

## COLONIES DE VACANCES

Sophie Fuggle

A battered bus arrives in the middle of the night during a storm. Palm trees sway precariously and disheveled passengers disembark, stretching, bitching and moaning and gather their luggage together before being allocated their beach huts. Luggage is missing and huts are lacking. The viewer feels the same lack of sympathy towards the desperate, whining holidaymakers as these holidaymakers do towards each other. This is *Les Bronzés*, Patrice Leconte's 1978 parody of Club Med and the aspirational upper-lower middle classes opting to spend their vacations in its dilapidated resorts in search of perfect tans and casual sex.

Providing clarification to the remark that all 'great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice', Marx informs us that what Hegel omitted to tell us here is that this occurs 'first as tragedy, the second time as farce.'<sup>1</sup> If *Les Bronzés* is farce then what of the tragedy? Where the doubling of farce and tragedy might be aptly identified with the dark tourism of the early twenty-first century in the form of prison and slavery museums, war memorials and tours of disaster zones, in the latter half of the twentieth century, a different yet equally notable version of this doubling occurs in the form of the camp. From refugee camp, labour camp and death camp we pass to the all-inclusive holiday resort with its regimented activities timetable, buffet queues and alcohol rations. More recently, the 'boot' camp has come to represent the apotheosis of the leisure industry. One no longer goes on holiday with the objective of escaping the constraints of work and its disciplinary regime but, rather, precisely to reaffirm and reinforce these constraints free from the very messy, unpredictable 'productivity' of work as it perpetually exceeds and contradicts its own limits.

The 'simulation' of military training in the form of physical exercise and dietary regime also marks an open acknowledgment of the link between war and tourism beyond simply visiting sites of historical conflict and violence. Both forms of leisure embody an endemic anxiety about modernity which has come

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). Available: <http://www.marxists.org>.

to define late capitalism.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, if war was once considered to suspend tourism as it did industry, its exceptionalism is now recognized as the *status quo*. Dark tourism, ecotourism, NGO charity work and international activism are all emerging 'leisure' economies predicated upon ongoing war, political unrest and natural disaster. At the same time, the habitual flows of voluntary migration are efficiently redirected, rechanneled according to a deterritorialized, global economic market. Holiday hotspot becomes political hotspot. Voluntary migration is offset against forced migration. First, business and economy class travel are now supplemented by what William Walters and others have termed a 'deportation class'.<sup>3</sup>

To proceed so swiftly from the concentration camp to the all-inclusive resort might appear as at once brutal and flippant. Yet, the short trajectory from one to the other is, in fact, underpinned by a certain utopian logic which binds post-war economic and emotional recovery together. This is the story of Club Méditerranée.

Whether described as 'camp', 'colonies de vacances' or, in the case of Club Med, 'village', the enclosed holiday resort might be defined as a space of exception. This is a space which Diken and Laustsen, following Giorgio Agamben's 1998 account of *Homo Sacer*, claim attests to the 'convergence between the biopolitics of totalitarianism (abandonment to violence and death) and mass hedonism (abandonment to sun, sea, sex and drugs).'<sup>4</sup> In its celebration of the sovereign core of Western biopolitics, the camp proliferates within modernity, as a site which, in offering itself up to the suspension and transgression of established cultural values and social norms, exists precisely to affirm such norms and values. Thus, while the holiday camp is promoted in terms of the 'liberation' of the natural, animalistic body (*zoē*) from its political rendering as *bios* within the space of the *polis*, the possibilities for such 'liberation' are increasingly limited. The exceptional space of the resort is at once inside and outside the *polis*, itself recreating at a micro-level the inclusions/exclusions of everyday socio-political existence. As such it is a space where *zoē* is 'captured' by the *polis* as it strives to extend the 'range of the biopolitical paradigm'.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, in tracing the trajectory between war and tourism via the space of the 'camp', we run the danger of producing a 'theory of the camp' which identifies

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<sup>2</sup> Lennon and Foley define 'dark tourism' in terms of this 'anxiety' which, they claim, has also rendered news of death and disaster as 'commodity'. John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*, London: Continuum, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> For a critical discussion of 'deportation class' see William Walters' chapter 'On the Road with Michel Foucault: Migration, Deportation and Viapolitics' in *Foucault and the History of Our Present*, edited by Sophie Fuggle, Yari Lanci and Martina Tazzioli, London and New York, NY: Palgrave, 2015, 94-110.

<sup>4</sup> Bülent Diken and Carsten Bagge Laustsen, *The Culture of Exception: Sociology Facing the Camp*, London: Routledge, 2005, 113.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 113; 119.

everything in terms of this marginal, liminal site of exception. In doing so we risk reducing all experience to the suspended logic of existence within the camp, failing to take account of the hugely divergent sets of relationships and acts occurring within different spaces termed 'camp'. In the face of such a reduction, it becomes difficult to locate any possibility for sustained critical and political engagement. This is clear from Diken and Laustsen's conclusion to their penultimate chapter on 'sociology after the camp' where their recourse to Gilles Deleuze's 'difference machines' as conceptual tool fails to offer more than further abstraction to the genuine problematic of the camp in late capitalist society as does their call for a 'politics of pity'.<sup>6</sup> To predicate one's politics on 'pity' seems to assume a Western model of imperialist guilt rather than demand a reconfiguration of existing political and economic paradigms. Consequently, the ethics of risk-taking they go on to propose in their final chapter constitutes a reactionary position which seeks to limit the damage of the camp, any camp, rather than actively contest the construction and operation of camp as simultaneously specific, exceptional and paradigmatic space. The camp is not the *non-place* [non-lieu] defined by anthropologist Marc Augé.<sup>7</sup>

At stake in this chapter, therefore, is an examination of how nationalism and its discontents continue to map themselves onto the beach. Here, my focus is on a 'beach' which exceeds hexagonal framing yet, at the same time, is predicated upon an understanding of the French beach which is as mythical as it is socio-historical. In considering the complex relationship between war and tourism inscribed onto the surface of the beach, destined to be washed away and redrawn *ad infinitum*, particular attention is given to the French holiday resort chain Club Med with reference to the specific myths it has engendered and parodies it has spawned. Here, the beach becomes the space where tragedy repeats itself as postmodern cynicism.

## Beach as Battlefield

The beach, as attested elsewhere in this volume, functions both metaphorically and metonymically as site of violent encounter between different sets of forces, identities and ideologies. Emerging from such encounters are various forms of colonization: appropriation, erasure, reclamation. In seeking to explore the links between war and tourism and the specific forms of neocolonization operating within the space of the Club Med village, a note of caution is required. It is all too easy to replicate the scathing mockery of Leconte's *Les Bronzés* in our critique of beach vacations along with the more recent indictments of tourism *qua*

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>7</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, Paris: Seuil, 1992.

human traffic in the novels of Michel Houellebecq. As satire pure and simple, Leconte's film replicates the elitist snobbery of his French middle class audiences whom no doubt would have failed to see themselves in his caricatures. Leconte himself is not unaware of this potential response and writes this into the narrative itself most notably in the relationship set up between two single females, Christiane and Gigi.

