

***Postcards to History: Tourist Representations
and the Construction of Postcolonial
Histories in the Anglophone Caribbean***

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I distrusted the idea of glamour that was given us by postcards and postage stamps (ideas repeated by our local artists): certain bays, certain buildings, our mixed population.

V.S. Naipaul, *A Way in the World*, 1994

Today, nostalgic wonderful and tearful archeology (Oh! those colonial days!) are very much in vogue. But to give in to them is to forget a little too quickly the motivations and the effects of this vast operation of systematic distortion. It is also to lay the groundwork for its return in a new guise: a racism and xenophobia titillated by the nostalgia of the colonial empire.

Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, 1986

I happened upon the old postcard of the Bahamas in a box labeled “West Indies” in the back of an antique collectors’ shop in Atlanta (fig. 1). Discolored by time, its once vibrant colors appeared monochrome and marked by the geographic distance it had traveled. One tourist, who had visited Nassau in 1936, had purchased and sent the card to Miss Isabel Gracely, her niece, in North Carolina. What, I wondered, had caught her eye in this particular image of a young black Bahamian on a mule-drawn pull cart framed by an arch of blooming bougainvillea? Why had she, just as I had pulled out this particular representation from its dusty home, chosen this postcard?

I paused at the old souvenir because it immediately triggered a memory. My grandmother had once described the postcard to me with a tinge of



Figure 1. James Sands, *Two Natives Nassau, Bahamas*, postmarked 1936, postcard. 3 1/2 x 5 1/2 in. The handwritten commentary on the card reads, "How would you like to have this to ride down Congress St. doing what Eunice allways [sic] wanted to do in an auto. Aunt Syl." Collection of author.

uncharacteristic resentment. She recalled having worked for a store on the island that had sold a postcard of a black man and a donkey, which was sardonically captioned "Two Natives." As my eyes rest on the title of my postcard discovery, I remembered her chagrin. Every time she was left alone in the shop she would secret away the card equating the black Bahamian and animal, ensuring that tourists would neither see nor collect it as a souvenir. Despite these covert actions by my grandmother (and perhaps other black Bahamians), a woman identified as "Aunt Syl" on the card did precisely procure this image to send overseas. Perhaps to Miss Gracely, the addressee on the card, the image of the black Bahamian, so offensive to one local shopkeeper, was representative of "Nassau," as the caption also specified.

My concern in this essay, however, is not with senders or recipients: I am primarily interested in the contemporary meanings of turn-of-the-twentieth-century postcards for persons like my grandmother, in other words, for local audiences. In recent years, these old postcards have been "returned to sender," or at least returned "home" to their place of origin. Since the 1990s, the century-old postcards have gained widespread visibility in the Bahamas and throughout the Anglophone Caribbean region as local collectors have actively acquired photographs and postcards of the islands dating from the

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from throughout the globe. They have published their global acquisitions in popular locally published pictorial history books. *Nostalgic Nassau* (1991), *Jamaica as It Was* (1991), *Glimpses at Our Past: A Social History of the Caribbean through Postcards* (1995), *Bygone Barbados* (1998), *Reminiscing: Memories of Old Nassau* (1999), *The Bahamas in White and Black: Images from the Golden Age of Tourism* (2000), and *A Journey of Memories* [Trinidad] (2000) are but a representative sample of these types of publications. This essay attempts to trace some of the implications of these postcards, once issued to envious recipients or collected as tourists' mementoes, on local memory and popular history on the islands. It calls attention to the consequences, contradictions, and even dangers of framing these cards as –to quote one publication– “our past.” The conclusion describes an exhibition of colonial photographs and postcards I curated, which precisely explored the limits of reflecting on “our histories” in the image pool of touristic representations.

By focusing on the afterlife of tourism-oriented photographs in contemporary Anglophone Caribbean societies, I aim to build on prevailing interpretations of colonial representations. While over the last thirty years a substantial literature has developed on how “the West” imaged other cultures and regions, few studies consider how such image worlds were received and interpreted by the colonized.¹ This omission is especially notable given that numerous scholars have called on researchers to be more responsive to the multiple audiences and meanings of Orientalist representations.² These revisionists have, however, typically restricted their own analyses to the reception of colonial imagery in Europe and Euro-America. Even scholars who research the photographic traditions in the non-Western world, “photography’s other histories,” have not interrogated the possible interpretations and uses of colonial photographs in these societies.³ Rather historians of photography have been attentive to how colonized peoples fashioned themselves as modern subjects in the photographic medium in the postcolonial period,⁴ frequently in contradistinction to colonial photographs. Less work has analyzed how local inhabitants reconstructed their identities and histories precisely through the colonial photographic archive.⁵ The recent republication of turn-of-the-twentieth-century colonial era postcards in postcolonial English-speaking Caribbean societies attests to the longevity and active social life of such objects among (formerly) colonized populations and the need to investigate this constituency as an audience for colonial representations.

¹ Two exceptions to this are T. Mitchell and Pratt.

² See Lowe; Melman; Lewis.

³ The phrase “Photography’s Other Histories” comes from Pinney and Peterson.

⁴ See also Appadurai; Behrend; Pinney; Bell; Brielmaier.

⁵ See Lippard; Poole.

