the sky is born.” Its deep blue waters are studded with mangroves, a variety of marine life, and part of the second largest coral barrier reef in the world. The reserve is also home to a range of wildlife from Giant Sperm Whales and Leatherback Turtles to flocks of Roseate Spoonbills and Jabiru Storks. Nearby communities, many of whose residents are de-

scendants of the ancient Maya, depend upon a healthy fishery to make a living: fishing and lobstering are the mainstays of the local economy. But as the metropolitan sprawl of Cancun expands its boundaries, development pressures increase on the protected area and its surroundings. RARE is currently training a corps of nature guides and ecotourism promoters based in the reserve, and creating a strong constituency for the environment through a Pride campaign.

This conservation-oriented text marries an emphasis on the Reserve's floral and faunal bounty with the "Maya People" and sets it up as a contrast to Cancun's mass tourism. The reserve not only harbors diverse species, but also supports the livelihood of descendants of the "Ancient Maya." The Cancun expansion encroaches on these species and this contemporary link to ancientness. RARE works with this modern-day, "authentic," ancient community to buffer the encroachment by fostering ecotourism and indigenous interest in the environment. The "Pride" campaigns are "social marketing" efforts aimed at making ecological issues relevant to local communities through entertaining training and education, including the creation of mascots, the very same campaign we learned about in Utah. I have been a student of RARE just like the locals.

The tour van picked us up from our hotel and we rode to the Muyil ruins, our launching point for the float. As the van bounced along cavernous Boca Paila road, we performed concerned, reflexive tourism by asking our guide Miguel questions about the company and himself. Our questions illustrated that we thought of him as an actual person, in his own context, rather than someone created only to serve our tourist needs. We were on a quest for an unknowable, "authentic" Miguel, an element that entered our eco-tourism experience, but this didn't stop me from partaking in the questioning, nor did I broach the topic with my family.

Miguel grew up in Punta Allen and began learning English two years ago from RARE volunteers. At various times, we commented on how amazing his English was. He works in the cooperative with four others and they take turns with various roles. He has had many jobs, primarily as a tailor, but now works construction in addition to tourism. The tour operation just started and they hadn't had many tours yet, but things seemed to be picking up. Miguel may have been around 30; I found him handsome, warm, and friendly. He flirted a bit with my brother's girlfriend, Angela, calling her "Angelina."

Once near Muyil, we rode with around ten others in two boats across a lagoon, applying biodegradable sunscreen and adjusting sunglasses and sun hats. When the rain began to fall, we put those away and collectively reached for our Gore-tex® jackets. It didn't surprise me that our tour boat crew dug out new-looking Eddie Bauer® and Northface® coverings. I didn't think to take pride in the worn coat my brother had bought me for Christmas almost a decade ago. I worried about the pollution caused by the boats but then reminded myself that few tourists would be interested in rowing themselves. The boat captains stopped the boats. Miguel told us about the tall, reed-like saw grass surrounding us and explained that Ancient Mayans, his relatives, had dug through it to create the canals we would float.

Miguel used many of the discursive resources provided by the web site. I wondered at the degrees of reflection about marketing the "authentic Mayan in preserved habitat." In the scriptural economy of this site, how was the discourse of authenticity being deployed? How much did it constitute Miguel's identity? How committed was I to this discourse and how committed did I want him to be? I watched him tell jokes about crocodiles eating us and looked for "true" moments behind the routine. Did I want some sort of authenticity beyond the affectation of authenticity? But wasn't the affectation also authentic? What was any more "real" than what we experienced in those moments?

By the time we have checked out the post-classic ruin, I am exhausted by these thoughts. The rain had long since abated. I eagerly jumped into the cool canal water and adopted the "lounge chair" life jacket position. I liked the sensation of floating and was glad that this particular position allowed for an effortless ab workout. When resting I saw the cloudy sky and the low-lying mangroves. Occasionally I heard a bird or someone would point out an animal or plant. I changed position.

Seeing Mangrove Warblers particularly pleased me. Biologist friends call them "LBBs," or "little brown birds," as though they don't matter. To me they were little, yellow and adorable so I was delighted to see one here or there. We also glimpsed occasional frigate birds, orchids, mangrove roots: all lovely and new and fascinating. For moments at a time, they became my only focus. Miguel pointed them out with such pride and seemed to delight in our joy at seeing them. I liked this joy and delight, and liked that I was not disgusted by the sandy floor or particularly scared of the supposedly non-hungry crocodiles likely bordering us.