Christiane embodies the wealthy bohemian who, in seeking out an 'authentic' encounter with other cultures finds herself on a package holiday with the socially inferior Gigi whom, as Christiane puts it, 'will do anything to make herself seem interesting.' There is a double irony here due to the comic timing of the statement which follows Gigi's reaction to the news that Bourseault, the *animateur* she was sleeping with, has died in a freak accident. Here, there is no time allowed to move from tragedy to farce. There is no authenticity under the superficiality. Only farce, only surface.

A similar self-reflexivity can be found in Marc Augé's *L'Impossible Voyage*, in which the anthropologist turns his gaze upon the French tourist. Adopting a personal tone, Augé's affectionate criticism of French holiday practices which include Disneyland Paris and Center Parcs along with La Baule, is situated between a nostalgia for childhood vacations spent in the French countryside and an 'urgent' call to a more enlightened form of travel which resists the tag of 'tourism'.<sup>8</sup>

Where both Augé and Leconte position themselves at a critical distance from those they are representing, Leconte's attack is based on the law of small differences maintaining social hierarchies; differences which are intellectual as much as economic. The overriding message of the film, embodied by the decision of the GOs, Popeye and Bobo, to stay for another season despite their ennui and disillusionment, is that rather than strive for a more fulfilling vacation experience whether this is predicated on the sexual, social or cultural, French society needs to stop taking itself and its tourism so seriously. Such a position no doubt endorses low-budget hedonism and the reckless consumerism of global tourism as a way of shedding French cultural stereotypes of colonial shame along with its intellectual and artistic elitism. In this respect, Leconte offers a playful riposte to the apocalyptic tone of Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967).

Augé's position, on the other hand, is more sinister in its critique of mass tourism through the awkward and reductive distinction he makes between 'tourist' and 'traveller'. Frequently, he makes his photographer companion, Catherine, scapegoat here thus setting up an additional gaze in between his own and that of the 'ordinary' tourists. This occurs most notably when he recounts Catherine's attempt to distance herself from the other camera-wielding tourists in Disneyland Paris, anxious not to be mistaken for yet another trigger-happy

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<sup>8</sup> Marc Augé, *L'Impossible Voyage: Le tourisme et ses images*, Paris: Éditions Payot et Rivages, 2013, 15.

parent. Ironically, it is thanks to the ubiquity of cameras within the theme park that she can photograph Disneyland unimpeded.<sup>9</sup>

Whether the distance one attempts to place between oneself and other 'tourists' or travellers is critical, reflective or knowingly ironic, the risk is a reproduction of the same inertia, a confrontation taking place within the space of a mirror. Fear of one's own superficiality is mitigated by reducing the experience and engagement of others with a space or practice to the vacuous and superficial.<sup>10</sup> As such the anthropologist is limited by his or her own gaze, caught up in defining the authenticity or validity of their own set of experiences as much as in capturing, classifying and denigrating the experiences of others. One goes to the beach with the precise aim of rendering oneself object. The refracted gaze of Augé constitutes less a meta-critique than a *mise-en-abîme* in which the possibility of 'authenticity' and self-legitimation is endlessly deferred.

The suggestion proposed by Augé that it is possible to engage in a form of voluntary, temporary migration without being a 'tourist' has, in recent years, become increasingly problematized. Nevertheless, charity work, ecotourism and the spread of NGOs with their endless supply of gap year students continue to be affirmed by public discourse and academic scholarship alike as responsible forms of tourism which counteract the damage done to planet and populations alike in the construction and frequentation of holiday resorts and hotel complexes. Yet, where the work of NGOs and humanitarian charities pursue the 'mission civilisatrice' of colonialism under the auspices of Western guilt *qua* responsibility, the beach resort continues to operate as site and process of unabashed neo-colonization. Moreover, to revisit the beach resort in the wake of more diverse studies and accounts of tourism is to insist upon its ongoing ideological function in conjunction rather than opposition to emerging and alternative forms of tourism.

What is required is a more engaged analysis of mass tourism which unpacks rather than reiterates the notion of tourists as a homogeneous, global mass. As Ellen Furlough makes clear in her article 'Making Mass Vacations', the emergence and development of specific tourist practices is bound very closely to the economic, political and social structures and ideologies of individual nations and states. Thus, where mass tourism in the U.S. can be linked to the notion of 'employee benefits' which developed under Fordism, in France and other European countries, annual vacation entitlement was defined in more overtly political terms.<sup>11</sup> *Congés payés* were first introduced in France by the Popular Front Government in 1936, the original 15 days (12 working days) paid vacation were

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 24; 26.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, New York, NY: Schocken Books: 1989 [1976], 10.

<sup>11</sup> Ellen Furlough, 'Making Mass Vacations: Tourism and Consumer Culture in France, 1930s to 1970s', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40:2, April 1998, 249.

extended by the government to four weeks in 1969 and then to five weeks in 1981.<sup>12</sup> The relationship between paid vacation as assuring the double role of worker as producer-consumer thus needs to be thought alongside and in distinction to the function of the *grandes vacances* in affirming a notion of citizenship that embodied a sense of belonging at the same time as enabling freedom of movement. Such freedoms must be thought of in terms of a neocolonial project which seeks to capture leisure alongside industry in its retention, acquisition and control of overseas territories and their natural and human resources.

## Mission Civilisatrice

The discovery of the sea is a precious experience that bears thought. Seeing the oceanic horizon is indeed anything but a secondary experience; it is in fact an event in consciousness of underestimated consequences.

I have forgotten none of the sequences of this finding in the course of a summer when recovering peace and access to the beach were one and the same event.<sup>13</sup>

As the powerful opening to Virilio's *Bunker Archeology* makes apparent, the beach as site of suspended logic, as state of exception is inherently linked to its spectral double, war. If access to the beach is predicated on the arrival of peace, the rest of *Bunker Archaeology* bears witness to the scars left by war upon the French coastline, transformed under Nazi occupation into an Atlantic Wall composed of around 1500 bunkers. For Virilio, therefore, understanding what he refers to as the 'liquid continent' is predicated on the recently departed army who had used it as a frontier. '[T]he meaning of this oceanic immensity' he tells us 'was intertwined with this aspect of the deserted battlefield.'<sup>14</sup>

In a similar vein and with implicit reference to the same strip of coastline, La Baule, Augé has suggested 'Le tourisme, c'est la forme achevée de la guerre' [Tourism is the finished form of war]. Moreover, like Virilio, he is attentive to the acceleration of this process: 'De ce point de vue, les choses s'accélèrent' [From this point of view, things are speeding up].<sup>15</sup> Augé is, of course, referring specifically to the dark tourism of recent decades and the increasing speed with which sites of disaster are transformed into tours and monuments.<sup>16</sup> Yet we might begin to chart this from further back. Where the development of the beach resort

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Virilio, *Bunker Archaeology*, trans. George Collins, New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012 [1994], 9.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Augé, *L'Impossible Voyage*, 10. My translation.