The Golden Era of the Postcard in the Anglophone Caribbean: Creating the Islands' "Tropical Picturesque" Touristic Image

A cultural biography of the social life of the postcard in the Anglophone Caribbean must begin at the beginning, retracing its origins, its producers and its (intended) consumers and meanings. "Postal cards" or "view cards" of the West Indies reached their height of production from 1895-1915, "the golden era" of postcard collecting in the United States and Western Europe, particularly Britain (Woody 13). As in other parts of the world, in the Anglophone Caribbean the postcard arose as a popular visual accompaniment to the tourism industry (Albers and James, 139). The Colonial Office in London specifically encouraged local officials in the islands to produce postcard series to stimulate the region's burgeoning tourist trade. In 1904, they urged: "It is added that a great effort is being made nowadays to restore prosperity to the West Indies by making the islands better known as holiday resorts. Quite an attractive series of pictorial postcards would doubtless tend to the end in view" (*DG* 15 April 1904). The "attractive" pictorial postcard was thus recruited to play a role in the restoration of prosperity to the West Indies in the wake of the decline of the sugar industry.

Colonial governmental bodies, passenger steamship companies, hoteliers, and local mercantile elites throughout the West Indies heeded this call, especially in Jamaica and the Bahamas. Both islands were the first to have tourist industries in the region. Companies specializing in transportation such as the United Fruit Company, the Elder Dempster Company (owners of the Imperial Direct Line), the Hamburg American Line, the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company and the Cunard Steamship Line, to name just a few, created postcard lines on Jamaica. In regard to the Bahamas, the Cunard Steamship Line, the Florida East Railway Line, and Munson Lines published cards. Local photographers, pharmaceutical companies, and mercantile elites, who owned businesses in the ports, also produced and distributed their photographs as pictorial postcards. The American Detroit Publishing Company and British postcard companies, like the Raphael Tuck and Sons Ltd. and Valentine and Sons Ltd., also sent representatives to the British West Indies. The postcards were often printed and sometimes retouched in Europe (Germany was a central postcard manufacturing center) or in the United States and then returned to the islands where they were offered for sale.

Postcard sellers targeted tourists as the intended consumers of these images, baiting visitors specifically in their ads. They boasted "Picture Postcards —A big choice of views for visitors— Hope [Gardens], Castleton, Montego Bay, &c and many of the inhabitants and their pickaninnies" and deemed their shops the "Headquarters for Tourists [with] The Largest and Finest Assortment of Illustrated Jamaica Postcards" (*DG* January 27, 1905; *DG* January 2, 1904). In addition, American and British companies and colonial governments distributed postcards to potential travelers at colonial

exhibitions and at ports of call, especially from places with direct steamship services to the islands, cities like New York, Miami, Palm Beach, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Liverpool, Glasgow, Southampton, and London.

Postcards provided not merely a means of making the islands “better known” to prospective holiday makers, as the Colonial Office specified, but served to radically reinvent the West Indies’ much maligned image. At the turn of the twentieth century, within Britain and the United States the West Indies were widely stigmatized as breeding grounds for potentially fatal tropical diseases (Curtin and Stepan). As one industry supporter recognized in 1891, “[t]o many old-fashioned people at home [Britain] to book a passage for Jamaica is almost synonymous with ordering a coffin” (Gardener qtd. in Hanna, 19). In addition to potentially natural hazards, fears of the islands’ rebellious black inhabitants also cast a cloud over the burgeoning tourist trade.⁶ Thus, image makers had to transform the islands drastically, from their association with disease and rebellion into spaces of touristic desire.

Postcards played an essential role in this refashioning process by presenting the region as a picturesque tropical locale, the picture of a tropical Eden. “Picturesque,” as I have argued elsewhere, in the context of the Anglophone Caribbean often referred to displays of “tropical” or exotic nature, which appeared ordered and cultivated, and representations of society as orderly and disciplined (Thompson).⁷ The miniature photographs thus featured artfully-designed tropical botanical gardens, impeccably manicured hotel landscapes, orderly fruit plantations, and clean palm-lined streets. A postcard of Nassau’s *Victoria Avenue*, a road fringed with equidistantly-positioned palm trees, by photographer James Sands, epitomized the ideal of ordered tropical nature (fig. 2). The view cards portrayed an island landscape, in essence, which had been tamed, one devoid of “tropical” hazards. The postcards also presented an image of a black society that had been successfully colonized. Images of blacks, which pictured them as peaceful, “civilized,” and loyal British subjects assured travelers of their safety among the natives. As curator of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society, Kevin Farmer, concluded after perusing his institution’s collection of postcards of Barbados, many postcards represented the island as “an exotic location without danger.”

⁶ The Haitian Revolution of 1798 and Jamaica’s Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865 loomed large in the imaginations of prospective travelers to the island. The more contemporaneous Cuban War of Independence (1895-1898) and riots that took place in Montego Bay, Jamaica (1902) likely revived fears of insurgency.

⁷ At the time, tropical nature did not so much signify the geographical derivation of a plant form as it did a “[s]pecies with strange or ‘prehistoric’ characteristics . . . prized as exotic, regardless of [its] actual geographical or climatic requirement” (Preston 195).



Figure 2. Sand's Studio, *Victoria Avenue – Nassau, Bahamas*, 1915-1930, postcard, 3 1/2 x 5 1/2 in. Collection of author.

