

Lallani, Shayan S. "Reimagining a Tropical Paradise: The Circulation of Imperial Ideologies in Early-Twentieth-Century Caribbean Cruise Guidebooks." *Journal of Tourism History* 17(1): 34-50

ABSTRACT: This article argues that early-twentieth-century cruise guidebooks deployed ideologies about Caribbean spaces and cultures constructed through imperial conquest. It examines how two influential travel writers, Harry L. Foster and Eleanor Early, shaped touristic perceptions of the region and its inhabitants. Unlike shipping lines such as the United Fruit Company, which presented a tropical paradise for overworked urbanites to regain their health, these cruise guides sought to move beyond such stereotypes by emphasising the distinctiveness of Caribbean nations. However, this emphasis on difference was framed through imperial ideologies. Consequently, while Foster and Early urged cruise passengers to avoid oversimplifying the Caribbean, their narratives ultimately encouraged travellers to perceive the region and its inhabitants using ideologies forged through western conquest. In doing so, these cruise guidebooks reproduced the language of empire to reimagine the Caribbean as a leisure destination for a growing US market.

KEYWORDS: Cruise industry; Travel writing; Caribbean tourism

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Introduction

Every year, around 30 million tourists visit the Caribbean—many of these by cruise ship. Cruise tourists seek the sun, sand, and sea that feature in modern marketing strategies for the region, especially in campaigns by the largest mass-market lines. Such commercials, alongside popular media representations of the Caribbean, may even tempt us to believe that these stereotypes are inherent and timeless. One need not look past Bacardí commercials featuring rum-happy tourists partying amongst palm trees and turquoise seas for proof of that notion. However, the Caribbean has not always been known to tourists through these anachronistic stereotypes portraying pre-industrial islands. Centuries of European colonial travel writing represented the region as disease-ridden and uncivilized, instilling fear in audiences back home. It was only when white entrepreneurs sensed a potential for profit in marketing the Caribbean as a leisure destination that a soon-to-be burgeoning tourism industry invested in reimagining the Caribbean as a tropical paradise, which travel writing further echoed.¹

Recent historical scholarship has shown that the early-twentieth century passenger shipping industry advanced lengthy campaigns to reimagine the Caribbean for American travelers. Especially important was the United Fruit Company (UFC), which carried passengers onboard their ‘banana boats’ to generate additional revenue from their fruit shipping business. As the historian James W. Martin argued, portraying the Caribbean as a therapeutic haven for

¹ Krista Thompson examines the circulation of visual representations of Jamaica and the Bahamas through the British Empire, arguing that the modern strategy of marketing the Caribbean as a picturesque originated in the late nineteenth century when colonial officials and English artists represented those islands as such, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). Catherine Cocks argues that, between the late nineteenth and mid twentieth centuries, tourism boosters circulated representations of the Caribbean as rejuvenating to counteract stereotypes of the region as disease-ridden, thereby promoting leisure travel there. *Tropical Whites: The Rise of the Tourist South in the Americas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013). Mimi Sheller studied how romanticized imperial imaginaries of the Caribbean influenced its representation in modern tourism marketing, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (London: Routledge, 2003).

overworked urbanites—an escape from the rhythms of capitalism—was central to United Fruit’s marketing strategy. Cruise itineraries distributed to passengers conveyed that they would return home from their voyages reinvigorated, “better fitted for the hurly-burly of the feverish civilization of which [they] are a part.” By the late 1920s, UFC’s cruises showcased this homogenous vision of tropicity—the ‘Golden Caribbean’—for 70,000 tourists annually.² Around the same time, transatlantic passenger shipping companies used similar strategies to offer Caribbean cruises as a seasonal revenue stream.

Travel writers were instrumental in reimagining the Caribbean as a leisure destination for American cruise tourists in the early twentieth century,³ helping to advance the interests of the United Fruit Company as an agent of US imperialism.⁴ However, the relationship between authors writing about Caribbean cruises and travel companies offering these vacations was far from straightforward. Unlike the United Fruit Company—which homogenized the Caribbean as

² James W. Martin, “The United Fruit Company’s Tourist Business and the Creation of the “Golden Caribbean,” 1899-1940,” *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 8, no. 2 (2016), 238-62; *Banana Cowboys: The United Fruit Company and the Culture of Corporate Colonialism* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018). Martin studies the United Fruit Company’s role in developing Caribbean tourism in the early twentieth century. UFC ships transported Anglo-American passengers to company banana enclaves, spaces purposefully curated to showcase for tourists the benevolence of empire displays of seemingly happy Latin American laborers engaging with state-of-the-art American technology.

³ Also important to the construction of a US-Caribbean tourism industry was a growing airline industry, which transported American tourists to the Caribbean and perpetuated the sun, sand, and sea stereotype that industry actors used to market the region. Blake C. Scott traces the development of US-Caribbean routes, as well as the cultural implications of this space and time compression. “Changing Caribbean Routes: The Rise of International Air Travel,” in *The Business of Leisure: Tourism History in Latin America and the Caribbean*, edited by Andrew Grant Wood (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021): 67-84.