The current was slow, steady and not at all even. Some people floated way ahead while others lagged without any seeming relationship to body type or floating style. I spent my time emptying my thoughts or negotiating around other tourists, a bit relieved to strike out on my own after days with the family.

I floated past a man from our boat who had balked when Miguel urged us to get in the water. He seemed generally uncomfortable and lacking in curiosity about Miguel or the Reserve.

"How is it?" I asked.

"It's an interesting experience," he hesitated, eyebrows raised, with a mildly sarcastic tone.

"We're definitely in nature."

Before I could even register my reaction, it had happened: I despised him. His response jarred me like the sudden presence of an oil tanker or an MTV Spring Break volleyball court cut into the saw grass. The "intellectual class" part of me looked down on him and his wife for their likely mass tourist mentality. I imagined them at a garish resort with brightly colored drinks named after Mayan deities and thought that he would rather be at one of the safe "ecoparks" we had passed on the way down to Tulum. These images held no post-tourist fun or irony, only disdain. The subcultural environmentalist in me loathed them for the life I imagined he and his wife led: gas-guzzling, gratuitous-air-

conditioning-using, big-box-store-shopping, USA Today-reading, McDonalds-frequenting. How did they find out about the tour? Why were they even here if they didn't like "nature"? Who were these people?

I, of course, did not invent this alterity. Lonely Planet illustrates it in its description of one of the Xcaret parks, Xel-Ha:

Once a precious spot open to all, Xcaret, about 10 Km south of Playa del Carmen, is now a heavily Disneyfied 'ecopark.' There are still Mayan ruins and a beautiful inlet on the site, but much of the rest has been created or altered using dynamite, jackhammers and other terraforming techniques. The park offers a cenote and an 'underground river' for swimming, a restaurant, an evening show of 'ancient Mayan ceremonies' worthy of Las Vegas, a butterfly pavilion, a botanical garden and nursery, orchid and mushroom farms and a wild-bird breeding area.

Package tourists from Cancun fill the place every day, happily paying the admission fee (children under five get in free), plus additional fees for many of the attractions and activities, such as swimming with captive dolphins.

The derisive undertone to this description highlights an antipathy towards commercialization, mass tourism, and the for-profit alteration of the landscape and animal habitat. The entry covers its bases by providing information to the would-be mass tourist, while simultaneously deadpanning disapproval. While both sites use the discourses of ecotourism and mystical Mayanness to lure visitors (or donations), the relative crowdedness and commercial nature of Xel-ha contrasts with the scant numbers who tour the canals simultaneously in the Reserve. The difference becomes one of scale.

After floating past the man and becoming aware of my thoughts, my tourist experience refocused on the source of my anxiety. I realized just how much our tourist interactions had to do with home. Miguel was not the central "other" in this situation; his kind of "authenticity" was not the real axis of my concern. This couple was.

Nostalgia washed over me for the certainty of my disciplined, activist past. I missed the moments of flagrantly and righteously judging people like this. It was so much easier to believe in the efficacy of certainty than to allow for the possibility of multiple truths, so much simpler to excuse the dehumanization of those with different affiliations. I was nostalgic for a time when identifications based on distinction seemed to repel rather than perpetuate alienation and injustice. Not knowing what to do with myself or with the man, I raised one of my legs and felt the warmth of the air against my wet skin.

Gazing back, I saw my mother grinning blissfully, my brother relaxed but instinctually attentive in case she became afraid. Later she would tell me she didn't know why the float pleased her so, but she guessed she felt safe in the water because of the gentle current and because it's *Mayan*. Not inquiring further, I intuited what she meant. She described a connection to a benevolent, spiritual undercurrent, a distant glory, untouched by conquest. I imagined that this connection somehow redressed injustice to the Cheyenne Indians in whose marginalization she was unintentionally wrapped up as a child.

Later we peeled off our wet clothes three at a time in an unlit bathroom at the interpretive center and ate snacks. Our food choices sparked simultaneous enthusiasm and hesitation on my part. Bothered by the Chips Ahoy!® cookies' corporateness and artificiality, I chided myself for thinking they were any different than the gas-powered boats or Miguel's plastic rain coat. Ideally, there would have been some local cooperative churning out baked goods in biodegradable wrappers. I pictured the shiny packaging in a dump, awaiting poison-causing incineration and felt like a small, guilty head on the Ugly American Tourist hydra.