<sup>16</sup> For specific discussion of war memorial tourism in France, see, for example, Jennifer Iles, 'Recalling Ghosts of War: Performing Tourism on the Battlefields of the Western Front,' *Text and Performance Quarterly* 26:2, April 2006, 162-80.

is linked to the industrial revolution and urbanism, the first and second world wars intensified the role of the beach as both witness and counterpoint to the anxieties and atrocities of modernity.<sup>17</sup> Lenček and Bosker make reference to the fantasies of tropical beaches held onto by those fighting inland in the cold and muddy trenches during the First World War. Likewise, following WWII, the beach turned battlefield is reimagined as a site of healing and rejuvenation. This is not simply as a result of the restorative qualities of the sea and the air which constituted the focus of eighteenth and nineteenth century trips to the coast.<sup>18</sup> Where the complex social hierarchies and strict lines between public and private were both reaffirmed and contested on the nineteenth century beach, the beach is reconceived in post-war France as a space in which such hierarchies can be erased in favour of collective freedom.

This was Gerard Blitz's vision which led to the founding of Club Med in 1950. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Blitz worked in a rehabilitation centre for survivors of the concentration camps. His work there led him to reflect on the collective trauma of war and recognize the therapeutic role vacations could play in alleviating such trauma. Moreover, to be truly effective, such vacations needed to be made available to all members of society and erase rather than reinforce social hierarchies and conventions. As Victor Franco writes of Blitz's vision in his biography of Club Med:

His idea was not merely to transport, house, feed and amuse holidaymakers. In his view anybody could do that job. What he wanted to do was create a new kind of holiday, to make a stand in the name of fresh air, sport, the principles of the amateur Club, wind, sand and a warm translucent sea. He hoped at the same time to express his opposition to pre-war society, the society which had emerged from the holocaust having learned nothing and understood nothing. He rejected the rules of conduct laid down by this society. The pattern on which he would build his club was an expression of this anti-bourgeois reaction.<sup>19</sup>

This 'anti-bourgeois' reaction was echoed by Gilbert Trigano, a former communist who, having supplied camping equipment to Blitz, subsequently became a partner in the organization, becoming President in 1963 and running Club Med for several decades afterwards before his son, Serge took over in 1993.

Drawing on one of the best-known claims made by Club Med marketing that its villages provided an 'antidote to civilisation', Furlough has argued that the organisation embodied the mass tourism and consumer culture of post-war Europe rather than provided a space in which to resist this.<sup>20</sup> At the same time,

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<sup>17</sup> Lena Lenček and Gideon Bosker, *The Beach: The History of Paradise on Earth*, London: Pimlico, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 3 and 4.

<sup>19</sup> Victor Franco, *The Club Méditerranée*, trans. by Michael Perl, Guilford: Shephard-Walwyn, 1972, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Ellen Furlough, 'Packaging Pleasures: Club Méditerranée and French Consumer

we might read this idea of ‘antidote’ posited as cure for the traumas of the various wars waged by the so-called civilized world against the notion of a ‘mission civilisatrice’ inherent in Club Med’s establishment and development beyond the borders of France itself. As Franco points out, there were important reasons why Blitz opened his first resort in Alcudia in Majorca rather than on the French coast:

Now traditionally, so far as holidays were concerned, their horizons were limited to the blue line of the Vosges, and that of the Pyrenees...the Atlantic stopped at Hendaye, the Mediterranean at Menton, while from Cape Gris-Nez to the Gulf of Gascony the bunkers of the Atlantic defence system loomed sinister on the beaches.<sup>21</sup>

The bunkers which were so fascinating to the young Virilio, functioned as a permanent reminder of the pathologies of war to the French population. To move beyond such pathologies required the temporary displacement of the French population outside of the traditional limits of their world. ‘The World as it is does not suit us’, Blitz claimed. ‘So we must build a new one.’<sup>22</sup> This construction of a new world was simultaneously an attempt to efface an old one.

The history of Club Med tends to be recited within wider accounts of *Les Trente Glorieuses* and the absorption of American notions of consumerism into French cultural practice. However, attention should also be paid to the fact that Club Med grew at a time when France, along with the rest of Western Europe, was undergoing an intense period of decolonization. Club Med opened its resort in Tunisia in 1954, two years before the country’s independence from French rule. The Club’s first permanent resort was opened in Agadir, Morocco in 1965. As Furlough suggests, ‘Club Med was a reconfigured colonialist adventure...vacationers could continue to partake of colonialist “exoticism” even if their country no longer controlled the region politically.’<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, the resorts in France’s overseas departments, such as Les Boucaniers which opened in Martinique in 1969, were part of the development of tourism which frequently, as Pascal Perri has argued, reaffirmed the enslavement of North African and DOM-TOM inhabitants to their former slave masters and colonisers. The rapid transition from slave colony to assimilation into the Republic ensured and demanded the maintenance of certain colonial hierarchies and forms of oppression.<sup>24</sup> Subsequently, the shift from a plantation-based economy to one focused on tourism reinforced these old hierarchies which required

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Culture, 1950-1968’, *French Historical Studies* 18:1, Spring 1993, 65-81.

<sup>21</sup> Franco, *Op.cit.*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Furlough, ‘Packaging Pleasures’, 77.

<sup>24</sup> Pascal Perri, *Le tourisme à la Martinique: Sous la plage...les conflits*, Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2004, 143.

black slaves to labour for their white masters. According to Perri, two in three visitors to Martinique are from mainland France.<sup>25</sup> Thus, for those working in the tourist and service industries, working for white French tourists is a reality as much as an impression. As Perri puts it: 'Les métiers du tourisme, eux, sont avilissants car on produit pour un autre, souvent un Blanc, un service sans grand valeur ajoutée.' [Tourist jobs are degrading in that one carries out a service for another, often a White, with little value attached to it.]<sup>26</sup>

For Perri, tourism continues to function as a 'catalyst' for conflict and tension in Martinique. Here he cites as a notable example the problematic dialectic established between the 'neo-colonial' attitude of the French tourists vacationing in the Antilles and the local population often described as '*enfants gâtés*' [spoilt children] for their refusal to embrace tourism as a viable economy or reconcile themselves to the low level of pay accepted by workers in other Caribbean countries. In 2002, the French hotel chain Accor withdrew its presence from Martinique as a result of problems with local labour. Strikes at Les Boucaniers in early 2007 lasted 3 weeks and led to 300 French guests being sent home early. The common response from tour operators and French media embodies a colonial discourse which condemns those making up the labour force for their failure to appreciate a form of work and industry which has been imposed upon them and which fails to serve their own communities who benefit little from the concrete jungles and infrastructure set up to facilitate the arrival and departure of overseas visitors. On their withdrawal from Martinique, then Accor boss, Gérard Pélisson, described the Antilles as '*un climat social détestable*.'<sup>27</sup>