⁴ Historical scholarship on Caribbean tourism demonstrates that travel writers can serve the goals of empire by promoting imperial narratives and facilitating travel through mobility networks established by colonization. See for example the work of Peter Hulme, “Sunny Tropic Scenes: U.S. Travel Writers in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba,” in *American Travel Writing and Empire*, ed. Susan Castillo and David Seed, Liverpool University Press (2009); Dennis Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise: US Tourism and Empire in Twentieth-Century Latin America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). While homogenizing the Caribbean and Latin America was a dominant theme in travel writing, there were certainly exceptions to this. Ricardo D. Salvatore argues that nineteenth century travel writers attempted to homogenize South Americans, but the diversity that they witnessed worked against this goal. These texts instead exhibited an oversimplified mosaic of local inhabitants and their cultures. “North American travel narratives and the ordering/othering of South America (c. 1810–1860),” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 9, no. 1 (1996): 85-110.

an anachronistic space of mystery and therapeutic possibilities,⁵ without substantial regard for the region's distinct cultures nor the colonial histories informing these differences—some of the most popular cruise guidebooks of the time attempted to venture beyond this stereotype by highlighting the differences among Caribbean destinations and cultures. At times, these cruise guidebooks even critiqued literature advancing the idyllic paradise stereotype, a romanticized trope that UFC promoted exhaustively. However, even as travel writers cautioned cruise passengers against homogenizing the Caribbean—encouraging them to look beyond stereotypes about tropicity advanced by US tourism boosters as they toured different ports of call—their ideas of cultural difference reproduced the language of both European colonialism and US imperialism to discuss cultural encounters. In turn, the authors of cruise guidebook perpetuated cultural ideologies about Caribbean cultures well into the second half of the twentieth century, when such ideologies were important to the emerging mass-market cruise industry's promotional campaigns for the Caribbean.

This article argues that early-twentieth-century cruise guidebooks deployed ideologies about Caribbean spaces and cultures constructed through imperial conquest. It examines cruise guidebooks authored by two prolific American travel writers: Harry L. Foster and Eleanor Early.

Compared to passenger shipping lines offering Caribbean cruises at this time, which romanticized the region through stereotypes about its therapeutic properties, Foster and Early opposed the homogenizing rhetoric advanced by shipping companies that marketed the Caribbean as a picturesque haven. Yet, both authors deployed ideologies constructed through imperial conquest in representing Caribbean cultures for a growing number of American tourists,

⁵ Martin, "The United Fruit Company's Tourist Business."

ultimately supporting shipping lines that leveraged and expanded colonial mobility networks to exploit the region for the leisure of western audiences.

Eurocentric Ideologies about the ‘New World’

Early-twentieth century tourism companies and travel writers advanced visions of a homogenized Caribbean sociocultural landscape in an effort to erase negative ideologies based in European colonization, which began when Christopher Columbus set foot in the land now called the Bahamas in 1492. Known by Indigenous inhabitants as Guanahani, the Italian explorer was quick to rename it San Salvador. This act signified the beginning of a cultural imperialism project in which Europeans shaped the ‘New World’ to advance geography, botany, and anthropology, in the process classifying, governing, and sometimes exterminating its inhabitants.⁶ In her study of travel accounts, Mary Louise Pratt called these frontiers “contact zones” – spaces where cultures meet with one another, often interacting along unequal axes of power.⁷

Colonial control over Indigenous inhabitants allowed European administrators to circulate the stereotypes they developed about the Americas, first and foremost through travel writing consumed by fascinated masses in the metropole. Columbus’ voyages were a basis for the formation of Eurocentric ideologies about the region – ways of understanding the Americas (and eventually the non-European world at large) conceived through stereotypes formed in contact zones that rested on the metropole’s perceived inherent superiority over its peripheries. Views that were constructed through colonial travel writing and taken as innate in European

⁶ Donald E. Pease, “New Perspectives on U.S. Culture and Imperialism,” in *Cultures of Imperialism*, edited by Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 26-27.

⁷ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 2007).

knowledge production included representations of the Americas as disease-ridden, anachronistic, and uncivilized, and its Indigenous inhabitants as simplistic, subservient, and childlike. By contrast, Europeans were portrayed as rational, educated, intelligent, and civilized. European officials and intellectuals justified conquest through these ideas by suggesting that colonial rule brought order to a 'New World' which needed it, and any commodities extracted to strengthen European economies were the reward for this selfless paternalism. However, these ideas were flawed from their inception because they assumed a timeless cultural, intellectual, social, political, and technological superiority of Europe over the Americas, which they proposed led to the metropole's economic dominance. In reality, it was wealth generated through colonial exploitation that paved the path for the Industrial Revolution and stagnated economic development outside of Europe.⁸

The circulation of European travel accounts was central to popularizing demeaning perceptions about the Americas. Explorers after Columbus took these ideas as starting points for their own encounters with Indigenous cultures, leading to the production of more stereotypes along the same vein. As more travel writers yet wrote about their encounters with other societies through a lens that positioned European cultures and knowledge as inherently superior, a Eurocentric way of understanding the peripheral world began to emerge for intellectuals to conceive of faraway lands.⁹ For colonial forces, travel writing also served a more pragmatic purpose, for the ideologies embedded within these texts helped justify European control over the inhabitants of distant territories.¹⁰

⁸ James M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 1993).

⁹ These intellectuals included the French philosopher Michel de Montaigne, Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, and German geographer Alexander von Humboldt, among others. While they differed in their conceptions of the Americas, each one's perspective was based in colonial ideologies.

¹⁰ Scott, *Unpacked*, 113.

Cruising the Caribbean Sea

The early-twentieth century U.S.-Caribbean cruise industry was built on the back of European empire. The United States had emerged as a key player in advancing imperial interests in the Caribbean, especially as European colonial power started to decline in the region. Following the Spanish-American War, the United States acquired Puerto Rico and established temporary control over Cuba, enforced by the Platt Amendment.¹¹ Recognizing the economic potential and strategic military importance of the Caribbean, the United States increasingly intervened in the region's affairs—economically, politically, and militarily—throughout the first half of the century.