Postcard producers also promoted the islands as premodern to travelers. The figure of the black island native and donkey – along with his bare-footed, tree-climbing, sugarcane-eating representational counterparts – frequently performed this role of tropical backwardness in postcards. The “Two Natives” postcard by white Bahamian photographer James Sands, as a prime example, imaged the black inhabitant as not far removed from animals on the Darwinian hierarchy of social evolution. Another viewcard of Jamaica produced by the United Fruit Company that referred to a black market woman and her beast of burden as the “Ford of the Rio Grande,” similarly cast the island as lagging far behind the modernity, enterprise, and technology of the United States on the scale of industrial evolution. Both place and people were imaged as aspiring to, yet lagging behind the time and history of the “civilized world.” The postcards presented the islands not just as geographically different, another foreign and tropical world, but as a place temporally apart, a universe trapped in the past.

If the subject matter of viewcards did not adequately convey the islands’ tropical and premodern ideal, producers further embellished the islands’ touristic image through handpainting. This is evident again in one version of the *Two Natives* postcard. Comparison to an earlier reproduction of the card reveals that the electrical lines that tracked across the top of the photograph were subsequently painted over. Such signs of modernity were antithetical to the island’s primordial natural reputation. The photographer also

enhanced the image by adding color to the bougainvillea. The card evinces a visual formula of Anglophone Caribbean postcard aesthetics, the subtraction of elements of modernity (electrical wires) and addition of signifiers of tropicality (tropical nature). The circulation of the same postcards over decades further contributed to the notion of an unchanging and eternally primitive Caribbean, arresting the region in a temporal representational stasis.⁸ The various stages of production and post-production –selecting subjects, captioning, and overpainting– betray postcard makers' continual struggles to assert the tropical picturesque narrative through postcards and their attempts to control, stabilize, and contain the meaning of the cards, and the image of the islands generally for travelers.

While some postcard producers aimed to carefully cultivate the islands' tropical image and steer the meaning of the postcards, travelers' handwritten remarks on the representations reveal the inevitable instability of the islands' tropically picturesque image. Although some purchasers confirmed the validity of this tropical ideal through their written commentaries, others continued to view the islands as places of tropical danger. One handwritten remark, scrawled on a postcard of Nassau's Royal Victoria Hotel gardens in 1906, for instance, claimed that the island had "alligators, crocodiles, sharks– and niggers to burn." The postcard sender listed (on an image representing "tropical orderliness" no less) an inventory of tropical hazards, classing the man-eating amphibians together with "the niggers." Thus from early on postcards became sites where competing ideas and ideals of the islands and their inhabitants were prescribed, inscribed, and destabilized. The postcard form, while enlisted in the service of various touristic or colonial agendas, inherently and literally left a space open on the bottom or back of the image for alternate interpretations.

The West Indies Postcards at Home: Local Uses and Interpretations of the Postcard

Although many viewcard producers imagined travelers as their primary consumers, the islands' black inhabitants, the people most frequently pictured in postcards, formed an inadvertent audience for these representations. At the cost of one pence each, however, few black workers could afford to purchase and send postcards, much less collect them.⁹ Hence,

⁸ The James Valentine Company, for example, first came to Jamaica in 1891. Twenty years later they advertised the same series in the local newspapers.

⁹ "The usual cost of a picture postcard in the Caribbean was probably the same as it was in Britain in the early years of the twentieth century: 'Penny plain, or two pence coloured'– two cents or four cents. It might cost only half penny to send a postcard locally, or a penny to send it anywhere else in the world (1 or 2 cents), but for a labourer [sic] who was lucky to get 24 cents for a day's work, the cost of a card and mailing it would have seemed a lot of money" (Gilmore p. viii). Ads in local newspapers offer "12 Selected varieties sent postfree for tenpence" (*DG* 13 January 1905).

generally the class transcendence often attributed to the mass-produced postcard (Schor 211), the so-called “poor man’s art form,” in Europe and the United States, was not a feature in the region. Yet, despite the seemingly prohibitive costs, some black inhabitants did acquire postcards and put them to new uses. In 1908, for instance, a traveler to Nevis documented that local masqueraders wore costumes made out of postcards (Williams). In this artistic appropriation, the masquerade participants co-opted and personalized the postcard for their own purposes. The “poor man’s art form” literally became the poor black man’s art form in Nevis, a Christmas masquerade costume.

While some residents creatively displayed the cards, others denounced the representations as thoroughly offensive. Sustained critiques of postcards, and touristic images generally, throughout the first half of the twentieth century reveal how local black audiences constantly surveilled the presentation of the island in the miniature universe of postcards, being particularly vigilant of the construction of the black race in these representations. A speaker at the grassroots Universal Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.) organization in Jamaica in 1915, for instance, critiqued the singular focus in postcards on the most economically disadvantaged and uneducated segments of the black population. He called attention to the deliberate “methods employed by a good many people in this island in making up [the] advertisements,” noting how photographers paid the island’s inhabitants “to pose,” in essence to perform an image of black backwardness, in postcard representations. Contemporaneously, E. Ethelred Brown, a member of the Jamaica League, advocated a boycott of the offending producers of postcards purporting to be “native scenes” – and declared it “the duty of those of us who are unfavourably and unfairly advertised to protest . . .” (*DG* January 18, 1915). While postcard producers constructed the islands’ picturesque image and naturalized this ideal through several devices, black critics of these representations constantly called attention to and protested the artifice of these representations – the singular focus of their subject-matter (black backwardness, poverty, tropicalness) and the constructed character of their form.

