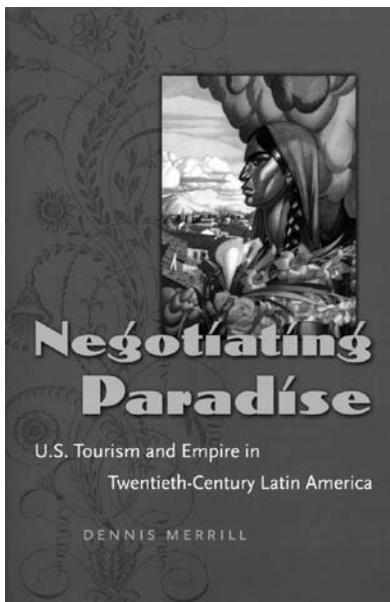


## REVIEWS

# Tourism, U.S. Empire, and National Projects in Latin America

By Liza Keanueneokalani Williams



**NEGOTIATING PARADISE: U.S. TOURISM AND EMPIRE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY LATIN AMERICA** by Dennis Merrill, University of North Carolina Press (2009), 352 pp., \$22.50 (paperback)

CRITICAL HISTORIES OF U.S. TOURISM in the Global South typically describe an imperial project, one whose expansion in the 20th century is often portrayed as a uniform process in which North American tourists descended upon various locales to exploit their people and landscapes. In *Negotiating Paradise* historian Dennis Merrill takes a fresh look at the tourist industry's global spread in the early 20th century, interpreting

it not only as an informal facet of U.S. imperial expansion but also as a complex process in which elites in tourist-destination countries seized upon building tourism as an opportunity to construct and solidify a national identity and culture.

In this view, tourism was, as the book's title suggests, a negotiated, fluid, and dynamic process. Although the world's far-reaching tourist infrastructure was developed as a project of U.S. empire, it was also part of a larger process of encounters—at both the state level and on the ground in the tourist milieu—that worked to define each nation and its relationships. As U.S.-based investors and managers sought to integrate global tourist industries, they in the process created colonized, commercialized versions of national or native cultures that were nevertheless useful to the local elites with whom they collaborated.

Tracing patterns that were also at work in the Philippines, Guam, and Hawaii, Merrill focuses on U.S. tourism in three countries in three periods: Mexico during the interwar period, Cuba during the early Cold War, and Puerto Rico during the years immediately preceding its commonwealth era and into the late 1950s.

In each case, Merrill contextualizes the rise of a national tourist industry as occurring within and parallel to technological advancements, industrialization, nationalism, and consumerism. The growth of tourism was

facilitated by advances in modes of transportation, together with media (filmmaking, print) and marketing, which constructed idealized spaces and peoples for mass consumption.

Yet in the case of Mexico in the 1930s, we see that it also contributed to building nationalism. U.S. and Mexican government officials negotiated the terms of the tourism relationship in the context of the United States' "good neighbor" policy, aimed at building solid alliances in the hemisphere during the run-up to World War II. Mexican officials saw an opportunity to improve relations with the rising new world power, but they also seized the opportunity to build a stronger nationalist identity.

To expand tourist infrastructure, the Mexican state not only gave tax breaks and subsidies to hotels and restaurants, but also funded archaeological projects. It sponsored low-budget films, invited travel writers to Mexico, and opened a tourist agency in New York City—spurring on the circulation of Mexico's representations in travel narratives, journalist commentaries, and tourism advertisements.

Meanwhile, the Laredo–Mexico City highway, which stretched between Texas and the capital city, opened in 1936; Mexico's portion of the Pan-American Highway was completed in 1950; and U.S. railroad companies linked lines from the Northeast and Midwest to Mexico. Between 1935 and 1942, hotel numbers had more than doubled, restau-

rants and nightclubs proliferated, and particular areas like Acapulco began to construct opulent resorts with golf courses, horseback riding, tennis, and swimming pools to attract consumers.

All this infrastructure supported the mobility of both U.S. citizens visiting Mexico and the greater movement of ideas and knowledge across the border. This, together with new constructions of Mexico as a nation boasting a rich cultural heritage, allowed the United States to expand its power over the region, even as Mexico built a more solid, if commercial, national image.

By the 1950s, Puerto Rico and other U.S. colonies were also using

tourism as a way to build foreign relations and sustain their economies, both in the Caribbean and in the Pacific. Competing with other tourist destinations like Cuba, the Florida Keys, Bermuda, and the Bahamas, Puerto Rican officials built modern luxury hotels on beachfront property specifically to attract upper- and upper-middle-class visitors, using Hawaii's Waikiki Beach as a model. Along with manufacturing the beach, investors worked to create an overseas image that would not only work against Puerto Rico's reputation for poverty but also attract visitors with an image of affluence and comfort.

As in Mexico, the island's tourism industry was carefully constructed

to reinvent and reinvigorate both the economy and local history and heritage. Constructing a marketable image proved just as important as building the tourist infrastructure itself.

But the tourist-friendly version of Puerto Rican history and culture did not go uncontested. Critics decried the hotels built by the Puerto Rican government as reflecting only what U.S. tourists demanded, not a true reinvigoration of a Puerto Rican past. Opponents to tourism both inside and outside the government also worried that tourism would only deepen Puerto Rico's dependence on the U.S. economy.