The advancement of U.S. empire and tourism in the Caribbean were closely interconnected. U.S. intervention strengthened mobility networks created during European colonialism, making the Caribbean more accessible to American tourists—including the many early-twentieth century travel writers who write about their adventures here—and serving as the groundwork for a burgeoning tourism industry that would eventually attract a mass-market audience. U.S. activities in the Caribbean also helped to promote it as an attractive destination. The writer Frederick A. Ober stated that, while explorers have long been familiar with the Caribbean—alluding to the history of European colonialism—it only recently became known to the American public. Ober reasoned that the Spanish-American War brought attention to the Caribbean as a potential vacation destination. He heralded that American tourists had “cause for congratulations” owing to the increasing accessibility of the Caribbean cruises. Ober then detailed attractions in the ports of the Bahamas, Bermuda, Cuba, Jamaica, Dominican Republic,

¹¹ For background on the Platt Amendment and how the United States used it to exercise authority over Cuba, see Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba Under the Platt Amendment, 1902-1934* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986). The U.S. detention facility Guantanamo Bay exemplifies the continuing political implications of the Platt Amendment.

and Puerto Rico.¹² Even as military and religious authorities imposed European conceptions of civilization on Caribbean populations and capitalists planned economic investments therein,¹³ mass-media publications encouraged Americans to tour those the islands.¹⁴ *The New York Times* advertised the publication of a new book entitled *Puerto Rico and Its Resources*, marketed in part to prospective travelers who desired an “account of the people, land, and products.”¹⁵ Perhaps more visibly, attendees at the Charleston Exposition of 1902, held in South Carolina, viewed displays depicting the resources and industries of Puerto Rico and Cuba.¹⁶

Americans wishing to satisfy curiosities about the Caribbean through cruising had a few companies to choose from. Hamburg-American advertised its 1907 cruises to Americans. Its 28-day voyages sailed from New York to “West Indies” destinations such as Cuba, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, St. Thomas, Barbados, Trinidad, Martinique, and Nassau.¹⁷ North German Lloyd and White Star also advertised cruises from New York to the “West Indies” in the 1914 season.¹⁸

Following European shipping magnates, American companies began to offer cruises. Some of the most prominent shipping companies based in the United States targeted non-elites with voyages to the Caribbean, emphasizing escapism as opposed to the luxury promised by such European lines as HAPAG. Ober himself cited Ward Line in speaking to these cruises accessible to the American public.¹⁹ American Line’s 1911 cruises to the West Indies, 31 days long, started

¹² Frederick A. Ober, “A Winter Cruise in the Caribbean Sea,” *Town and Country*, January 17, 1903, 24, ProQuest Databases.

¹³ “Reforms in Puerto Rico: Archbishop Chappelle Plans to Teach the People the Value of American Control,” *New York Times* January 7, 1899, ProQuest Databases; “Episcopalians' Puerto Rican Plans,” *New York Times*, January 8, 1899, ProQuest Databases; “To Develop Puerto Rico: Chicago Capitalists Said to be Planning Numerous Enterprises in the Island,” *New York Times* January 8, 1899, ProQuest Databases.

¹⁴ Ober, “A Winter Cruise in the Caribbean Sea.”

¹⁵ “Puerto Rico and its Resources,” *New York Times*, January 7, 1899, ProQuest Databases.

¹⁶ James B. Townsend, “A Great Southern Exposition,” *The Cosmopolitan*, March 1902, 523, ProQuest Databases.

¹⁷ “The Hamburg-America Cruises, *Town and Country*, January 12, 1907, 42, ProQuest Databases.

¹⁸ “Display Ad 18,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1913, ProQuest Databases.

¹⁹ Ober, “A Winter Cruise in the Caribbean Sea.”

at US \$150.²⁰ For comparison, state and local government workers around this time earned an annual income of US \$699.²¹ While an American Line cruise would likely have been unaffordable to the average American, that vacation would be feasible for an upper-middle class individual. Nevertheless, cruising to the Caribbean before the First World War remained an unpopular vacation choice, cost-prohibitive and generally more attractive to adventurous tourists.²²

The most instrumental American shipping line was the United Fruit Company (UFC), an agricultural enterprise dealing in bananas founded in 1899 through a merger between Boston Fruit Company and the Tropical Trading and Transport Company.²³ The company used cruises, often two or three weeks in length²⁴ and initially for only 60 first-class passengers,²⁵ to increase the profitability of their fruit venture.²⁶ Its demographic was white, middle-class urbanites, especially the managerial class of the American business community. UFC targeted those who had the funds to escape urbanity.²⁷ Its brochures promoting Caribbean cruise tourism as an opportunity for “rest and recreation” with the goal of offering “health and happiness” to tired office workers (**Figure 1**).²⁸

²⁰ “West Indies, South America and the Panama Canal,” *New York Observer and Chronicle*, October 20, 1910, 509, ProQuest Databases.

²¹ “Income and Prices 1900—1999,” U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Germany, accessed September 27, 2021, https://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/his/e_prices1.htm.

²² L.J. Lawton and R.W. Butler, “Cruise Ship Industry—Patterns in the Caribbean 1880–1986,” *Tourism Management* 8, no. 4 (1987): 331.

²³ Marcelo Bucheli, *Bananas and Business: The United Fruit Company in Colombia, 1899–2000* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 47.

²⁴ United Fruit Company Great White Fleet Brochure, n.d, RL.11193, Box 9, Folder “Tourism & Travel—Cruise Lines 1901-1955,” Baden Collection of Print Ads, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Raleigh, North Carolina.

²⁵ John S. Hogue, “Cruise Ship Diplomacy: Making US leisure and power in the Anglophone Caribbean, 1900–1973,” PhD diss. (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2013), 32.

²⁶ Martin, “The United Fruit Company’s Tourist Business,” 240.

²⁷ Martin, “The United Fruit Company’s Tourist Business,” 241–46; James W. Martin, “Mapping an Empire: Tourist Cartographies of the Caribbean in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Early Popular Visual Culture* 9, no. 1 (2011): 11–12.