To recap, postcards of the West Indies were originally produced to meet the specific needs of the islands’ tourism industries at the turn of the twentieth century and were consumed primarily by travelers. This tropicalized image world was, however, from early on inherently open to alternate and even opposing meanings, as the changing captions and handwritten commentaries testify. The cards, as publicly displayed images, were also viewed by unintended audiences. While black inhabitants “wrote back,” protesting the visual narratives of these representations, these critiques and contestations left no traces on the visual archives – archives that centrally pictured the islands’ black population. The absence of these

perspectives on the tropicalized image world, unlike the producers' captions on postcards or its purchasers' handwritten commentaries, would dramatically affect how subsequent viewers would interpret the photographs, read the narratives of these representations, and represent the past, particularly in popular pictorial histories in the region. Or, to use historian Rolph Trouillot's terms, because blacks did not leave "concrete traces" on either the "making of *sources*" (postcards) or "the making of *archives*" (collections of postcards), it would dramatically effect "the making of *narratives*" and "making of *history* in the final instance" (26).

Contemporary Picture Books: Narrating History through the Postcard Archive

In more recent times in publications throughout the postcolonial world unintended consumers of postcards have become primary ones. In many former colonies postcards have become central tools in the reconstruction of postcolonial histories of the subaltern and the deconstruction of the imperious imperatives of postcard makers.¹⁰ Algerian scholar Malek Alloula, for instance, through his study of colonial postcards of Algerian women aimed "to return this immense postcard to its sender," to use the images to explore, explode, indeed, to "exorcize" French colonial myths about Algeria (5). Authors in the Anglophone Caribbean have also used postcards to reflect on the colonial past; their picture books, however, have done different work. The publications generally have framed the old images as historically accurate representations of the past and proffer the picturesque society featured on postcards as visual evidence of the "better days" of colonial rule or the "golden age" of tourism. They not only privilege and reiterate the narrative of picturesque tropicality, originally created to appeal to tourists, but present key features of the islands' carefully crafted touristic image as historical fact to local audiences. This is evident even in the subtitles of the publications that frame the postcards as transparent windows onto "the way we were," to cite the title of a book on Jamaica (*Jamaica*).

The typically brief texts that accompany the visual images in these publications further frame the postcards and photographs as documentary and objective representations of an earlier era. *Nostalgic Nassau*, for example, promises a "nostalgic peep into the past" (1). And, Ann Yates, the author of *Bygone Barbados*, offers "Barbadians and visitors . . . a piece of our past" (ix). On two occasions she describes her picture book as a "history" of Barbados (ix). The author of *The Bahamas in Black and White*, Basil Smith,

¹⁰ See Alloula; Geary; Geary and Webb; Maxwell; Prochaska.

also bills his book as “a valuable record of the way things were” and “a celebration of the work of this elite cadre of photographers who created the images that made the Bahamas famous” (9-10). The producers of these publications reintroduce these images as a visual history of the islands to local audiences (as is suggested in their use of the collective “we” and “us”) and visitors.

These books base much of their claims of historical accuracy or transparency on the simple fact that they use photographic picture postcards, subscribing to the belief that the camera never lies. They work under the assumption that because they feature photographs, these images picture or document “the way we were.” *The Bahamas in Black and White*, in the very title, invokes both its use of photographic images, but also elicits a more colloquial understanding of “black and white,” as something that is clear, documentary, and conclusive. Many of the titles point to the inclusion of photographic materials by way of description, but they also index, by extension, the images’ historical accuracy.

Unsurprisingly, given these documentary claims, several authors interpret the picturesque society featured on postcards as visual evidence of the “better days” of colonial rule. Yates, for example, lauds the images in *Bygone Barbados* as visual documents of the orderliness of Barbadian society in the colonial era: “These photographs give us a wealth of information, *they show a well ordered, law abiding, church going and diligent island . . . with robust commerce, many gracious buildings, schools and churches . . .*” (emphasis mine). The “well-ordered” image of the island she detects in the photographs is precisely the picturesque ideal makers of touristic representations had to project of predominantly black societies to attract hesitant travelers to the tropics.

Some authors designate and celebrate the sites pictured in the cards, particularly the places that epitomized the ordered tropical landscape, as historically important. In *Nostalgic Nassau*, for example, Shelley Malone and Richard Roberts lament the disappearance of the Royal Victoria Hotel’s gardens. They express sorrow that, “[t]he once splendid exotic gardens are gone and sadly she awaits her demise. Ah . . . but, thanks for the memories dear lady” (46). In regard to a postcard of Victoria Avenue, another crowning example of an ordered tropical landscape and ode in appellation to the British Empire, they comment, “[t]oday unfortunately [Victoria Avenue’s] charm is gone, and it more closely resembles a parking lot” (27). They view their project as a way to preserve the past: “Before the best of old Nassau is completely forgotten, the authors hope to create an affection for the good (or bad, depending on your point of view) old days” (1). Many of the sites and buildings they cite as historically valuable are those that were designated as such in early tourism campaigns. Generally, the books position both the societal order and the physical sites (sights) long treasured in the visual economies of tourism and reinscribe these myths and spaces of touristic importance as

the state of the past and historical treasures respectively. They also position this era, which coincides with British colonial rule, as “the good old days,” even though Malone and Roberts concede that some people may differ with their point of view.