In defining such animosity towards tourism as a form of 'ingratitude', such discourses continue to affirm the 'mission civilisatrice' of mainland France towards its outlying territories. And when such a mission fails, it is those who have refused or contested its oppressive demands and called out its colonial project that are punished most heavily. Investment in France's DOM-TOM encouraged by substantial tax breaks<sup>28</sup> has focused on tourism, the construction of hotel complexes and resorts. To alienate tourists is to alienate the financial support of mainland France rather than propose alternative economies and industries. Rather than withdrawing from Martinique along with Accor and others in 2002, Club Med decided to operate a sale and lease back system. In the transferal of the operation of the Club to local business, the state contributed 35 million Euros towards the '*défiscalisation*' process with local organisations paying 16 million Euros. Club Med limited their contribution to 3 million Euros. While

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> For example, the '*Loi Pons*' was introduced in 1986 in order to encourage investment in DOM-TOM property development. Investors were given tax reductions of around 45% on properties in the region.

this move may be seen as alleviating tensions by giving local populations greater agency in the running of their service industries, what this actually points to is a huge reduction in the Club's responsibility for the finance and management of Les Boucaniers whilst ensuring it continues to obtain maximum profits. There is no real redistribution of wealth here since it is only rich Martinican business owners such as Yan Monplaisir benefitting in the process.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, at the same time as assuring the continuation of France's own colonial legacy, Club Med's decision to open a resort in the Arziv region of Israel's north Mediterranean coast in 1961 at the invitation of Ben Gurion attests to its complicity with the Israeli occupation and the Western powers which continue to endorse this. As Peter Lagerquist has suggested, the empty coastline which was partly given over to the club by the Israeli government is both a physical and symbolic embodiment of a revisionist history aimed at forgetting.<sup>30</sup> The dominant narrative of Arab migration to Lebanon following the arrival of Israeli forces in 1948 glosses over the ethnic cleansing and genocide which resulted in the idyllic, unpopulated beaches. The coastal village of al-Zib was deserted and its thousand year Arab history bracketed out.<sup>31</sup> Club Med became Israel's only private beach via special legislation. Thus, where Blitz and Trigano perceived the role of the club in Israel as in keeping with its therapeutic ideology following the specific atrocities of the Holocaust, the exceptionalism granted to the Club in Israel might, in fact, be considered as an obscene joke. The exceptional space of the camp reconfigured to exclude rather than include *homo sacer*.

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In the opening decade of its operation, Club Med's occupation of overseas territories moved from that of encampment to colony. Despite Blitz's concept of creating a vacation space which removed French society entirely from the spectres of war, his first resorts relied on army surplus supplies, tents and campbeds, provided by the Trigano family. Later the army tents were replaced with Polynesian huts enacting the shift from territorial occupation to cultural appropriation as sarongs and other Polynesian inspired motifs were assimilated into the 'mode de vie' at Club Med villages around the world. Describing his own experience of a Club Med resort, sociologist Henri Raymond comments on the use of the appellation 'village' suggesting it evokes a sense of permanence or longevity in relation to the vacation,<sup>32</sup> something which might also be compared to the lon-

<sup>29</sup> Jean-Jacques Manceau, *Le Club Med: Réinventer la machine à rêves*, Paris: Editions Perrin, 2010, 108-9.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Lagerquist, 'Vacation from History: Ethnic Cleansing as the Club Med Experience,' *Journal of Palestinian Studies* 36:1, Autumn 2006, 43-53.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>32</sup> Henri Raymond, 'Recherches sur un village de vacances,' *Revue Française de Sociolo-*

gevity of a colonial occupation. At the same time, such 'villages' are situated apart from actual villages which assume the form of ghettos or excursion sites.

The introduction of Polynesian style huts was intended to inspire a primordial simplicity, aimed at reinforcing the idea of abandoning the constraints and conventions of Western civilization. Jean-Didier Urbain describes this in terms of a passage from simulacra to simulation. Where the hotels and guesthouses of the nineteenth century were taken up with reproducing the social hierarchies of city life, at stake here is the simulation of a different world. Sleeping on the beach, shedding the trappings of civilization, one 'plays' at being the other, the down-and-out, the negro.<sup>33</sup> Yet, Urbain's observation of the decontextualisation does not go far enough. This 'playing' the other is neither innocent nor unmotivated.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, we should be wary in defining it simply in terms of the apathy of late capitalism in which all experience is reduced to simulacra and, as Augé and Virilio suggest, all tourism is constitutive of a form of inertia. Something more complex is at work in this reenactment of Tahitian village life, in this 'playing' the homeless or the negro. It is not simply the acquisition of real estate that defines Club Med's 'mission civilisatrice'. This also occurs in the emptying out of meaning of cultural signifiers, the celebration of Polynesian cultural representations, architecture, clothing and so on, as empty signifiers, waiting to be appropriated according to individual fantasies of relaxation, hedonism, exoticism.

Club Med's 'mission civilisatrice' might thus be considered as a reenactment of Bougainville in Tahiti. Describing Bougainville's travel journal published in 1771 as 'one of the most influential publications shaping attitudes toward the beach', Lenček and Bosker suggest how his narratives of Tahiti project Western ideals and fantasies onto the islanders and their way of life rather than provide accurate accounts:

[Bougainville's] glowing descriptions of native islanders were instantly seized upon by intellectuals seeking support for the myth of the 'noble savage' – the idea so popular in the eighteenth century that man in his natural state is both good and happy, and that all his vices and miseries stem from the greed and sophistry of civilization. Both Bougainville and his readers were all too glad to think of the Polynesians as incarnations of an ideal. On the beaches of Tahiti, they imagined idyllic islanders whom they endowed not with actual virtues, but with virtues they thought, as noble savages, they ought to have.<sup>35</sup>

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gie 1:3, July-Sept 1960, 323.

<sup>33</sup> Jean-Didier Urbain, *Sur la plage: Mœurs et coutumes balnéaires XIXe-XXe siècles*, Paris: Payot, 2002, 197ff.

<sup>34</sup> A further irony is at work here in the repetition of nineteenth century French artist, Paul Gauguin's original quest for the purity and innocence of an island lifestyle as source of aesthetic inspiration. Tahiti was thus already marked on French cultural consciousness less as an escape from corrupt civilization than as a space in which the exoticised, untouched other (in the form of Gauguin's child wives) is forced to yield to the violent, transgressive desires of the European colonizer.

<sup>35</sup> Lenček and Bosker, *Op. Cit.*, 49.

