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CARIBBEAN CRUISING: SEX, DEATH, AND MEMORIES OF (CONGO) DARKNESS

Rick Mitchell

The trick, for the modern capitalist magic to function, is to deface the commodity of labor, allowing its [...] use-value component to surge forth, flashlike, only to disappear once again as [...] exchange-value. Hence fetishism is not a consequence but the magical precondition for the commodity, and hence for mature capitalism, to function. We should not be overly surprised, therefore, at the spectacular “return” of the archaic within modernity.

—Michael Taussig, “The Beach (A Fantasy)”

I can deny my dependence, denying sexuality, filth, death, and insisting that the world submit to my action. But this negation is fictitious.

—Georges Bataille, “Transgression”

...the first dead are our first masters, those who unlock the door for us that opens onto the other side, if only we are willing to bear it. Writing, in its noblest function, is the attempt to unerase, to unearth, to find the primitive picture again, ours, the one that frightens us.

—Hélène Cixous, “The School of the Dead”

I’m sitting in one of those new Starbucks which seem to be springing up everywhere nowadays, putting all the old coffee shops—less uptight about carving initials on tables, posting home-made flyers for poetry readings, lost cats—out of business. There are now five Starbucks within a two-mile radius of my home and they’re always reliable, always the same, which seems to be a big part of their global appeal. As I sit near the window with my Cafe Americano—which isn’t large, or extra-large, but “*venti*”—looking out at yet another ugly San Fernando Valley parking lot while trying to write something about the Caribbean cruise ships I once worked on, my thoughts float back to a port I used to visit, Samaná; to its two, open-air, thatch-roofed, side-by-side bars that sat just up the hill from Samaná’s lone pier, a modern cement structure built by the cruise

line which owned the only cruise ship that stopped at this rural outpost in the Dominican Republic, one of two countries, along with Haiti, that shares the island of Hispaniola.

Samaná

A donkey in the street, loose chickens;
cast iron cruise ship billowing smoke;
tourists talk English in tennis shoes
negotiate green hats of freshly woven palm,
miniature sailboats of goatskin, horns.
“Isn’t that somethin’?”

Gliding across pristine waters, past lush, tropical mountains, the ship sailed into Samaná every Wednesday. Waiting at the pier along with a couple of taxi drivers and their beat up cars would be groups of young kids in ragged clothes not shy about encircling a crew member and tugging on his clothing while asking for a dollar, an apple, anything. And a line of old blue school busses always stood just off the pier awaiting shipboard passengers. Hating to drive alone during the long three-hour trip from Puerto Plata, the bus drivers, always practical, filled many of their seats with young women who would make the weekly trip with hopes of earning some money from the crew—mostly Latino and West Indian males at the time—or at least having some fun. I also think back to my narrow cabin with the bare light bulb over the bed; lazy Aruban dogs, ribs pushing through their skin, wandering to nowhere in particular over hot, oil-stained piers; Old San Juan and its dilapidated, second-story sailors’ tavern where the menu included fish and chips, cocktails, and waitresses in bikinis and spiked heels who were available for visits to one of the hourly rooms at the back of the bar.

Along with St. Thomas, Old San Juan is now the busiest cruise ship port in the Caribbean, the world’s most popular region for cruise ships, and success has taken its toll on the old landmarks. During a recent visit to Old San Juan, for example, my first trip to the Caribbean in eighteen years, I found a sprawling new casino and hotel where the sailors’ tavern once stood. All of the old sailor haunts seemed to have been bulldozed over, homogenized to make way for the new in this oldest of American cities. I had visited this port as a crew member about seventy times but Old San Juan’s cobblestoned streets, along with the freshly painted buildings, seemed less real than ever before.

He wears red lipstick, white make-up
on his goatee, white patent leather shoes,
a white polyester suit with wide lapels, a

white cardboard top hat that says *Mágico*.
“Looky, looky,” says the dark skinned Dominicano.
“Me Sammy Davis, Jr.”
And he inhales white thread
into his right nostril.