For Merrill, the emphasis on creating a tourist image exemplifies

**Solidarity Trip to Guatemala, March 13-21**

*Other trips planned for May and August*

We work with CONIC, a social movement organization that fights for land reform, food sovereignty, and indigenous rights. We will:

- build ventilated stoves so women don't suffer from eye and lung problems from cooking over open fires
- plant trees and gardens and teach permaculture
- learn how agrofuel production is driving indigenous communities off the land, and help fight back

**Cost (excluding airfare):**  
**Students: \$950**  
**Non-students: \$1,150**

For information email [wkramer@access4less.net](mailto:wkramer@access4less.net)  
 Organized by the Farmer Solidarity Project  
[farmersfightback.wordpress.com](http://farmersfightback.wordpress.com)

\* change yourself, change the world \*

**Global Awareness Through Experience**

**Oaxaca, Mexico : Jan 30-Feb 7, 2010**  
**El Salvador : March 1-10, 2010**  
**Guatemala Holy Week: March 24-April 3, 2010**  
**Chiapas, Mexico : May 19-29, 2010**





912 Market St  
 La Crosse, WI 54601

608.791.5283  
[gate@fspa.org](mailto:gate@fspa.org)

**www.gate-travel.org**

\* change yourself, change the world \*

## REVIEWS

the workings of U.S. imperial “soft power.” “Before the vacation destination is experienced, indeed, well before departure, travel is turned over in the mind,” Merrill writes. “The power to imagine and to manipulate the imagination is a soft power that lies at the heart of visitor-host negotiations.”

Merrill further argues that soft power operates through the “everyday life” of empire. Borrowing the concept of the “contact zone” from literary historian Mary Louise Pratt, Merrill argues that in the modern spaces of 20th-century tourism (airports, hotels, taxi stands), people of various and disparate cultures meet in highly uneven power relations. Tourism creates these cultural contact zones, in Merrill’s view, while providing imperial soft power a channel through which to work. Tourists, in this light, function as imperialist foot soldiers wielding soft power in the asymmetrical space of the tourist contact zone.

We can see this concept at work especially well in the author’s treatment of Cuba. Of all the U.S. tourist destinations, of course, none garnered more fame or notoriety. Although U.S. newspapers published damning reports of crime and vice in Cuba—revealing how the gambling industry was controlled by U.S.-based mafias collaborating closely with the Batista dictatorship—a steady flow of North American tourist-patrons nonetheless supported the gambling and other entertainments of Cuban tourism. The consumerism that is central to tourist industry forms part of empire building through encounters, interpersonal contact.

Tourism remained Cuba’s second-most important industry, after sugar, until after the revolution, when the new government cracked down on prostitution and gambling and as-

serted control over tourism as a nationalized industry. For a time, travel agencies still booked clients to Cuba. But then, in 1961, the State Department banned U.S. tourism in Cuba, declaring it contrary to U.S. interests. Cuban officials attempted to revive the tourist industry but did not succeed until after the Soviet collapse, when Cuban tourism made a strong comeback without officially tapping the large but still “illicit” U.S. market.

Historical accounts and cultural analysis like this provide an excellent look into the dynamics of tourism’s many negotiations. Merrill’s sharp eye toward globalization, consumption, and nation building provides an important contribution to our understanding of U.S. empire.

However, while Merrill points out that he chooses to focus on the “everyday” workings of empire (for example, daily economic tensions between the tourist and taxi driver), he tends to focus on negotiations between local government elites and U.S. agencies. It is unclear why his argument remains at the top, but it could be because it is difficult to find archival evidence of everyday interactions between tourists and locals. But Merrill does not address this fact and, although he posits that he would like to take the focus from top-down governmental actors to ordinary citizens, the focus inevitably shifts to the state. The “ordinary citizens” who worked within the tourist and service industries in these geographies remain invisible.

Despite this, the book does an excellent job of showing that the making of U.S. empire through tourism is not simply a one-sided process with the North simply descending upon the South. Merrill complicates our notions of empire by showing that the tourist industries in Latin America were co-constructed for the pur-

## LA HERMANDAD EDUCATIVA

## Study Spanish in Guatemala

A not-for profit sisterhood of two collectively-run schools offers one-on-one instruction, family living, field trips and cultural activities.

Families are welcome.

LA HERMANDAD EDUCATIVA includes *Proyecto Lingüístico Quetzalteco* in Quetzaltenango and *Escuela de la Montaña* near Nuevo San José.

For more information write :

P.O. Box 7141  
Minneapolis, MN 55407

Visit our web site:  
[www.hermandad.com](http://www.hermandad.com)

pose of forming national identities and particular relationships with the United States.

But the argument is well balanced; although local government officials in Latin America participated in developing tourist infrastructure, they remained dependent upon and under the power of U.S. empire. With this kind of approach *Negotiating Paradise* offers the reader a nuanced understanding of how tourism, U.S. expansionism, and nationalist projects intertwine.

---

*Liza Keanueneokalani Williams is a Ph.D. candidate in American studies at New York University. She studies indigenous feminisms, the politics of representation(s) of Kanaka Maoli, tourism, militarism, colonization, and decolonization in Hawaii.*