²⁸ *United Fruit Company*, “The Call of the Caribbean,” 1916, <https://archive.org/details/UnitedFruitCompanySteamshipService1916A>.

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MEXICO CUBA SOUTH AMERICA

SAILING UNDER THE AMERICAN FLAG

UNITED FRUIT COMPANY STEAMSHIP SERVICE

Figure 1. United Fruit Company, "The Call of the Caribbean," 1916, <https://archive.org/details/UnitedFruitCompanySteamshipService1915A>.

The construction of the Panama Canal led to popular media representations depicting neighboring tropics tamed by American modernity; though Panama is geographically marginal to the Caribbean, these representations enticed American steamship lines to expand their offerings to warmer, southern destinations more broadly, which included the expansion of cruises into the Caribbean. United States Congress authorized the construction of the Canal in 1902 under the Spooner Act. Construction began in 1904. Over the next decade of work, companies and tourists alike expressed fascination with the project, steamship lines among them. Thousands of Americans visited the Canal during its construction to view and photograph the conquest of western modernity over Southern nature.²⁹ They felt safe to do so because it was during American interventions in Panama and Cuba that dedicated teams combatted malaria and yellow fever. Disease rates among white canal workers dropped significantly by 1906. US Army Physician William C. Gorgas proclaimed American victory over tropical disease at the American Medical Association conference in 1909, stating, “The white man can live in the tropics and enjoy as good health as he would have if living in the temperate zone. This has been demonstrated both by our two military occupations of Cuba and by our present occupancy of Panama.” The proclamation made national headlines, encouraging tourists to seek pleasure in the Caribbean, imagined as a wonderland rather than a graveyard with American imperialism to thank for the shift. The United Fruit Company acknowledged that the Canal increased touristic interest in Caribbean nations and targeted that demand. It renovated its small steamships into luxurious vessels with increased capacities, now capable of carrying both tourists and bananas to support UFC’s enterprise.³⁰

²⁹ Jeremy Sherman Snapp, *Destiny by Design: The Construction of the Panama Canal* (Lopez Island, WA: Pacific Heritage Press, 2000), 11.

³⁰ Blake Scott, “From Disease to Desire: The Rise of Tourism at the Panama Canal,” *Environmental History* 21, no. 2 (2016): 270-75.

Alongside first-hand accounts from medical professionals such as Gorgas, marketing rhetoric about Caribbean climate and societies from the United Fruit Company was instrumental in countering demeaning stereotypes about disease and cannibalism that were produced through European colonialism, which in turn earmarked the region as unfit for American tourism.³¹ Brochures promoting UFC's cruises told tourists of ports “through the Golden Caribbean” where pirates buried their treasures centuries ago, romanticizing the destination (**Figure 2**).³² UFC's New York City ticket office even displayed material culture evoking escapism. An office worker visiting the ticket office in 1928 would have encountered references to tropicality, encouraging him to enjoy a trip away from his fast-paced life as a bureaucrat. For onlookers, the ticket office promised both mystery and adventure. The décor was vaguely Spanish-American and ticket agents provided “characteristic” Latin American hospitality by being cheerful, friendly, and patient. The floors had Mayan patterns, while carved furniture and tropical plants were found throughout the space.³³ In turn, the office advanced stereotypical themes of local subservience and friendliness, as well as warm, picturesque lands untouched by industrial modernity. The anachronistic characterization of Caribbean lands echoed colonial stereotypes advanced by eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century European artists and writers, who romanticized the region as an idyllic paradise that stood in contrast to European ‘modernity.’

³¹ Cocks, “The Pleasures of Degeneration;” Martin, “The United Fruit Company’s Tourist Business,” 239, 244; Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 30, 204.

³² United Fruit Company, “There the Pirates Hid Their Gold,” 1915, <https://archive.org/details/UnitedFruitCompanySteamshipService1915A>.

³³ Martin, “The United Fruit Company’s Tourist Business,” 246, 256.

THE GREAT WHITE FLEET

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 —from the spacious deck of a GREAT WHITE FLEET Ship, with the constant charm of golden sunshine, the purple of tropic palms, and the welcome of a radiant sea
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Map labels: CUBA, JAMAICA, PANAMA CANAL, CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA, COLOMBIA, LINES TO SOUTH AMERICA.

Figure 2. United Fruit Company, "There the Pirates Hid Their Gold," 1915, <https://archive.org/details/UnitedFruitCompanySteamshipService1915A>.

The stereotypes UFC deployed in the office to promote Caribbean tourism were equally prominent on its cruises. Outside-facing staterooms encouraged passengers to experience the “tropical waters,” as did the “wide and spacious” promenade decks with considerable space to enjoy the Caribbean sun.³⁴ Palm courts, sitting rooms that surrounded passengers with foliage and cane furniture, immersed passengers in tropicality. Mediating tropicality through cultural Americanization was an important part of UFC’s cruise offerings, and technology was key to mediation. Passengers experienced the pinnacle of American modernity through technology from industrialized societies; these were fast ships with state-of-the-art air conditioning designed to protect fruit and passengers from the muggy tropical climate.³⁵ The onboard availability of sound movies offered sailing American tourists the same innovations they enjoyed on land, painting the cruise experience as both modern and comfortable. Any remaining doubts that passengers would be sailing onboard a decisively Americanized space modernity were erased by promise of state-of-the-art “spotless” and “sleek white liner[s], air-conditioned throughout.”³⁶

UFC’s deployment of Americanization to mediate tropicality continued at port,³⁷ when the company transported passengers to its shoreside banana enclaves. Tourists experienced Caribbean nations from the comfort of railway and motorcar technology. Even though they witnessed the production of bananas, these excursions were primarily meant to showcase the benevolence of American empire. In these culturally sanitized front regions, tourists saw the technological innovations that permitted the efficient production and transportation of cash crops, as well as the seemingly happy indigenous inhabitants who benefited from the modernity

³⁴ “New Cruise Program of Great White Fleet,” *The Globe*, February 18, 1933, ProQuest Databases.