During a six-year span in the eighties I worked onboard several different cruise ships, primarily in the Caribbean. One of the ships sailed from Old San Juan every Tuesday with approximately a thousand passengers on a weekly tour that featured six ports in seven days. Along with the Greek officers, European and American casino staff, gift-shop clerks, cruise staff, musicians, and performers, I was part of the “upper crew.” The so-called “lower crew,” the bulk of the cruise-ship’s work force, hailed from places such as Jamaica, Honduras, Nicaragua. Of a much darker hue than the upper crew, the lower crew resided deep down in the ship’s bowels, where it wasn’t unusual for ten crew members who worked various shifts to share a small, windowless cabin. Unlike members of the upper crew, the lower crew member—who often worked fourteen hours, every day, for eleven months straight—was permitted to surface only while on the job and in company uniform. Today, with a fair wage difficult to come by in many parts of the world, over forty nations are often represented within a cruise ship’s crew. Not tethered to any particular place nor subject to American jurisdiction and able to sail—with a low-wage, multinational crew—at a moment’s notice through unregulated international waters while evading taxes, laws, and a minimum wage, the slippery cruise ship has become the space par excellence of unfettered globalization.¹

“Looky, looky, looky, looky,” he says
from behind mirrored shades,
“Me Sammy Davis, Jr.”
Me Sammy Davis, Jr.”

¹ The American- and European-owned cruise ships that ply the Caribbean fly under flags of convenience. That is, they’re registered in countries such as Liberia or Panama, places that don’t collect much in the way of taxes or, more importantly, enforce labor laws. Lacking external regulations and having access to cheap, non-union labor, the cruise ship is not unlike an antebellum plantation. Tellingly, an observation by Fredrick Douglass from the mid-nineteenth century seems applicable to the twenty-first century cruise ship, and perhaps to other globalized work spaces that are answerable to no one but the multinational corporation: the “plantation is a little nation of its own, having its own language, its own rules, regulations and customs. The laws and institutions of the state, apparently touch it nowhere. The troubles arising here, are not settled by the civil power of the state” (49). For further insight into globalization and cruise ships, see Wood’s “Caribbean Cruise Tourism: Globalization at Sea.”

as he performs tricks with thimbles
sponge balls, cards to attract dollars U.S.
from disinterested sightseers.

But for now the concept of globalization is too abstract, impenetrable. So I'd like to turn to the imagistic "fan of memory" which, as Walter Benjamin suggests, "never comes to the end of its segments; no image satisfies [the fan's operator], for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside" (*Reflections* 6). The fold of truth, which can arise as a striking imagistic memory from everyday life, compels the writer to unfurl the fan further, and further, in order to mine the image's significance, its relation to the next image, and the next one. One particular image has compelled me to keep thinking about Caribbean cruising.

The image: a big white cruise ship sailing towards San Juan at about 17 knots. I'm sitting on the bed, sheets and blanket tightly tucked under the mattress, in my comparatively large cabin, upper-deck, starboard side, forward, the two portholes wide open, welcoming in the Caribbean breeze. Suddenly, urgent knocking, banging at my door.

"Mitchell...Mitchell."

Larouche, the person who makes my bed and delivers clean towels every morning, rushes into my cabin, horror filling his face. "Mitchell, Mitchell," he blurts out in a thick Haitian accent while looking me straight in the eye. "My baby, she's very sick, Mitchell. My baby, she's sick. I...I need to fly back home tomorrow, soon as we get into port. I...I need you to help me, Mitchell. Please...please, Mitchell, please."

Nearly two decades later, trying to make some sense of the desperation that filled my always-amiable steward's face as we sailed through a calm sea whose barbaric history includes Columbus' "Discovery," colonialism, and various imperialist naval operations, I recall another, not-unrelated horror, the one that Conrad's Kurtz finally names as the truth of his past quickly unfolds just before he dies. Kurtz's final words, we are told, invoke the horror of imperialist plunder in Africa generated in no small part by slavery. The same sort of slavery responsible for the voyage of my Haitian cabin steward's ancestors from the dark Congo to the sun-filled Caribbean where, in the 1980s, Larouche, working fourteen-hour shifts, seven days a week for three hundred dollars U.S. a month as a shipboard servant with virtually no rights, doesn't seem all that far removed from Conrad's abject, faceless slaves in *Heart of Darkness*.