Another trait of early postcards resurrected as historical fact in some of these accounts is the idea that the islands remained unchanged, that time, in essence, stood still during the colonial period. The authors of *Nostalgic Nassau* pick up on the “representational sameness” inherent in the postcard image world, but interpret this as indicative of Nassau’s unchanging character during the colonial era. They claim, “[t]he Bahamas has altered more in the last thirty years [the Bahamas gained independence in 1973] than in the previous one hundred and thirty. Most of the early Victorian domestic architecture has disappeared, due to public apathy and the greedy demands of property developers with little appreciation of history” (1). They suggest that in the colonial era the island remained unchanged, but that in the post-Independence period “Old Nassau” had disappeared due to people who lack an appreciation of history. The authors base their historical claims on old postcard representations, which precisely imaged the islands as places outside of history, time, and modernity.

While postcards historically left a space open for competing interpretations, these publications present the materials in a more closed form, siphoning off possibilities for alternate interpretations. Even though at least one author did acknowledge the viability of differing interpretations, the glossy picture books share several organizational and design features, which construct the interpretative frame for these representations. Although all books, of course, structure their narratives, the re-presentation of the multi-sided and multiply-narrated postcards in the contemporary picture books would explicitly shape how the postcards could be read by their newest recipients- contemporary local viewers.

First, the writers seldom contextualize or describe the historical circumstances under which many of the representations they proffer were created; they do not allude to the touristic impetus behind many of these photographic creations. The books do not address the issue of the original (intended) consumers towards whom these images were directed. Without describing the touristic impetus of these postcards, these books can re-circulate the images in a contextual vacuum, or in a new context, as objective images of the region.

Second, few of the publications identify the particular creators or publishers of the postcards. Even when the authors mention the names of photographers in their introductory remarks, they seldom attribute particular representations to specific image-makers. As a result of this authorial erasure, multiple images from numerous creators and publishers are recomposed into an anonymous visual pastiche. The paucity of research into photography in the Anglophone Caribbean in general may account for

this lack of contextual information.¹¹ Many public photography archives in the region, including the National Library of Jamaica or Department of Archives and Public Records in the Bahamas, do not identify photographs or postcards by their makers. If their collections are systemically organized at all, they are classed by subject matter. The non-attribution of these images in the archives and in publications conceals the identity of photographers and presents the representations as collective, impartial, and transparent visual records of the islands.

Third, the mailing addresses and postal markings, which indelibly document many cards' previously traveled international routes (which often appeared on the verso of cards), are seldom reprinted in publications. Interestingly, the postcard's authenticity, according to critic Susan Stewart, was generally based on their being purchased in or sent from their place of origin— they had to be materially connected in some way to this originating locale (138). The absence of postal marks in contemporary publications suggests that the currently perceived authenticity of the cards lay not in their places of origin (i.e. the collections of persons in Europe and the United States). Rather, by downplaying the former transnational origins of many cards, the books' creators imply that the images never left home. Perhaps these earlier routes would disrupt the "rootedness" of the postcards— their ability to speak as objective documents about the origins and history of the islands. The publications reinstate the postcard as "native" to the islands and as "national" documents, when actually both the production and consumption of the postcards were components of a multi-layered transnational process.

Fourth, the printed captions that originally appeared on many of the postcards and the senders' handwritten messages have often been erased in the republication of these materials. The books generally do not reprint the back of the cards. By concealing the earlier personalized reading of the cards, the postcards re-circulate without traces of its previous use, its former interpretations. This erases the history of the cards as sites where competing interpretations sometimes coexisted, where visual representations were explicitly open to subjective rather than objective interpretation.

The contemporary picture book authors' own printed comments, however, may be viewed as a new form of handwriting, the assertion of another private inscription on the postcard archive. The authors' own "handwriting," in this instance the more indelible and authoritative form of the printed word, claims possession of the postcards as evidence of their past. Unlike the singular personal inscription of the cards by early travelers, however, the authors strive towards a more collective reclamation of images, as is evident in the

¹¹ David Boxer's groundbreaking research in *Duperly* (2001), example, promises to transform the field of research into photography and perhaps the photographic archives in the region.

constant referral to “our past” in the publications. However, to authenticate the postcards as objective documents of a collective past, the representations could not bear traces of their previous use by travelers.

That the earlier caption or handwriting could disrupt the easy appropriation of these postcards into contemporary narratives of the picturesque past is evident in what appears to be the deliberate erasure of a caption on a postcard republished in *Nostalgic Nassau*. The authors reprinted a version of Sands’ “Two Natives” postcard, but hid its caption, overlapping it with another card. If the old caption had remained, the majority black population in the Bahamas might find it difficult to interpret such an image as evidence of the “good ole days.” It might even (re) provoke local black contestation of the representation of race in postcards, and resentment of the racist practices so commonplace during the era in which they were produced. Preempting this possibility, the authors erased the old caption. Not unlike early postcard producers, who retouched or changed their captions in an attempt to make the image work for its touristic cause, this action marks an attempt to control the meaning of the cards, although now by removing a caption rather than adding one. Erasure also calls attention to the authors’ self-conscious and active role in selecting and recollecting the past. Like tourists picking postcards of the Anglophone Caribbean to remember their travels, the authors choose particular representations to reconstruct the islands’ history. These authors not only selectively tell the history of the islands through choices they make, but also attempt to direct interpretations of the images for other viewers by not allowing them the opportunity to see postcards in their historically layered complexity.