³⁵ Martin, “The United Fruit Company’s Tourist Business,” 241-42.

³⁶ “Display Ad 165,” *New York Times*, December 8, 1935, ProQuest Databases; “New Cruise Program of Great White Fleet,” *The Globe*, February 18, 1933, ProQuest Databases; “Display Ad 73,” *New York Times*, April 20, 1938, ProQuest Databases.

³⁷ Richard Peet discusses the concept of Americentrism in his work, “From Eurocentrism to Americentrism,” *Antipode* 37, no. 5 (2005): 936-943.

that UFC brought to the agricultural sector. Additionally, cruise directors narrating shore excursions focused not on labor, but on narratives of visionaries who organized banana enterprises and UFC's conquest over the land and barriers previously posed by distance.³⁸

Thus, references to Caribbean cultures before and on UFC cruises homogenized the Caribbean by leveraging stereotypes around tropicality, peaceful indigenous inhabitants, and preindustrial islands. These strategies, rooted in European colonial encounters where some artists and travel writers portrayed the Caribbean as idyllic, were crucial in countering prevailing negative stereotypes of the region as disease-ridden and inhabited by cannibals, which had previously discouraged tourism.³⁹

Representing Caribbean Cultures for Cruise Tourists

As Caribbean cruises gained popularity as a vacation option, travel guides produced for cruise tourists also grew in numbers. Harry L. Foster was born in Brooklyn in 1894 and was educated at an elite preparatory school. After serving in France during the First World War and thereafter along the Mexican border, Foster was honorably discharged. At this time, his wanderlust took him south through Mexico and Central America – a path that would soon be well-traveled by

³⁸ Martin, "The United Fruit Company's Tourist Business," 257-58; Martin, "Mapping an Empire." Perhaps the most potent example of the imperialism inherent in these cruises was the relationship between UFC and the United States government. According to Lawton, "Cruise Ship Industry," 331, the US provided subsidies to offset the costs of taking on cruise passengers. The country also deployed soldiers on multiple occasions to protect UFC's Latin American interests. Additionally, UFC contributed to The Good Neighbor Policy, introduced by the Roosevelt administration in 1933 and key to US-Latin American relations between the early and mid century. More information on the relationship between the policy and tourism can be found in Amy Spellacy, "Mapping the Metaphor of the Good Neighbor: Geography, Globalism, and Pan-Americanism During the 1940s," *American Studies* 47, no. 2 (2006): 40, 51-55. Of the shipping line's involvement in the policy, Cynthia Enloe argues that UFC opened the Middle American Information Bureau to educate schoolchildren about the western conceptions of progress that American technology brought to Latin American nations, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 220.

³⁹ Cocks, "The Pleasures of Degeneration," 216, 223-25; Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics*, 13; Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 30, 204; Martin, "The United Fruit Company's Tourist Business," 239, 244.

“tropical tramps” fascinated by the allure of the tropics.⁴⁰ Foster traveled the Caribbean and Latin American extensively. He leveraged his experience to write several books about his trips, including *The Caribbean Cruise*, published in 1928. This work conveyed general knowledge about cruising and the countries typically found on Caribbean itineraries.

Eleanor Early was born in 1895 in Newton, Massachusetts. Although Early was trained as a teacher, she began her career as a journalist almost immediately after graduating from Wheelock College. Early wrote for the *Boston Post* and *Boston Globe* during her time in the city. Later in life, she joined the staff of the *New York Times*.⁴¹ Her extensive travels informed numerous books about the Caribbean. Her in-depth guide to the region was published in 1937. It was followed in 1939 by *Lands of Delight*, concerned more specifically with cruising to the Caribbean and South America.

Foster and Early, both prolific travel writers, authored cruise guidebooks that worked to counteract the idyllic paradise stereotype. Instead, they hoped to showcase the distinctive aspects of Caribbean countries and cultures for their readers.

Foster began his cruise guide by proclaiming that the warm Caribbean climate has lured thousands of Americans, questioning even if any more reason was needed to visit, “To dwell upon the other attractions of the West Indies is probably superfluous.” He went on to describe the ways in which the Caribbean had been described by tourism boosters, “Lazy, somnolent, contented, they rise like emerald gems from the azure, cloudless sea...In some respects, these sea-girt gardens have much in common. There’s scarcely one of them which hasn’t been at some point described as an “Isle of Enchantment,” or “A Tropical Paradise.””⁴² These portrayals of the

⁴⁰ Blake C. Scott, *Unpacked: A History of Caribbean Tourism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022), 120-21.

⁴¹ Alden Ludlow, “Introducing Eleanor Early,” *Wellesley Historical Society*, accessed September 21, 2024, <https://www.wellesleyhistoricalsociety.org/collections-spotlight-eleanor-early>.

⁴² Harry L. Foster, *The Caribbean Cruise* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1928), 3-6.