A \$2 “mahogany” ashtray shatters
on hot cement; a small brown dog, legs tied,
lies in a burlap bag on the pier,
its head and eyes anxiously following flies
and I wait to accompany passengers
on the overcrowded white wooden boat
to the offshore beach.

Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid suggests that touristic servitude is a role for which Caribbean people of African descent have been especially well prepared. In *A Small Place*, Kincaid unfurls personal memories of Caribbean tourism and history in order to draw connections between Antiguans’ obsession with their emancipation from slavery, as if it had just happened yesterday, and the country’s hugely popular Hotel Training School, which “teaches Antiguans how to be good servants, how to be a good nobody, which is what a servant is” (55) and, Kincaid implies, what a slave was.

Onboard the ship—that strange, deterritorialized space which, though seemingly serene, like the Caribbean Sea’s surface, cannot escape the historical conflicts that are as real as the fossilized slave bones littering the Atlantic—tourists resist unfurling the significance of potentially unsettling images, since to do otherwise might spoil their fun. Directly addressing the North American who is bent on having a good time in the Caribbean no matter what, Kincaid utilizes irony and a second-person narrative to force the tourist/reader to acknowledge his complicity in Caribbean oppression:

you needn’t let that slightly funny feeling you have from time to time about exploitation, oppression, domination develop into a full-fledged unease, discomfort; you could ruin your holiday. They [people who were once slaves and are now servants] are not responsible for what you have. (10)

Without successful repression of “that slightly funny feeling,” the tourist’s carefree holiday, that carnivalesque reprieve from the drudgery of work and the banality of everyday life, becomes an impossibility.

“¿Manzana, tiene una manzana?” a boy smiles,
and I hand him one of the apples I had swiped
from the cruise ship dining room.
Several other children swarm over,
thin hands outreached:
“one dollar, man, one dollar”;
“manzana, manzana”;
“one dollar, joe, one dollar.”
A little girl with an all-white eye
tugs on my shirt but doesn’t speak.

It is difficult, however, to ignore feeling unease when abject poverty is relentlessly visible. This may help to explain why the cruise ship, plying a seemingly people-less sea during most of a tour's duration, has become an ideal vacation domicile/vehicle for visits to postcolonial ports. In spite of their conflict-free images on travel brochures and in the touristic imagination, these ports still maintain elements of "[t]he originality of the colonial context" of which Frantz Fanon writes in the early 60s, where the "economic reality, inequality, and the immense difference of ways of life never come to mask the human realities" (40). Although it may be difficult to mask irreconcilable tourist-host contradictions, especially as economic conditions worsen, the intensifying commodification of experience within late capitalism, as seen in the region's development of all-inclusive, tightly controlled and vigilantly patrolled resorts and shopping areas, has helped to shield the tourist from discomfort while abetting the expansion of Caribbean tourism. Several cruise lines, seeing the profit potential in masking worsening human realities ashore, have even created their own "Caribbean" ports. One cruise line, for example, has developed a private "island" in Haiti—actually, a swath of beach-front property protected by a ten-foot wall and armed guards, and manned by carefully screened and trained locals—so that cruise ship passengers can experience "the best of the Caribbean" while avoiding the sight of a populace tainted by starvation (Wood 361-362). "Close the shutter," Kurtz ordered Marlow over a hundred years ago as he steamed down the Congo. "I can't bear to look at this" (Conrad 85).

I arrive at the bar late today.
Young Dominicanas in New York Islander,
Cowboys, Royal Caribbean Cruise Line t-shirts
sit on crude goatskin chairs
at round makeshift tables
with bottles of rum, coke, *cerveza*,
winking, smiling, waiting.