Lenček and Bosker make the connection between the promiscuity promised by Club Med's advertising and encouraged within its villages and the sexual favours supposedly offered as a welcome to French sailors arriving in Tahiti (rather than assumed and demanded from them). However, the link here is more complex and more important than a basic association of sex and beach. Imbuing local traditions with its own values and ideology, reshaping the landscape and imposing social and racial hierarchies akin to a colonial project, Club Med involves a similar act of projection to the one found in Bougainville's encounter with the Tahitian population and his subsequent representation of this encounter to those back in France.

One of the major paradoxes here is the affirmation of the body within the Club's discourse. For Blitz, sport and other forms of exercise were an inherent part of mental and physical recuperation following the war. However, scholarly reflection on the privileging of the body is often taken up with the scantily clad body of the bronzed sunbather and his or her sexual exploits. Urbain, Furlough, Littlewood and others have all commented on the implicit and explicit promiscuity of encounters within the Club facilitated by the purported erasure of social hierarchies and the reduction of dress codes to swimming trunks or sarongs.<sup>36</sup> Yet, Club Med affirms the space of the beach not simply as site to be colonized by towels and sun loungers. From the outset the Club embodied a specific reification of the body which finds its origins in military training and performance documented in 19th and early 20th century manuals such as Georges Hébert's *Méthode Naturelle* (1912) along with texts such as Victorin Raymond's *Manuel des Baigneurs* (1840). As Urbain points out, Dr Raymond is quick to distinguish swimming as a technical exercise from that of the 'singé, nègre ou quadrupède' [monkey, negro or four-legged animal].<sup>37</sup> An acquired technical superiority is emphasized in certain races in contradistinction to the 'animal-like' naturalness of movement attributed to others.

Herein lies the inherent contradiction of Club Med's claim to reject civilization and its discontents whilst not only reaffirming existing socio-economic distinctions but also the very discourses underpinning Western Imperialism and, more specifically, National Socialism. The 'technicity' required by many of the activities on offer in the Club Med villages re-establishes social hierarchies at the same time as reenacting a fascistic reification of the young, male athletic body not simply in itself but via the mastery and performance of a series of technical pursuits such as scuba diving, sailing, windsurfing together with the competitions that were regularly organized.<sup>38</sup> Where international competitions and tournaments such as the Olympics offer a receptacle for displays of

<sup>36</sup> Furlough, Op. cit.; Urbain, Op. cit.; Ian Littlewood, *Sultry Climates: Travel and Sex since the Grand Tour*, John Murray: London, 2001, 208ff.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Urbain, Op. cit., 172.

<sup>38</sup> See Raymond, Op. cit., 328-9.

national prowess and a way of channeling xenophobic sentiments into 'healthy' patriotism, the recruitment of former Olympic and professional sportsmen and women as GOs extended such patriotism beyond the televised spectacle to the space of the vacation.

Finally, if anything affirms the colonization project of the club against its slogans then this must surely be its logo. In contrast to the therapeutic, egalitarian claims of its advertising copy, the logo chosen for Club Med, Neptune's trident, is immediately associated with the conquest of the Mediterranean. Such symbolism does not simply reimagine the myths of the sea but, instead, represents first a desire to conquer and rule the Mediterranean coastline and, second, to transpose the (phallogocentric) power of this rule onto the beaches of the entire world. It has been claimed that the French comedian, Guy Bedos, used to make the joke that:

On nous dit qu'on ira bientôt dans la lune ? La lune, ce sera comme l'Espagne...  
Quand on pourra y aller, on tombera sur le Club Méditerranée !

[They're telling us we'll soon be able to go to the moon? The moon will be like Spain... The moment we're able to go, we'll find Club Med already there!]<sup>39</sup>

A trident is a three-pronged fishing spear and despite reworkings of the logo in 1980 and 1995 to make it appear first softer and more casual and then, in 2010, cleaner and neater in keeping with brands such as Apple,<sup>40</sup> it nevertheless continues to provide an inadvertent reminder of the plundering of natural and human resources involved in the constructing and operating of holiday resorts throughout the developing world. In this respect, the prongs might be further reimagined as arrows, evoking those appearing on imperial maps and strategic military plans. It is also important to note the deliberate resemblance of the prongs to the roofs of the Polynesian-style huts. The reduction of representation to a set of simple lines parallels the emptying-out of meaning that is essential to the 'mission civilisatrice' transposed to mass tourism.

## Factory of Desire

If Club Med provides one of the most salient examples of the neo-colonization project of French tourism during a period of major decolonization in the decades following WWII, such a project is, as Furlough and others have argued, closely intertwined with the unprecedented economic growth and rise of

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<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Christiane Peyre and Yves Raynouard, *Histoire et légendes du club méditerranée*, Paris : Seuil, 1971, 8. My translation.

<sup>40</sup> Here, see Manceau, *Op. cit.* [middle plates].

consumer culture associated with *Les Trente Glorieuses*. Moreover, the shifting ideology underpinning Club Med as it evolved from non-profit organization to a company of shareholders in the mid-1960s when the Baron de Rothschild came to its financial rescue, can be neatly mapped onto the marked change in the general notion of ‘vacances’ as a right for all, to a product to be desired and consumed by those who have ‘earned’ it. This is something Raymond already observes in his early ethnographic study of the ‘village de vacances’ in 1960.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the saturation of images of the beach in mainstream media and advertising consolidate the idea of the vacation as a product which extended beyond the temporal and spatial limits of its consumption. Indeed, in this respect Club Med seems to prefigure as much as to emulate brands such as Apple which have come to predicate themselves on lifestyle aspirations which do not simply exceed specific products being sold but, also, offer up possibilities of exceeding the very notion of a ‘lifestyle’ itself.

It is fairly obvious perhaps that a company offering beach vacations would be able to extend customer experience and consciousness of the brand beyond the product itself in ways not immediately available or intuitive for other products. On the one hand, the ‘empty’ beach featured in Club Med’s magazine, *Le Trident*, and other advertising, provides a *tabula rasa*, open to individual interpretation and desire rather than evoking a clearly defined set of behaviours and achievements to aspire to. It matters little whether the ‘actual’ experience of a specific resort lives up to the marketed images since such images dominate public consciousness for the greater part of the year and thus do much to blur and erase specific memories of sunburn and overcrowded beaches. On the other hand, Club Med offers its GMs the opportunity to ‘consume’ their vacation via its clothing ranges and other merchandise both before and after the vacation.<sup>42</sup> Thus, where a washing powder advertisement might offer up the myth of bourgeois domesticity,<sup>43</sup> a Club Med holiday can be marketed as providing an escape from such domesticity while its merchandise and magazines ensure this escape remains a perpetual possibility even when one returns to everyday life in the city or suburbs. The quotidian becomes the time and place where one remembers, dreams, plans and prepares for one’s vacation. Again, like war, the vacation has ceased to constitute a hiatus in usual economic production and consumption and has now become its defining, structuring objective.