Caribbean as a homogenous, preindustrial utopia aligned with narratives that were gaining discursive traction and thereby contributing to the growth of U.S. political and economic hegemony in the early twentieth century. Tourism marketers were working tirelessly to counter previously dominant colonial narratives that portrayed the Caribbean as dangerous for visitors, in hopes of commodifying the region's natural resources for tourism. Traveling Americans would contrast this representation of the Caribbean with the United States, which had seen rapid technological and economic progress, suggesting in turn that the so-called tropics were an ideal destination to escape from capitalist modernity.⁴³

Foster, on the other hand, critiqued this homogenizing perspective advanced by the tourism industry. According to him, the Caribbean was much more than sun-soaked beaches and islands that were too similar to tell apart. "It remains only to be said," Foster told his readers, "that the Caribbean of popular fiction – a land of oppressive heat that sooner or later saps the white man's energies...is not the Caribbean of actual fact." In fact, he asserted, "On closer inspection...you'll note that each island has its own individuality, its own personality, its own peculiar charm," for "the more serious minded will find much more of interest and profit" in this "cradle of American history."⁴⁴

Yet, the mechanisms through which Foster expressed difference between Caribbean countries nevertheless resulted in cruise tourists understanding local cultures through the language of empire. In an effort to set Cuba apart from neighboring islands, Foster asked tourists to view it as a conglomeration of western nations. He likened Cuba to France for its "gay cafes and broad boulevards," even calling it the "Paris of the West." Foster's comparison of Cuba with Paris tamed the relatively new tropical destination for tourists who were expected to be familiar

⁴³ Cocks, "The Pleasures of Degeneration," 216, 223-25; Martin, "The United Fruit Company's Tourist Business."

⁴⁴ Foster, *The Caribbean Cruise*, 3-6.

with the European cultural institution. On the other hand, Foster also highlighted Cuba's "Spanish atmosphere enlivened by American jazz,"⁴⁵ while its most expensive cafes and restaurants resembled those found in "New York hotels even to the extent of providing roof-gardens and jazz,"⁴⁶ setting the stage for further discussion of the destination through association with its former colonizers. Foster continued, recounting that, as the ship approached Havana, passengers would be captivated by views of Morro Castle and La Cabaña – Spanish fortress constructed to protect Havana from attacks by British forces, pirates, and buccaneers – as well as "typical Spanish homes."⁴⁷ Although Cuba had by now gained independence from Spanish and American rule, Foster encouraged cruise passengers to experience Cuba not by interacting with its Indigenous inhabitants, but by interacting with the remnants of empire. Similarly, for Foster, Puerto Rico was also "Spanish in appearance and custom, even though it sometimes plays baseball, eats ice cream, or sings "The Star Spangled Banner,"⁴⁸ rendering the destination familiar through the deployment of nationalism.⁴⁹

Anachronistic descriptors were present throughout Foster's description of various Caribbean countries – particularly pronounced in his account of Haiti. Here, Foster advanced Eurocentric stereotypes about Haiti, describing it as "A land where...voodoo drums echoed through the mountains to proclaim human sacrifice." Some of Foster's claims even represented slaveowners as the victims of their slaves. He recounted that "early slaves revolted to massacre the whites." Here, the act of slaves fighting for their freedom was equated to "massacre," which Foster used to justify the continued dehumanizing treatment of slaves at the hands of colonial

⁴⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 72.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁹ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: SAGE, 2005).

forces, “white men lived in secret terror of their slaves, bullying them unmercifully to keep them in subjugation.”⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Foster advised that although Haiti had some localities which were undeveloped and left much to be desired for tourists, American engineers and doctors had done a lot “to make Haiti livable.”⁵¹ Along a similar vein, Foster told readers that “much progress was made in the development of the country” as a French colony, “in the construction of roads and bridges and fine plantations.”⁵² Interrogating these claims in the context of the previously anachronistic description of Haiti (alongside the dehumanizing characterization of its inhabitants) suggests that, for Foster, Haiti was uninhabitable before colonial intervention. Foster’s suggestion rested heavily on his social position. Haiti was perfectly inhabitable by its residents and their previous generations. Instead, Foster likely meant to convey that Haiti was unfit for visitation by American tourists, an issue which – according to him – was addressed through the benevolence of colonizers rather than local agency. By crafting a narrative that juxtaposed ‘uncivilized’ locals and supposedly benevolent colonial officials, Foster asked readers to understand Haiti using untenable polarities constructed through European colonialism, producing a version of Haiti that was simultaneously exotic enough to attract cruise tourists while assuring them of their comfort and safety.

Attractions on offer further advanced this polarity. Emphasized in Foster’s guide were historic sites associated with European colonialism, experiences implied to be culturally ‘safe’ for their connection to western notions of civilization. As the Dominican historian Lennox Honychurch argued, the violence of European colonialism and the subsequent destruction of Indigenous cultures resulted in historic sites for touristic consumption primarily rooted in

⁵⁰ Foster, *The Caribbean Cruise*, 103-104

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 107

⁵² *Ibid.*, 104

colonial and Creole influences.⁵³ As these representations gained traction, they were further perpetuated in travel guides such as Foster's. Even in instances where a shift towards viewing local cultures, as opposed to European legacies, was evident, the experience was limited to gazing instead of engaging, and the experiences were homogenized into broader cultural representations and in some cases even Eurocentric stereotypes. For example, Foster described the locals' cultural dances – “survivals of crude African performances” – as “primitive sights” that create “barbaric rhythms.”⁵⁴ In essence, Foster used the language of European colonialism to anachronize Haiti's contemporary inhabitants, while dehumanizing their cultural practices as “barbaric.” However, the shipping line served as an extension of western power in its capacity to mediate foreign cultural experiences for tourists. Indeed, Foster noted that cruise lines could be trusted to offer adventure without danger, for shore excursions would be arranged carefully. Thus, even in the guide's attempts to showcase the individuality of the island and its inhabitants, references to uniqueness frequently drew on Eurocentric ideologies and were accompanied by western mediation. It was through this process that Foster rendered encounters with these localities familiar and thus ‘safe’ for western consumption.