The outright purchase and simulation of Caribbean islands seems to be the trend of the future, as several cruise lines now regularly visit islands which they own and regulate. In addition to taking away much-needed income from the cash-strapped ports that are dropped from the itinerary to make room for the visits to corporate-owned, simulated beach areas (white sand is often imported to these hyperreal sites so that the beach can meet tourist expectations), such islands dramatically increase profit potential because the cruise line owns everything that's sold there. And tourists, desiring clean, trouble-free experiences that are different, but not *too* different, seem to like the idea of the private island, an extreme example of the Disneyfication of Caribbean tourism, and of a globalization process

that stresses homogeneity while encouraging market-driven forces that are often at odds with locally-rooted cultures and economies. Robert E. Wood, examining the cleansing and simulation of public space practiced by Caribbean cruise lines, quotes from Michael Sorkin, who sees the “theme park”—which is more or less what we get with the mega-mall, the contemporary cruise ship, and the private island—as emblematic of globalization:

This is the meaning of the theme park, the place that embodies it all, the ageographia, the surveillance and control, the simulations without end. The theme park presents a happy regulated vision of pleasure—all those artfully hoodwinking forms—as a substitute for the democratic public realm, and it does so appealingly by stripping troubled urbanity of its sting, of the presence of the poor, of crime, of dirt, of work. (qtd. in Wood 358)

A young girl, can't be more than 16 or so,
grabs my left forearm, locks her eyes with mine,
and carefully forms three words in English:
“I love you,” she squeaks, while weaving
her dark, tiny fingers through mine.
I smile, guzzle some more beer.

Another example of an attempt to cleanse the sting of social conflict from a particular place can be found in the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs which had entrusted Kurtz with the writing of an immensely important report (another type of comforting simulation) that could help to clear the way for even greater profits in the ivory trade. Ultimately, however, Kurtz is unable to embrace his life-long work on the treatise. He betrays his devotion to the Ideal through his scribbled note on the report's last page, ““Exterminate all the brutes!”” (Conrad 66), as well as through his deathbed countenance and final words which unleash, for Marlow, a flurry of images that suggest the truth of who's responsible for what. As Kurtz begins to enter that charged liminal space, the threshold of death, Marlow perceives by candle-light, in the “impenetrable darkness” of the dying man's face, an unforgettable alteration:

Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn't touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. (Conrad 86)

In the brief space between this image and the patient's last breath, Kurtz utters the words that will continue to haunt Marlow.

Under the thatched roof, as the girl places
both of my hands on her gyrating hips,
a man with stunted, deformed legs,
a Mets cap turned backwards on his head,

dances on his hands for money
to rusty merengue instruments.

Over a year after the trip down the Congo Marlow's final memory of Kurtz's face—which, as death quickly approached, was suddenly unmasked, "as though a veil had been rent"—continues to spark powerful flashes of recognition of the colonialist's horrific history. Back in Belgium, Marlow hopes that visiting Kurtz's Intended to deliver some of her lover's papers will help him to give up the memory of Kurtz "to the past[...]to surrender personally," Marlow says, "all that remained of him with me to that oblivion which is the last word of common fate" (90). Yet as he stands in front of the Intended's "high and ponderous door, between the tall houses of a street as still and decorous as a well-kept alley in a cemetery" (90), memories of Kurtz, of murky Africa, drumming, imperialist plunder, of "the heart of a conquering darkness [...] of triumph for the wilderness" (90), suddenly and without warning envelop Marlow. He rings the bell next to the thick mahogany door of the Intended's Brussels home and Kurtz, long-ago buried in a mud hole alongside the Congo River, seems to stare back at him from the door's "glassy panel—stare with that wide and immense stare embracing, condemning, loathing all the universe. I seemed to hear the whispered cry," Marlow confesses, "The horror! The horror!" (91).

As I sway to the merengue band
she pulls out a tattered green card
signed and dated by a doctor.
"Estoy limpia... ¿Quieres hacer chicky-chicky?"
She pulls me towards her and I don't resist.

Unlike the film images shot in a Hollywood studio, an individual's storehouse of images cannot be easily controlled, ordered, discarded. According to Benjamin, when imagistic memories leap into view they often appear as moments "severed from all earlier associations" (*Reflections* 26), time "outside history" (*Illuminations* 184). The odd, out-of-context, non-linear array of images, which create something like the *v-effekt* of Brecht's epic theater, can "make strange" our perceptions of the everyday, of history, forcing us to rethink the past, the present, and perhaps our own roles in historical conflict.