Of equal importance here is the role of a brand like Club Med in the construction not only of consumer myths but, at the same time, its creation and perpetuation of nationalist myths of vacation and, furthermore, the culturally

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<sup>41</sup> Raymond, *Op. cit.*, 326.

<sup>42</sup> In addition to its on-site gift shops, Club Med launched a mail order catalogue in 1959 exclusively for GMs. See Furlough, ‘Packaging Pleasures’, 78.

<sup>43</sup> See Roland Barthes, ‘Saponides et détergents’ in *Mythologies*, Paris: Seuil, 1957, 36–38.

and socially-inflected figure of the French tourist. This does not simply involve an erosion of politically-charged notions of vacations for all workers and their families. And, this affirmation of national identity occurs precisely as a result of Club Med's success as an international corporation rather than in spite of this.

A recent biography of Club Med describes the organization as a 'monument nationale', comparing it to the French football team.<sup>44</sup> Writing about *the* 'monument nationale', the Eiffel Tower, in 1964, Roland Barthes unpacks the construction of myth via mythical construction. According to Barthes, for Guy de Maupassant, like many of his fellow Parisians now and then, the only way to escape the visual profanation to his beloved Paris was to climb the Tower and dine in its passable restaurant. Yet, as Barthes points out, the Eiffel Tower has come to constitute the ultimate symbol of Paris and, moreover, France to the rest of the world. The cosmopolitan glamour the Tower has come to embody cannot be attributed to its construction, its function as a radio mast or even the irresistible pleasure inspired by its hourly light show.<sup>45</sup> There are other TV masts elsewhere, Berlin, Seattle, Tokyo with comparable aesthetics, other towers, the Empire State Building, the Petronas Towers, with similar stories of architectural genius and engineering prowess but none of which replicate to anything near the same degree the very specific myths produced by the Eiffel Tower. Implicit in Barthes' text is not simply the variety of myths belonging to the Tower but also the way in which the Tower lends itself to all of these. The same applies to Club Med. Its mythical status is also predicated upon multiple perspectives which operate from within and without in seeming opposition. On the one hand, it operates, like the Eiffel Tower, as a symbol of French national identity. To vacation in a Club Med village is frequently perceived by non-French guests as vacationing as the French do. On the other hand, the Club is mocked and derided from within as vulgar manifestation of modernity and Republicanism.

However, rather than simply echoing claims made by biographers and scholars alike concerning the 'mythical' status of Club Med, it is more interesting to consider the way in which this mythical status continues to be affirmed by such accounts. One of the most notable ways in which this occurs, is via the notion of collective storytelling. As Manceau suggests in his biography: 'L'esprit est entretenu par oral' [The spirit is maintained by word of mouth].<sup>46</sup> The decision to define customers as *gentils membres* (GMs), thus including them in the narrative of the organization, has become a staple – used both to champion the socialist origins of the Club within a history of French tourism as well as by those more critical of the role the club played in developing mass consumerism via brand loyalty. Furlough, for example, documents the ubiquitous presence of the Club

<sup>44</sup> Manceau, Op. Cit., 17.

<sup>45</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1979.

<sup>46</sup> Manceau, Op. Cit., 8.

via its publications, marketing campaigns and social networks. In their 1971 biography of the Club, Peyre and Raynouard suggest this ubiquity extends beyond those patronising the Club and is a matter of national concern :

Le Club Méditerranée est la seule organisation en France qui partage avec le Parti communiste l'étrange privilège de ne laisser personne indifférent. On est pour ou on est contre, sans trop savoir pourquoi.

[Club Med is the only organisation to share with the Communist Party the strange privilege of leaving no one indifferent. You are either for or against without really knowing why.]<sup>47</sup>

The comparison with the PCF is important. Not only does it maintain Club Med's association with a socialist, egalitarian agenda but, at the same time, it defines the Club as a matter of nationalist, political interest. This is less a case of actually demonstrating that Club Med *was* a matter of interest for the entire French population and more of arguing that Club Med *should be* a matter of interest as a national brand and global symbol of a particular aspect of French identity as produced by leisure and consumption.

This notion of public responsibility and implication in a national brand is echoed in Manceau's more recent book focused on Henri Giscard d'Estaing's management of the club since 2002. For Manceau, Club Med is a fundamental part of the French psyche to the point that he suggests that : 'Depuis sa création le Club Med est au cœur de toutes les grandes questions philosophiques qui ont animé la société française.' [Since its creation, Club Med has been at the heart of every philosophical question inspiring French society.]<sup>48</sup> Yet, here public complicity and responsibility for the club's future takes on a slightly different inflection. For Manceau the public's sense of ownership of the Club instilled in them by Blitz and Trigano, is something to be treated with suspicion. In this respect, his account includes reference to the damaging role of parodies like *Les Bronzés* as well as social media sites like Trip Advisor. At stake here is a different interpellation of the French public, one that limits this public to a certain financial elite, affirming French exceptionalism above inclusivity. Thus, despite Giscard d'Estaing's failure to make the club profitable by 2010, Manceau's objective is to demonstrate how his management strategies have put the Club 'sur la bonne voie.'<sup>49</sup> Such strategies are presented by Manceau in terms of an ethico-moral responsibility which, it becomes apparent, have the objective of affirming the club's 'mission civilisatrice' both above its economic success and as fundamental to this.

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<sup>47</sup> Peyre and Raynouard, Op. cit., 7.

<sup>48</sup> Manceau, Op. cit., 13.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 217.

Manceau's narrative involves a revisionist history of Club Med, a rewriting which enables him to position Giscard d'Estaing's 'vision' as a continuation rather than radical departure from the one conceived by Blitz and Trigano. The book's subtitle 'reinventer la machine à rêves' might be translated as 'reinventing the dream machine' focusing on the possibility of having a 'vision', risk taking, and the image of an innovative yet well-oiled machine required to set such a 'vision' in motion. Here, a double-doubling occurs in which the fantasy of Giscard d'Estaing like that of Blitz is defined as the realization of the fantasies of the Club's patrons. Yet, we might also read this reference to a 'machine à rêves' via a different translation, the notion of a 'factory of desire' in which Fordism gives way to a post-Fordist configuration of desire based on the very same narcissism of small differences underpinning Leconte's parody of the Club. And, for Manceau it is precisely the small differences that enable Giscard d'Estaing to redefine Club Med as a 'marque de luxe' where previous radical changes to the Club's business model and product by his predecessors simply impoverished the brand.