Postcards and Making History in the Final Instance

The question remains: whose stories do these new narratives of the past tell? Who precisely frames the publications for public consumption and to what end? Revealingly the creators of all these books and the most avid collectors of postcards and photographs in the Bahamas and Jamaica are all from the white elite classes of these societies (with few exceptions). The racial and class backgrounds of the collectors, although not determining factors, do provide some perspective on their possible interest in and use of these colonial and touristic representations. Significantly, under colonialism generally, and within the race and class hierarchies institutionalized under this system, white elites garnered economic and political privileges on the islands. They occupied the highest rungs on the social ladder (under British colonial elites). Members of this group were also often the economic and social benefactors of tourism.¹² Given this background, perhaps it is not

¹² White mercantile elites benefited most economically from the fruits of the travel industry, as tourists frequented their businesses in port districts. Moreover, tourists

surprising that white collectors would be attracted to images of the colonial era and the heyday of tourism and would position these representations as “the good days.” Of course, not all collectors and compilers of these books aim consciously to venerate the colonial past. Indeed, they may simply organize the books, their recollections, based on their own experiences and understandings of the past (their “private albums”), revisiting, visualizing, and even celebrating their histories from their own perspectives. Through their published postcard collections they can recreate the social world that they, or their families before them, once inhabited. In this respect, the publications may be viewed very literally as private albums, personal visual records, of the past. Author of a postcard book on Trinidad, Joseph Abdo Sabga, concedes as much when he prefaces his publication with the words: “I hope that you will find this selection to be an interesting one, bringing back fond memories, and acting as a personal album on a Journey of Memories” (xii).

Typically, this private commemoration of the good old colonial days, however, is seldom presented as a select view of the history of the islands, but rather as a journey of memories on which all viewers can personally embark. As such, the books often posit that socially and economically society as a whole was better off during colonialism. Regardless of the various authors’ motivations, when most of the publications seem to re-present history from similar (white elite) perspectives, this version of history has become reified. In this way, as Farmer points out, many of these publications engage in and authorize a kind of “romantic amnesia, for in fact ‘the good ole days’ weren’t that good for many members of these societies.”

The picturesque ideal, which many postcards of the islands conjure, was created both as parts of and against the backdrop of social and political repression of the majority of the population. The images presented on postcards obviously gloss over the conditions of segregation and discrimination under which much of the islands’ inhabitants suffered during colonialism, and in the name of tourism. The same hotel that Malone and Boyd picture, for example, and recall nostalgically with the words “thanks for the memories, dear lady” was described by black Bahamian suffragette, Doris Johnson, as “the symbol of white superiority” in her recollections (10). The hotel was one of the last establishments to be desegregated in Nassau. Thus the colonial nostalgia in which many of these books engage proffers a very select version of history that can naturalize and neutralize the violence of colonialism and tourism, presenting it to contemporary audiences as an ideal period in their history. In this process, the same images used to sell

had social cache for local whites; they brought modernity to the colonial outposts. During the winter tourist season elites enjoyed rubbing shoulders with metropolitan travelers and took advantage of the modern entertainments and amenities in hotels. These hotels were frequently off limits to blacks until the mid twentieth century.

the islands to a tourist clientele a century ago have more recently been re-employed to sell this colonial past to the islands' contemporary inhabitants.

Re-envisioning the History of the West Indies Postcard: The *Bahamian Visions* Exhibition

It was in the context of the reappearance of the picturesque postcard wearing the invisible mask of history that I curated in an exhibition entitled *Bahamian Visions* at the National Art Gallery of the Bahamas in 2003, which allowed me as an art historian to add a footnote to the complicated biography of the West Indies postcard. The exhibition, composed of thirty turn-of-the-twentieth-century photographs of the Bahamas and their postcard descendents, attempted to provide an alternate vision of postcards from that presented in the picture books. If the postcard publications had precisely re-presented the postcards as "history" by suppressing (or ignoring) the motivations surrounding the creation of the images and by erasing alternate interpretations of these representations, *Bahamian Visions* attempted to make this history of production and consumption a part of the viewing experience of the exhibition. The show foregrounded the history of the active manufacture of the islands' natural tropical image.

Visitors to *Bahamian Visions* immediately encountered explanatory wall text, which outlined the circumstances under which the tourism-oriented photographs and postcards were produced. Viewers, who were patient enough to scan the eight panels before the photographs captured their attention, were introduced to three photographers, whose works the exhibition featured: American photographers William Henry Jackson (1843-1942) and Jacob Frank Coonley (1832-unknown) and Bahamian James Osborne Sands (1885-1978). They learnt that the photographers were hired by an American hotelier, the British colonial government, and the local tourism promotional board, respectively, to create alluringly picturesque representations of the winter resort. The emphasis on particular image makers and their patrons aimed to counter the non-attribution of these representations to specific visual authors in popular postcard publications. While the show was divided into three, highlighting the individual vision of each photographer, their singular focus on very select motifs called attention to the limited scope of a more wide-ranging touristic vision of the islands.

Each section of the exhibition contained "postcard modules," where one photograph was accompanied by four or five postcards permutations of the same image. The reproductions gave the photographs new "life," as Susan Stewart puts it, through their miniaturization (Stewart 60). The modules drew attention to the various devices photographers used to produce and transform the meaning of a single photographic image. They visualized, to quote Stuart Hall, the "active labor of making things mean" both through the active selection of and construction of subject matter

and in the development and post-development phase of production (64 qtd. in Albers and James 137).