Marlow himself acknowledges the strange way in which powerful memories of the past can subvert chronological time. Upon seeing for the first time the Intended, Marlow realizes that

she was one of those creatures that are not the play-things of Time. For her he had died only yesterday. And, by Jove!, the impression was so powerful that for me too he seemed to have died only yesterday—nay, this very minute. I saw her and him in the same instant of

time—his death and her sorrow in the very moment of his death. Do you understand? I saw them together—I heard them together. She had said, with a deep catch of the breath, ‘I have survived’; while my strained ears seemed to hear distinctly, mingled with her tone of despairing regret, the summing up whisper of his eternal condemnation. (91)

Marlow’s irrepressible memory of Kurtz’s last words always seems to be connected to something else: Africa, slavery, the city of Brussels, and—most importantly—to people, such as the Intended, whose life behind her thick, ornate door in one of the city’s finer neighborhoods is the flip-side of Kurtz’s exploration in the name of a higher Ideal.

According to Marlow, the Intended’s survival, and that of all women—who are incapable of withstanding the “truth”—remains dependent on “illusions,” which is why Marlow lies to the Intended about Kurtz’s final words. While Marlow’s memory, both involuntary and voluntary, mixed with the present, the distant, seems to collapse both time and space while creating what Benjamin refers to as “experience,” where “certain contents of the individual past [...] combine with material of the collective past” (*Illuminations* 159), as well as with the unavoidable present, Marlow is willing to share much of his experience only with other white, European men like himself. As Marianna Torgovnick suggests, the original teller of Kurtz’s tale believes that women and natives remain unable to understand the implications of imperialism in the Congo: “For Marlow, women (like primitives) exist outside the circle of rational thought and do not struggle, as he does, for comprehension; moreover, they must actively be prevented from doing so” (154). The “‘truth,’” it seems, “can be experienced only in the masculine sphere” (Smith 178), where European women are defined as passive subjects in need of masculine protection, while the faceless natives (particularly females) are seen as elements of wild nature that can only benefit from the firm, paternal hand of the colonialist.

Hand in hand, we near the row of unpainted
cinderblock rooms behind the smaller bar
and a football-player passenger
whom I had told about this place the night before
suddenly taps me on the shoulder.
“I had 2 qts. of beer,” he brags, grinning,
as he passes a joint to a friend,
“a bottle of rum, and two different girls
for fifteen dollars U.S.”

For Benjamin, “Thinking [historically] involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a

shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad" (*Illuminations* 262-263). In order to harness the radical potential of the monad, an historically-charged, dialectical image of both past and present, collective and individual, the historian must grasp the past within the context of "the now," "For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own threatens to disappear irretrievably" (*Illuminations* 255).

At the beach an old man from the cruise ship
was found floating face down in the ocean.
I pounded his hard white chest
during the quiet boat ride back.
"Doesn't seem to be much hope," said
the passenger/physician. "Besides,
we're only required to try to revive him
for thirty minutes but you're representing the ship
so it's your call, but he doesn't have a chance."
"You know better than me," I said.

The moment of death can provide—for the observer—an especially opportune time to seize hold of "an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" (*Illuminations* 255). In his essay "The Storyteller" Benjamin discusses the dying man during that arresting moment before the final breath: "suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority," Benjamin believes, "is at the very source of the story" (*Illuminations* 94).