The panoptic gaze of Woodsy Owl, the USDA Forest Service mascot pinned me down, even as far away as Tulum. He hailed me with this "give a hoot, don't pollute" image and I answered with my worry and sense of responsibility. I noticed how inseparable this interpellation was from my Americanness, how neither could be chipped off of me like cultural shellac. Woodsy helped discipline me into becoming an environmental citizen just as subcultural forces disciplined me against the corporateness and artificiality of Chips Ahoy!®. As an effect, I am an Ugly American and a Woodsy American at once. As global forces of governmentality continue to converge, RARE produces similar gazes among wildlife mascots throughout the world. This effect compensates for my previous nostalgia.

### Interstitial habitus

When the van dropped us off, my brother gave Miguel his tip and, exhausted, he told his last joke of the day, an accidental repeat of one he had already told. "It's so nice to be supporting a *real Mayan*," my mother said as we lingered with our bags of towels and wet clothes, ready to nap before the New Year's Eve celebrations. It felt good to me, too, for a moment, before it occurred to me that the fuzzy feelings came from a redistributive impulse. In the Reserve's scriptural economy, we claimed generosity, kindness, thoughtfulness and benevolence and restored Miguel's "ancient dignity." To have pointed this out to my companions would make me a party pooper, a bubble-burster. I kept my thoughts to myself.

Later that night I found myself celebrating the New Year at Mezzanine, a Moroccan-inspired hotel/bar right on the beach. I knew it had to follow the regulations of all places along Boca Paila road, so I felt ok about it: they keep a certain area of jungle, and create complex waste filtration systems. With these certainties in place, I didn't have to feel like just another depraved Cancun tourist about to get wasted on New Year's Eve.

Miguel stood near the bar with a beer. In the "authenticity" fantasy, I suppose many tourists would like to think that their tips go towards something like cooperative gardening rather than alcohol purchases at Euro-chic clubs. Perhaps he thought I would feel this way. Still dressed in his guiding outfit, he explained that he was only drinking because it was New Year's Eve.

Throughout the evening we passed one another on the dance floor or near the bar and exchanged friendly chat. He was sometimes with another American

associated with the RARE center. I became increasingly absorbed in the music, tequila, and in dancing with strangers from all over Europe, North America and Mexico. Unlike the distinction-filled world of Thornton's club kids, here the music provided a common language, and an opportunity to move. Few of my judgments made it through the filter of joy, movement and sweat.

The American stood next to Miguel during one of my trips to the bar for water. Miguel yelled something into my ear that I didn't understand.

"What?" I yelled over the celebratory noise.

"I love you," he seemed to say.

"You love me?"

The American with Miguel couldn't hear him but saw the surprise and confusion on my face.

"I love you."

I tried to imagine what I would say in another language after a few drinks and realized that my options for expression would be seriously limited, and that I would likely say something in the "I love you" range. Flattery mixed with sympathy: as worried as he was about drinking in front of me, I was sure he'd be mortified to remember telling me he loves me. The American finally heard the last "I love you." He smiled a bit warily, and steered Miguel away. Miguel disappeared from my horizon, as typical as a North American guy on a Saturday night, but as specific as Miguel from the Biosphere Reserve, as knowable or unknowable as anyone, and now gone.

Warm rain fell. The music and the crowd enveloped me in a nostalgia that I fleetingly noticed I didn't have a handle on. I floated in the crowd, in the rain. No analysis, no panoptic view of myself on the dance floor in Southern Mexico. Immersed, submerged and released; I swam in nostalgia I couldn't see and let the distinctions rest.

## NOTES

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1 The conquest-reeking name refers to the spectacular area where Magellan would "discover" the legendary big-footed Patagon tribe.

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## RELATED HYPERLINKS

Patagonia®, <http://www.patagonia.com/>

RARE Conservation, <http://www.rareconservation.org>

Tulum, <http://www.tulum.com/>

UNESCO Sian Ka'an World Heritage Site, [http://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=31&id\\_site=410](http://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=31&id_site=410)

Woodsy Owl, <http://www.fs.fed.us/spf/woodsyl/>

Xel-ha, <http://www.xel-ha.com.mx/>




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Kyeann Sayer  
Cultural Studies Department  
Claremont Graduate University  
[kyeann.sayer@cgu.edu](mailto:kyeann.sayer@cgu.edu)