One of the main ways this revisionist history is constructed is by assuming the tradition established in earlier biographies of setting up an opposition between the Club's heroes and its villains. If Blitz and Trigano were the original heroes, the Baron de Rothschild was the first villain. If Rothschild assured the Club's growth and success by bankrolling the operation during the 1960s, he is also credited with turning the resorts into 'factories', losing sight of the club's original values and *raison d'être*.<sup>50</sup> In Manceau's book, Philippe Bourguignon plays a similar role. Having become President of Club Med in 1997 after running Disneyland Paris, Bourguignon is associated with a cheap americanisation of the Club via an endless recounting of his unsuccessful projects and campaigns. As 'antidote' to this *disneyfication*, Giscard d'Estaing is cast as perfect embodiment of French sophistication.<sup>51</sup>

In setting up these oppositions, Manceau is able to situate Giscard d'Estaing within the Club Med myth. His revisioning of the Club as a luxury brand aimed at the top 4% of the French population<sup>52</sup> is credited by Manceau as somehow in keeping with the all-inclusive ideology of Blitz and Trigano. Manceau achieves this by focusing on what I have already termed the 'mission civilisatrice' of Blitz and Trigano. Where for Club Med's founders, this 'mission' enabled the French population to collectively exceed the horizons of the 'hexagone' along with the

<sup>50</sup> See Peyre and Raynouard, *Op. cit.*, 257.

<sup>51</sup> At the same time as being reified as the Club's founding fathers, Blitz and Trigano are conjured up but not dwelt upon by Manceau. Where various global events of the opening decade of the 21st century, 911, SARS, the 2004 Tsunami, play a major role for Manceau in the Club's recent narrative of survival and reinvention, almost no mention is made of the manslaughter sentences served by the Triganos in 2000 following an aircraft accident off the coast of Senegal.

<sup>52</sup> Manceau, *Op. cit.*, 53-4.

limits of everyday life such a mission takes on a different form with Giscard d'Estaing. The French tourist is no longer the primary focus but is instead displaced by a global elite. The 'all-inclusive' discourse of the early Club Med gives way to a 'multi-culturalisme' composed of the new moneyed middle classes of emerging super-powers China, Russia and Brazil.<sup>53</sup>

Moreover, this claim of continuity coupled with innovation is affirmed via an incessant rhetoric of colonization. On the one hand, this rhetoric is described as fundamental to Giscard d'Estaing's plan for the club. His two major strategies as recounted by Manceau, 'Cap sur l'incomparable' and 'Magellan', employ an overtly colonist vernacular as does his 'carte de transformation'.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, such language is echoed by Manceau's own narrative as he refers Giscard d'Estaing as 'capitaine'<sup>55</sup> and to the Club's success as predicated upon 'un monde à construire' [a world to be built]<sup>56</sup> and, in particular, 'la future conquête sur la Chine' [the future conquest of China].<sup>57</sup> Thus it becomes apparent that, at least for Manceau, Giscard d'Estaing's salvation of Club Med lies precisely in a reinstatement of the 'mission civilisatrice' of the French tourist industry. Such a reinstatement, in turn, redefines France in terms of an old world, aristocratic sense of privilege and taste. His love of hunting in rural France is evoked in contrast to the Club's raucous 'Crazy Signs' dance routines.<sup>58</sup> At numerous points in his book, Manceau plays on the deliberate ambiguity of the appellation of 'president' to link Giscard d'Estaing to his father's political legacy creating a direct link between the management of the Club and the government of the Republic. 'Les pâtes et les foies gras poêlés sont désormais au goût du président.' [Pasta and foie gras are henceforth cooked according to the tastes of a president.]<sup>59</sup>

Thus, as France continues to subsidise its flag carrier, Air France, while other European airlines have long been privatized or, in the case of Sabena and others, abandoned by government and tax payers, it is possible to see a very specific French colonial desire at work in Giscard d'Estaing's 'projet Magellan'. Leisure continues to function as a symbol of French national identity. Yet, inclusion within this identity becomes carefully refined, aligned with luxury brands such as Dior and Hermes that are increasingly marketed to the new wealth of Asia and South America. Consequently, the 'multiculturalism' of Giscard d'Estaing's

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<sup>53</sup> According to Manceau five 'essential' values were agreed upon as part of Giscard d'Estaing's new vision: 'multiculturalité, esprit pionnier, gentillesse, liberté, responsabilité.' [multiculturalism, a pioneering spirit, kindness, freedom and responsibility], Op. cit., 84. My translation.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 55-6.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 68. My translation.

marketing discourse assures the global myth of the French-citizen-tourist as monocultural, solely predicated upon economic wealth and a homogenized image of global consumerism.

## Reclaimed Land

Since the late 1980s, the need to critique the neocolonial desires enacted through global tourism has taken on a double imperative. Western operated resorts and tour companies have often justified their plundering of resources and occupation of prime coastal real estate in terms of the (questionable) economic benefits and employment opportunities afforded to local populations. However, such justification becomes harder to maintain in the face of today's discourses on global warming and the already widely evident threats to coastal areas around the planet. Short-term financial gains no longer serve as legitimation for the strain placed on water supplies and other resources along with the irreversible damage caused to coastlines by concrete developments and infrastructures set up to benefit a visiting rather than local population.

As indicated above, Manceau's desire to align Club Med's history and identity with that of France manifests itself most excruciatingly in his references, both implicit and explicit, to Giscard d'Estaing's father, Valéry. There is a certain irony in this forced linking not least in its open celebration of old money as appropriate embodiment of French civilization versus the vulgarity of mass tourism as symbol of impoverished Republican ideals. A different link might be set up here via father and son. As Maurice Burac has argued, the aggressive tourism development program announced by Giscard d'Estaing at the start of his presidency failed to translate to the needs and circumstances of France's Outre-Mer where over-population was already a major issue.<sup>60</sup> In addition to the misplaced incentives of the *Loi Pons* mentioned above, urban planning policies defined in mainland France failed to be applied with the same level of consistency in the overseas territories leading to what Perri has termed a 'tourisme anarchique'<sup>61</sup> and what Aimé Césaire and others have criticized as the 'bétonnisation' [concretization] of the Antilles by European and North American developers. According to Burac, tourism in Martinique during the 1970s and 1980s 'seemed like a new form of human pollution within a structure of neglect.'<sup>62</sup>

A similar attitude might be identified in Henri Giscard d'Estaing's 'tokenism' concerning the Club's perceived championing of sustainable development

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<sup>60</sup> Maurice Burac, 'The Struggle for Sustainable Tourism in Martinique' in Sherrie L. Baver and Barbara Deutsch Lynch (eds), *Beyond Sun and Sand: Caribbean Environmentalists*, New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2006, 67.

<sup>61</sup> Perri, *Op. cit.*, 24.

<sup>62</sup> Burac, *Op. cit.*, 68.

juxtaposed with his own aggressive development programme. Manceau makes it clear in his biography of the Club that questions of environment, local labour and sustainable development are little more than marketing tools at best, impediments to economic growth at worst. He cites the multiple environmental awards the Club has won as an exercise in branding rather than an ethical obligation. The cynicism at work here is palpable and epitomized by a statement from the Club's director of sustainable development, Agnès Weil:

Sans savoir encore si nous souhaitons aller jusqu'à l'obtention d'un écolabel pour chacun de nos villages, nous voulons être exemplaires en accélérant les démarches de management environnemental et en donnant des *guide lines* de construction pour nos villages futurs.