Kurtz's authoritative final expression and words—"The horror! The horror!"—continue to disturb Marlow because those unforgettable moments implicate not only the speaker, but also the West, its (masculine) history and, importantly, Marlow himself. In another, somewhat more modern moment aboard a ship, which could be, perhaps, part of Marlow's time, of today, of the days of the middle passage, my cabin steward, the veil of cheerful servitude momentarily lifted to reveal another (yet related) sort of horror, stands pleading with me for help. Confronted with the threshold not of his own death experience, but with that of his young daughter (whom he may never see again for a variety of reasons, including his distant job in a globalized economy that offers distressingly low pay and no medical insurance), Larouche—through his fear-stricken words and countenance—seems to implicate not only cruise ships and the unfettered free market of gross exploitation, but also the person from whom he requests the money that could pay for the trip back home. Perhaps the horrific fear expressed in Larouche's face continues to nag me

because it pushes to the fore the always present yet (for the tourist) rarely discernible unease generated by the irreconcilable tensions at the center of a relationship between people like myself, an upper crew member and, simultaneously, a tourist, and those who serve. While most tourists ignore or at least attempt to conceal the inherent conflict between the vacationer and the native who serves, Fanon, a Martinican, believes that such tensions remain ultimately unmistakable because of the relentlessly visible racial, economic, and cultural differences that seem to naturalize (for tourists) the roles of servers (poor people of color) and served (usually white and at least middle class).

“I talked the guy down,” gushes
the football player’s friend
as he holds up for my inspection
a 3-foot-tall painted wood carving
of an old man with a dog,
“from 65 dollars to 13 bucks.”

As suggested earlier, however, the Disneyfied commodification of experience, through the creation of tightly controlled environments, such as private island destinations, Universal Citywalk, shopping malls, and shopper-friendly mega-cruise ships which are often referred to as floating malls, helps to make conflict acceptable by creating the illusion that it no longer exists. This market-driven homogeneity, so central to the globalization process, is also a primary component of consumption, which works most effectively when process, labor and dirt, the negative, remain carefully concealed so as not to disturb the holiday of the market. As Fredric Jameson points out, people inhabiting a “society of abundance” find it increasingly difficult to see beyond the harmonious surface of commodification. (And what better place to examine abundance than on a cruise ship, with its endless meals, snacks, midnight buffets, shopping, and non-stop gambling.) Citizens of the society of abundance have

lost the experience of the negative in all its forms [...] (and) it is the negative alone which is ultimately fructifying from a cultural as well as an individual point of view [...] (since) a genuinely human existence can only be achieved through the process of negation. (Jameson 108)

Larouche’s urgent, terror-filled pleading remains troubling because it offers a glimpse of genuine (and troubling) human existence within the dehumanized touristic host in spite of the suffocating, all-pervasive commodification which shapes the way that we experience touristic relationships.

The old man in the bathing suit
laid back in the white wooden boat
eyes closed, saliva sliding down

the side of his weathered face;
no friends or family to hold his hand;
his death moved no one, not even me.

While sitting in Starbucks contemplating ways to make Caribbean tourism palatable for intellectual consumption, my vision lands upon that ubiquitous green and white Starbucks emblem in the coffee shop's window, on my cardboard cup, on every other cup, recycled napkins, bags of coffee beans, caps, shirts, all of which are for sale in a shop named after Ahab's first mate, Starbuck, who—though not an authority on the Caribbean—had deep knowledge of another warm-water sea, the South Pacific. And Starbuck understood the ocean's use value, how it could actually benefit humankind, from his years aboard whaling vessels seeking oil that would light the world. Although the retail-chain Starbucks' primary product is coffee and not whale oil, the sea may be just as important to this coffee emporium as it was to the crew of a whaling ship since the sea remains the primary avenue of transportation for Starbucks' coffee beans, as well as for so many other things. But today the use value of the sea seems to have disappeared.² Rather than viewing the sea as having a practical purpose, we now perceive it only as something to contemplate, to consume, as part of a holiday tour package.

In the mid-nineteenth century Marx perceptively observed that as capitalism advances, exchange value eclipses use value by foregrounding what things are worth monetarily while effacing any signs of the negative, such as the exploited labor which makes the things. With the magical disappearance of use value, the gleaming, impenetrable surface of the commodity—wiped clean of conflict and tension—dominates, indeed dictates, everyday experience. Increasingly, Caribbean islands seem—from the tourist's point of view—to be homogeneous non-places filled with whatever dream the tourist wishes to assert while avoiding thinking of related unpleasanties, such as the plight of the exploited crew members who serve them, "good nobodies" often paid little more than seventy cents an hour in a workplace environment rivaling Third-World sweatshops.