In other destinations, local inhabitants themselves were represented through the visions of empire. Foster asserted that the people of Puerto Rico have largely maintained their “Castilian” ways, but also noted that the penchant for baseball and soda Americanized Puerto Rico. According to the writer, San Juan was a combination of “the charm of old Spain with the modernity of a Yankee metropolis.”⁵⁵ In turn, the novelty of a Caribbean vacation was balanced

⁵³ Lennox Honychurch, “Caribbean Heritage: Its Uses and Economic Potential,” in *Caribbean Wooden Treasures: Proceedings of the Thematic Expert Meeting on Wooden Urban Heritage in the Caribbean Region*, UNESCO World Heritage Centre (2005), accessed November 3, 2024, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/documents/6104>, 28.

⁵⁴ Foster, *The Caribbean Cruise.*, 115.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 145-46.

with the familiarity of European and American cultural referents to mediate the experience for cruise tourists. In taking this approach, the text relegated the historical experiences of colonized communities to the peripheries.

Foster insisted that his guide was as a counternarrative to other contemporary guidebooks that romanticized the Caribbean as a utopia. Nevertheless, in highlighting the so-called unique aspects of each locale, the he discussed destinations using discourses produced almost exclusively through imperial conquest, sanitizing encounters with local inhabitants and their cultures to be palatable to western audiences and perpetuating a cultural production process that elevated the views of colonizers rather than the colonized.

Foster's contemporary, Eleanor Early, intended to capture the unique characteristics of Caribbean islands in *Ports of the Sun* (1937), written for both cruise tourists and those touring the Caribbean by other means. Early's subsequent work, *Lands of Delight* (1939), was meant exclusively for cruise ship tourists. Just like Foster's *The Caribbean Cruise* and her own prequel, *Lands of Delight* attempted to highlight the cultural differences between Caribbean nations for tourists. Each chapter focused on a popular cruise port and contained a brief history of the country, before suggesting activities for cruise passengers visiting those regions.

Despite Early's attempts to showcase differences between Caribbean cultures, opposing hegemonic narratives perpetuated by the tourism industry which homogenized the Caribbean as a tropical paradise, her narration of local histories advanced narratives based in European colonialism. For instance, the chapter titled "Santo Domingo – The Land Columbus Loved" suggested that consumers would read a Eurocentric history of the region. Indeed, even as Early attempted to move away from homogenizing slaves – arguing that grouping slaves from different parts of Africa together would be like doing the same with Nordics, Latins, and Hebrews as it

pertains to Caucasian identity – she nevertheless advanced other stereotypes about slaves. “The Eboes [Igbo people, an ethnic group from Nigeria] were ugly, with long jaws like baboons,”⁵⁶ Early told her readers. Her attribution of monkey-like characteristics to black persons drew on a history of European colonial officials comparing slaves to monkeys as a form of dehumanization.⁵⁷ This stereotype was followed by yet another, “In 1770, two Eboes [Igbo people, an ethnic group from Nigeria] in Antigua were convicted of eating a fellow slave. They made a stew of him, with Congo beans.” Early advanced these dehumanizing stereotypes to evoke empathy for abusive slaveowners, stating, “you can better understand the terror that inspired their treatment of the sauvages [sic].”⁵⁸ It became further evident that Early held her own stereotypes about Caribbean locals in her discussion of Puerto Rico, where she spoke of the Industrial Reform School, recounting “all the little black boys try to think up awful things to do, so they will be committed until they are twenty-one.”⁵⁹

Early’s stereotypes influenced how she encouraged cruise tourists to experience the Caribbean. Her accounts consistently perpetuated imperial perspectives to sanitize aspects of local cultures and histories that western tourists may have perceived as upsetting or distasteful. The writer forthrightly told readers that they would encounter the remnants of slavery in Santo Domingo and elsewhere on their journeys. Though slavery was, and remains, an important part of Caribbean histories, interacting with reminders of atrocities ran counter to the carefree experience that most travelers expected on their leisure trips. To counteract these notions, Early reframed destinations through cultural referents with which Americans would be familiar. She

⁵⁶ Eleanor Early, *Lands of Delight: A Cruise Book to Northern South America and the Caribbean* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1939), 21.

⁵⁷ Claudia Zeller, “Monkeys as Metaphor: Ecologies of Representation in Dutch Travel Writing about Suriname from the Colonial Period,” in *Animals in Dutch Travel Writing, 1800-Present*, edited by Rick Honings, Esther Op de Beek (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 139-58.

⁵⁸ Early, *Lands of Delight*, 21-22.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

compared the well-dressed girls in Santo Domingo with those in New York, “the girls dress as stylishly as New York debutantes, and their mothers are smarter than the dowagers of Boston.” Early’s Americanization of Santo Domingo’s inhabitants made the locale more approachable for cruise tourists. Thereafter, she discussed *arroz con pollo* (chicken with rice), “the national dish of several South American countries,”⁶⁰ offering a recipe and encouraging would-be cooks of this dish to purchase earthenware casserole cookware like the Spaniards use when guests debarked in the Dominican Republic. By suggesting that passengers use cookware associated with the country’s former colonizer to prepare what had become known as a national Dominican dish, Early made it more approachable for western tourists. Colonial cultural representations were further emphasized when she encouraged cruise tourists visiting the Dominican Republic to tour a Cathedral housing the tomb of Columbus. The luxurious wares within – paintings, silver altars, a golden chalice made by Cellini, Spanish chests that conquistadors brought with them to the New World, and a painting and altar gifted by Ferdinand and Isabella, and Emperor Charles, respectively – set this European space worlds apart from the Dominican world just outside its gates.⁶¹ In addition to these discursive methods used to render the cruise experience more culturally comfortable for passengers, protocols were in place to ensure their physical comfort. Early noted that the cruise line provides guests touring Caribbean ports “with a well-informed conductor who speaks excellent English;” otherwise, she suggested that tourists visit the Tourist Bureau for other options.⁶²

⁶⁰ Ibid., 28-29. South American cities bordering the Caribbean Sea were frequently part of Caribbean cruise itineraries, and commonly continue to be.