A postcard module section focused on one of the most popular and enduring photographs of the Bahamas, an image by Coonley entitled *On the Way to Market* (1888-1904). The image features a black vendor posed with a basket of turkeys on her head. The rare studio photograph offered a unique glimpse of, and behind, the theatrical stage on which the island's touristic image was performed. In other words, the image, to recall Hall, called attention to the "active labor" of creating the island's touristic image. Standing before the album in print, viewers could easily recreate the moment of the photograph's production. In the image palm fronds, prerequisite props in the recreation of a tropical island scene, look hurriedly and determinately strewn across the background and floor of the photographer's studio. The black woman also seems pulled into this makeshift fabricated world. A reluctant inhabitant of the studio's landscape, she regards the photographer with cool nonchalance, seemingly as indifferent to his presence as the turkeys upon her head. In addition to the model and backdrop, the photograph reveals the wider studio environment, including the window that Coonley uses as a light source. The palm backdrop, Anderson's wooden pose, the turkey props, and studio lighting all point to the various devices used to construct the island's touristic image.

While the early print leaves its photographic slip hanging (showing many of the studio props used to create the image), subsequent postcard reproductions of the image, also featured in the exhibition, erased or downplayed these elements over time. In a version of the photograph postmarked 1910, most of the details of the studio's interior, the Brechtian backstage, were cropped out of the image. A subsequent reproduction of the postcard dating from 1915-1930, focused even more squarely on the vendor and her fowl. The image creates the impression that the photograph was shot outdoors in a tropical landscape rather than in a studio environment. Interestingly, the back of the postcard gave credit to another photographer altogether, James Sands, who likely purchased Coonley's glass plates when he took over the New Yorker's studio in 1904. Sands further transformed the image through hand painting. He added a light azure blue to the sky and forest green to the palms, more faithfully representing the exterior landscape. The sequence of images provided a visual time lapse, allowing visitors to inspect the "naturalization" of the studio construction over time. Fittingly, one sender of a version of the postcard scrawled across the back of the representation: "This picture is natural," even though the different versions of the *On the Way to Market* betrayed anything but their "naturalness." This hand written appraisal of the image, dating from 1910, also appeared in the module; casting a literal spotlight on the frequently blighted back of the postcard and former interpretations of the image. The purchaser's inscription, their insistence on the "naturalness" of the representation,

exposed another layer in the active production of the meaning of the postcard.

Beyond deconstructing the photograph's naturalizing devices, the module put the postcard's century-long social biography on exhibition. The last manifestation of the viewcard included in the display appeared as late as 1996, when a locally-based artist and collector, the late Brent Malone, republished a series of Coonley's photographs as postcards. Interestingly, Malone restored the photograph to its full composition for the first time in approximately fifty years. He also colored the image in faded pastel colors, putting a rose-tinted patina of the past on the photograph. The artist encased the image in a frame composed of straw, a material associated with market vendors in contemporary Bahamian society. Perhaps the straw provided a late twentieth-century addition to the ever-changing tropes of tropicality. Overall, the module –in contrast to the picture books that frame single postcards as yielding a fixed or transparent meaning– animated a history of the postcard from its “natural production” through its century-long reproduction, during which the image, its interpretation, and even its author, changed.

While the *Turkey Vendor* drew attention to the tropical world Coonley recreated in his studio and how subsequent cropping or hand painting transformed that image over time, another module focused on changing captions and unchanging representational genres. One sequence of images started with a Sands photograph and postcard captioned *Two Natives*, a title identical to the postcard I found in the antique shop. While the image was different from my postcard, it included many of the visual ingredients of my acquisition: a young black man, on a donkey drawn cart, surrounded by bougainvillea. Sands would return to this theme throughout his half-century long career, rearranging the same photographic icons as if they were well-worn props in a recurring theatrical production. But there were variations on the theme. One card produced between 1915-1930, for instance, was creatively titled “Three Natives” and included two black men instead of one. In addition to slight changes in the visual formula, on occasion the representation circulated devoid of its more familiar caption. A version of the “Two Natives” postcard was also published under the caption “Typical Gateway,” drawing attention away from the man and mule altogether and directing it to the flowering archway. The caption change within the repeating same representational genre highlighted the seemingly arbitrary attachment of captions in general, and essentially undermined “the authority” of the printed text. How did the postcard producer go about formulating a textual summation of the visual image? What factors, for instance, informed Sands' change of caption from the derogatory *Two Natives* to the more benign *Typical Gateway*? How, given the changing script of the postcard, should contemporary viewers interpret the meaning of these images historically and the more recent captioning (or decaptioning) or historical narration of these representations?

Cognizant of how local interpretations had been written out of the postcard archive, museum visitors were invited to leave their own captions, names, and addresses on (caption-less) reproductions of the *Two Natives* and *On the Way to Market* postcards. The commentaries remained on view in the exhibition supplementing, indeed becoming an integral part of, the visual history of the images. How would contemporary Bahamian viewers respond to the *Two Natives* image my grandmother so detested? Might a local museum-goer recognize some of the postcardized personages and identify photographic subjects who had been rendered anonymous caricatures in the visual economy of tourism? Could the public postcards function as private mementoes of a family member, offering viewers an unexpected glimpse of a loved one?