Cruise ships, like Starbucks, seem to offer tremendous promise though, like the commodity form itself of which they're an ideal example. Actually, Starbucks and cruise ships may have more in common than one would think. A poster hanging in Starbucks coffeehouses throughout North America features images of

² As Michael Taussig points out, "The conduct of life today is completely and utterly dependent on the sea and the ships it bears, yet nothing is more invisible" (251).

Starbucks coffee-bean labels, or perhaps they're simulations of labels. (I've never seen these labels on bags of Starbucks coffee.) The various pictures of labels on the poster proclaim the beans' origins—Guatemala, Antigua, Kenya, Panama, Ethiopia—and they include images of the exotic: elephants, jaguars, tigers, indigenous art. Emphasizing the consumer's ability to go global without traveling any farther than the neighborhood Starbucks, the poster proudly proclaims: "Coffees gathered from a world of travels. So you can enjoy here or at home." Is this a perk of the new globalized economy? A throwback to good old colonialism, of the type that Conrad himself participated in as a ship's captain? Perhaps we've been globalized all along, at least since Columbus discovered that the world wasn't flat. In emphasizing that the consumer can enjoy coffee from around the world at home or at Starbucks, all of which are reassuringly the same, Starbucks, like the cruise ship industry and other forces of globalization, sells the exotic yet familiar, homogeneous yet different (but not *too* different) within a carefully constructed environment that seems to be all surface.

Examining cultural artifacts from Paris of the mid-nineteenth century, a period during which the illusory magic of commodification was becoming a central aspect of everyday life, Benjamin—in his ongoing excavation of modernity—quotes from a poem by Baudelaire which suggests the individual's new relationship to the world:

And from on high I contemplate the globe in its roundness;
No longer do I look there for the shelter of a hut.

—Baudelaire, "Le Gout du neant" (qtd. in *Illuminations* 185)

The speaker remains disinterested in considering the globe's practical aspects, ways in which the earth can meet the real material needs of society. The world has become a pleasantly round sphere to be contemplated in itself, without any connection to the people who inhabit it.

The onset of modern capitalism, followed half a century or so later by motorized cruise liners, offers the promise of abundance, thereby numbing the shocks created by gross inequality, unjust labor practices, the necessity of finding shelter in a hut. And this abundance continues to hinder us from responding, in ways that are human, to the desperation of others in which we are all complicit. Although it has become increasingly difficult to perceive use value's intermittent, flash-like appearances—which, as Michael Taussig observes, are instrumental in animating the commodity fetish³—the

³ See the headnote from Taussig on page 7.

foregrounding of use value can abet social struggle by helping to display the human realities of commodification. The negative, so central to commodification yet elusive to the tourist within everyday touristic experience, within the Caribbean cruise, the cruise through the Congo, can become momentarily visible when historically-charged memories unfurl themselves, although our failure to “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (*Illuminations* 255) and act on it negates the flash’s sudden negation of commodification and thus allows the commodity’s trickery to continue.

As I lay back on a well-worn mattress,
elbows propping me up,
she spits out a mouthful of white cum
which becomes suspended
in the plastic basin of water
on the dirt floored, two dollar
cinderblock shack with no windows
and a curtain door.

The North American tourist seeking a pleasurable vacation in the Caribbean finds solace in the globalized, commodified homogeneity of his destination, and in the difference that he *feels* (but refuses to know) in the magical, mesmerizing flashes of use value that are concealed by exchange value as rapidly as they appear. At all costs, of course, the Caribbean tourist must repress the negative. Ideally, the negative never rears its ugly, unsettling face during one’s holiday in the sun. But if in spite of one’s best efforts the face of the negative just won’t go away, then one must try to create the illusion, as Marlow does for the Intended, that the face is something other than what it is. Grasping the flash of recognition is too disturbing, although there’s nothing wrong with contemplating the native hut, as long as the hut remains untarnished by the necessity of local inhabitants.

Sammy Davis Jr. swallows pins
and concludes his act
by exhaling the white thread
from his left nostril.

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