⁶¹ Ibid., 30-31. Monuments associated with empire – especially sites of violence such as plantations – continue to be popular tourist attractions for contemporary visitors to the Caribbean. Andrew Grant Wood, “Introduction: Travel History’s Checkered Past as Prelude to Future Catastrophe?,” in *The Business of Leisure: Tourism History in Latin America and the Caribbean*, edited by Andrew Grant Wood (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 9.

⁶² Ibid., 25.

Early's narration of Puerto Rico similarly presented a sense of allure and adventure mediated by imperial perspectives. Puerto Rico, she told her audience, was a land of contrasts with touchy people, with beautiful architecture but also "filthy" slums. She spoke in generalizations of the local inhabitants – on one hand the lower classes who did not speak English because they were "stupid," and on the other elites who outright refused to, out of disdain for Americans and to embrace Spanish heritage.⁶³ Her narrative reduced Puerto Rico's diversity into easily consumable, binary ideas, feeding into touristic fascination with the foreign while simultaneously distancing them from any meaningful engagement with locals. Early's demeaning characterization of locals reflected imperial ideologies, suggesting that any deviation from American standards implied intellectual or cultural inferiority. Her dichotomy fed into imperial stereotypes that simplified Puerto Rican identity into two opposing forces: those who were supposedly uneducated, and those who were hostile toward American influence.

Early went on to offer a colonial history of the island, before discussing food, "Puerto Rican foods are greasy, and so different from ours that I am afraid you will not like them...if I were you, I'd keep away from the native restaurants, and ask Mr. Weise at the Condado to order a special dinner at the hotel, something Puerto Rican – with restraint."⁶⁴ The Condado also had a garden for music and dance, with coconut palms dotting the area and "native instruments being played," entertainment which upper-class Puerto Ricans came to enjoy, too. Her narrative encouraged cultural sampling, though in heavily controlled ways. She suggested tourists try the local cuisine at a luxurious hotel – an elite space evoking both cultural and hygienic safety. In this space, guests sampled Puerto Rican food prepared with a level of "restraint," ensuring that it was tailored to their palates and not excessively "different." Early's description of a carefully

⁶³ Ibid., 38-39.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 64.

curated environment reinforced the idea that engagement with local cultures should take place in spaces that protected the cruise tourist's physical safety and cultural sensibilities—far from the impoverished areas previously mentioned. This approach allowed passengers to experience a “safe” version of Puerto Rican culture without facing the realities of local life

Overall, Early's text contrasted hegemonic travel industry representations of the Caribbean at the time, which often homogenized the region as a tropical paradise without appropriately conveying differences in local, regional, or national cultures, or historical shifts therein. Nevertheless, the representations in Early's guide filtered Caribbean cultures through the language of European conquest in some instances, and American empire in others. Ultimately, and despite Early's attempts to showcase cultural differences, her readers were trained to understand the Caribbean through the discourses of empire.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the early-twentieth-century cruise guidebooks of Harry L. Foster and Eleanor Early used the language of empire to shape the gaze of American cruise tourists, mediating vacation experiences in the process. Examining these works reveals resistance to hegemonic narratives romanticizing the Caribbean through stereotypes about its therapeutic properties which industry actors – including the United Fruit Company – deployed in promotional strategies. Despite their resistance to these homogenizing discourses, both authors wrote of local cultures through imperial frameworks, shaping how they represented the region and local inhabitants for cruise tourists.

Foster's critique of prevailing stereotypes which depicted the Caribbean as “lazy” and “somnolent” suggested an intention to showcase the region's distinctiveness. He encouraged

readers to explore the individuality of these lands. However, his comparative approach, for instance likening Cuba to Paris, revealed a reliance on familiar Eurocentric references that mediated the experience for passengers while reinforcing a narrative aligned with imperial perspectives.

Early's efforts to highlight cultural differences also revealed her entanglement with the tropes of conquest. Her portrayals often exoticized and at times dehumanized local cultures. Although she attempted to engage with the legacies of slavery and its implications, she sanitized these histories to make them more palatable for cruise tourists. In doing so, Early framed interactions with Caribbean cultures through an imperial lens, suggesting that these experiences were best understood through the values and perspectives of western colonizers.

Together, Foster and Early articulated a tension between resisting homogenizing representations and inadvertently supporting the cruise industry's vision of the Caribbean as a timeless, exotic destination. While they expressed a desire to resist homogenizing representations and celebrate the individuality of Caribbean nations, their reliance on imperial language weakened their critique. Rather than fully deconstructing the complexity of power dynamics between Caribbean nations, European empires, and the more recent advancement of US imperialism, the travel writers inadvertently upheld the structures of empire, reinforcing the conception of the Caribbean as a space for the pleasure of western tourists. In turn, their guidebooks reproduced the structures of power they set out to challenge, illustrating the tensions between tourism and empire in the early-twentieth-century Caribbean.

For the cruise industry, the perpetuation of imperial discourses was essential to transforming the Caribbean into a marketable tourist destination. By sanitizing and reshaping local cultures, Early and Foster contributed to rebranding the Caribbean as a palatable locale for Americans to sample foreign societies. This framing deemphasized earlier ideologies rooted in European conquest that othered the Caribbean as malaria-stricken and cannibal-inhabited, and even more recent stereotypes based in US imperialism of the region as an idyllic paradise for overworked urbanites to enjoy escapism. Even so, the mediation strategies examined in this article contributed to the circulation of cultural ideologies. As these sanitized ways of understanding Caribbean cultures through the frameworks of empire gained momentum amongst tourism boosters, they deeply influenced the emerging mass-market cruise industry's marketing strategies for the region from the late twentieth century onward, highlighting the ongoing challenges of decolonizing Caribbean tourism.