While many exhibition visitors' commentaries were not revelatory in the ways I anticipated, they did reveal an interesting new interpretative chapter in the biography of the postcards. If the postcard publications invoked a colonial nostalgia, several captions revealed that viewers framed the images as respectable representations of hard-working black or "African," as one museum-goer specified, Bahamians. As a resident of Fresh Creek, Andros explained on the back of the *On the Way to Market* postcard, "This woman looks as though she is struggling to make enough money to buy food. She look like she need special help, but will be successful through all her trials." Another museum-goer from Nassau reiterated, "Hard days work is never done." A California resident added, "He knows how much we can bear." Despite the woman's seeming tribulations, many museum visitors interpreted the woman as a "Strong black woman." Similar sentiments regarding economic toil were expressed on the back of the *Two Natives* image, where one visitor from Fort Lauderdale wrote, "Earning his keep 'another day, another dollar.'" The images, which circulated as commodities in the leisure industry at the turn of the twentieth century, were primarily interpreted as documents of black labor and hardship.

Some exhibition visitors were specifically attentive to the labor of blacks as photographic subjects and the circumstances surrounding their "postcardization." One resident of Cable Beach, Nassau, tried to recreate the turkey vendor's thoughts as Coonley positioned her in front of the camera's viewfinder: "I'm tired and dislike my photo being taken!" Such a comment thoroughly denaturalized the picture-taking process and cast a spotlight on the power relations between the photographer and his photographic subject. What did the vendor make of her sudden place on the photographer's stage? What did she understand, what did Coonley reveal, about the fate of her photographic image? Did she ever walk, in the course of her daily routine, by a store and see her own visage staring out at her from a postcard rack? Would such an encounter be disquieting or heartening? The museum commentator's remarks, however, do not convey victimhood, but defiance. They plainly suggest that within the complex and unknowable circumstances that led to

the production of the photograph, the vendor's very disposition communicates some level of agency, if not resistance.

Another exhibition visitor implored on the back of the image of the turkey vendor "Who is this Lady? What was her name?" searching for the story of the woman who came to inhabit the picture. The two questions, of course, begged of the viewcard information it had historically denied. If the postcard archive did not document the interpretations of many black residents, they even less frequently revealed anything about their black protagonists. The "turkey vendor," however, was a somewhat unique case. Indeed, in large part because of her photographic celebrity, when the woman who posed in the postcard died it made front page news, even in the organ for the white elite, *The Nassau Guardian* (NG 16 September 1908). The report revealed that the "hawker of poultry and . . . the original of the well known photograph (taken several years ago) of a woman with a basket of turkeys and chickens on her head," was named Lizzie Anderson. It also detailed that she met an untimely death and was found with her neck broken at the bottom of a well. The exhibition and, more specifically, the catalogue were able, at the very least, to offer an answer to one of the inquisitive museum goer's questions; they gave Anderson, formerly an anonymous black face who stared out of the world of postcards, a name.

Conclusion

Overall, the exhibition offered another public display of twentieth century photographs and postcards, presenting another way of visualizing the history of these images and the narratives of history they enable and disable. Unlike the form and content of the postcard publications, which organized the viewcards into the neat and unfolding narrative of a book, the display across the museum's walls allowed a more filmic and fragmentary visual experience of the images, their replays and recasting over time and space. The exhibition highlighted the various devices used in the creation of the postcard's footage and looped the same visual images on the recurring wheel of touristic representations. This curatorial strategy aimed to recognize and reproduce the forms of critique long made about postcard representations. Recall that since the early twentieth century black observers had contested the postcard makers' singular focus on certain "native scenes" and the "methods" they employed to perpetuate these representations. *Bahamian Visions* refracted the postcards through the prism of these historical critiques, interpretations long segregated from the postcard archive. By allowing these perspectives to share the visual stage with the history of the postcards and their makers and having (local) viewers leave concrete traces on the archive; the exhibition attempted simultaneously to display a history of tourism-oriented photographs, to call attention to the making and unmaking of historical sources and postcard archives and, perhaps ambitiously, to inform and transform the "making of *history* in the final instance" (Trouillot 26).

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Calenda: The Rise and Decline of a Cultural Image

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It is with the French Creole world, more so than the Spanish or the English, that the cultural image *calenda* came to be associated, in spite of the fact that from the earliest citations of the word it was deliberately identified with the Spanish. Also, remarkably enough, in spite of geographical proximity and constant migration, the cultural image *calenda* was never a feature of those Caribbean islands that were English for most of their history. The paradox in all of this is that the *calenda* was said to be African in origin. The fact is, however, that one has to make a distinction between the cultural feature itself, which no doubt had African roots, and the label it acquired in the French Creole world, which was the work of French writers. In a 2004 article Roberts discusses the origin and associations of the word *calenda*; here the cultural image will be examined.

When Jean Labat introduced the word *calenda* to the French reading public in 1722, he said that it referred to a specific dance apparently performed by a specific ethnic group: "It comes from the Guinea coast and apparently from the Kingdom of Arda." ([1722] 1724 2:51). Labat lived and worked in the smaller French Caribbean islands from 1694 to 1705, but it was to the year 1698 and to the slaves in Martinique that he was referring. Labat's tentative location of the geographical origin of the *calenda* in Dahomey (modern-day Benin) was substantially based on the fact that it is the place from where a great number of the slaves on his plantation in Martinique came. Labat claimed that he learnt their language and thus found out more about their culture.

In his presentation of the dance, Labat described the movements of the dancers together with the musical accompaniment. He also gives assessments of and reactions to the dance. This is what he said about the formation and the movements of the dancers:

The dancers are in two lines, one facing the other, the men on one side and the women on the other. Those who are tired dancing and the spectators