[Without knowing yet if we want to go down the path of obtaining an eco-badge for all our villages, we want to be exemplary in speeding up the process of environmental management and providing guidelines for the construction of our future villages.]<sup>63</sup>

It is clear from this statement that the focus here is on speedy construction with sustainable development merely a means to achieving this. The environment like local labour is something to be managed not respected and protected in itself. Moreover, Club Med's specific conservation projects seem to embody one of the major paradoxes of a more broadly defined ecotourism as explained by Sherrie L. Baver and Barbara Deutsch Lynch:

[E]cotourism projects may meet narrowly defined conservation objectives, but privatization of natural resources and enclosure in support of ecotourism exacerbates problems of inequality and access.<sup>64</sup>

Elsewhere, debates over land leased to the Club demonstrate the extent to which the 'mission civilisatrice' has been internalized by local communities. In the case of Phuket in Thailand, discussions in 2014 as to the future of the land leased to the club since 1985 highlighted divergent opinions as to the validity of Club Med's presence. Where certain groups spoke out in favour of making the land which is part of Kata beach available for the use of the local community, there were also those that welcomed the presence of a foreign investor whom they view as circumventing the possibilities for corruption amongst local officials and developers and the destruction of coastal parkland by the general public. As local news source, *Phuket Wan* stated:

While Club Med is about as international in outlook as any resort gets, it is regrettable that little of that international approach has permeated the surrounding

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Manceau, *Op. cit.*, 183. My translation.

<sup>64</sup> Sherrie L. Baver and Barbara Deutsch Lynch, 'The Political Ecology of Paradise' in Baver and Lynch, *Op. cit.*, 14.

village mentality, which is still locked into the same way of operating as in 1985.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, readers' comments following the *Phuket Gazette's* reporting on the negotiations included the following type of statements:

Because of the Club Med, the Kata Beach Road is the cleanest, prettiest beach road on the entire island. Park? I guess the locals just want to ruin it as quickly as possible. They'll set up massage tents, street food vendors, tuk-tuk stations, etc, and generally make the place filthy. Has anyone noticed how run down the beach is in Kamala?<sup>66</sup>

The outspokenness of critics of Phuket's government along with an indictment of the local Thai population based on the crudest of stereotypes seems to reproduce a 'colonial' discourse in which indigenous communities cannot be trusted to look after their land and resources thus requiring intervention from the developed world.

In August 2014 it was agreed that Club Med would develop 5 rai (8000m<sup>2</sup>) of land into a public park in exchange for a renewal of their lease for just 3 years. The symbolism of this gesture should nevertheless be noted within the context of global operations, in particular, their stakes in the Chinese market but also, their lack of commitment to local communities elsewhere as demonstrated in their minimal investment in Les Boucaniers.

## Conclusion: Les Vieux Crabes

For a number of years, singles tour operator, *Club 18-35 ans* has used the tagline 'interdit aux vieux crabes.' [old crabs prohibited] The pun referencing STIs as well as Club Med's ageing brand and customer base affirms the role and indeed the necessity of parody within today's increasingly stratified beach resort industry. Moreover, parody, it seems does not damage a brand but rather assures its status in public consciousness. A critique of tourism and more specifically, the tourist, is built into the tourism of late capitalism. It is this critique which enables organisations like Club Med to turn any attack on their operation onto their customers at the same time as demanding public responsibility for the interests of a brand as symbol of their own national and class identity. This circumven-

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<sup>65</sup> Sert Tongdee and Alan Morison, 'Fairway to Heaven: Phuket Scores Park for the Club Med Course,' *Phuket Wan*, 14 August 2014. Available: <http://phuketwan.com/property/fairway-heaven-phuket-scores-park-club-med-course-20824/>. Accessed 16/09/2014.

<sup>66</sup> Comment made by 'artistman' in response to Saran Mitrarat, 'Phuket officials threaten protest over Club Med lease,' *Phuket Gazette*, 18 April 2014. Available: <http://www.phuketgazette.net/phuket-news/Phuket-officials-threaten-protest-Club-Med-lease/29170>. Accessed 16/09/2014.

tion of sustained critique not simply of tourism *per se* but the neocolonial ideologies which continue to underpin it, works in tandem with the inertia of global travel identified by Virilio and others.

However, if the respective takes on weekenders and tourists by Godard and Leconte represent the descent into ironic self-parody of Western consumerism in the post-war decades, Michel Houellebecq's reimagining of France's global tourist industry in *Plateforme* (2001) marks a limit in which farce flips over into tragedy once more. In the novel, the postmodern cynicism which enables the open promotion of sex tourism as respectable and mainstream meets the violent necropolitics of an Islamic fundamentalism responding to this reenacting of Western colonialism. Where Houellebecq's anti-Islam stance is deeply problematic, the novel nevertheless is worth noting here for taking irreconcilable global tensions to their logical conclusion in order to reaffirm the perpetual link between war and tourism.

In early autumn of 2014, the future ownership and management of Club Med was uncertain. A complex set of negotiations had taken place over the preceding months between two different potential investors, Chinese conglomerate Fosun and Italian tycoon Andrea Bonomi. Both investors were highly sensitized to the mythical status of Club Med within French national identity as perceived both inside and outside of France. Fosun had their bid supported by Ardian, a French private equity firm and proposed to keep Giscard d'Estaing as Director General. Bonomi was backed by Serge Trigano who would be reinstated as Club chairman if their bid had been successful. In the end, Bonomi withdrew after the bidding war saw him make a tidy profit from Club Med's elevated share price.

As part of its reporting on the 'saga' between the two sets of investors, *Le Nouvel Observateur* ran the headline 'Le Club Med devrait devenir le Club Chinois' [Club Med would have to become Club Chinese].<sup>67</sup> If anything this simply reiterates the Club's own stirring up of nationalist sentiment and the legitimization of its neocolonial projects in Asia now presented as counterpoint to the designs China has on the European tourist industry. Moreover, the 'revisiting' of history in order to write the new owner into the Club's narrative will not attest to a 'betrayal' or 'affirmation' of the Club's values and identity. What is at stake here is the acknowledgment not so much of the myths produced by Club Med but, rather, the ability of the beach, other beaches, and those appropriating these spaces, to *produce* a whole series of myths. In its 'colonisation' of beaches worldwide, Club Med not only ensures the longevity of France's 'mission civilisatrice' long after its loss of empire, but also enables this mission to redefine itself along with French identity according to the pathological anxieties of global consumerism.

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<sup>67</sup> Claude Soula, 'Le Club Med devrait devenir le Club Chinois', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 12 September 2014. Available: <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/societe/20140912.OBS9034/le-club-med-devrait-devenir-le-club-chinois.html>. Accessed 16/09/2014.

Thus, if the beach represents the site of multiple encounters, actual and imaginary, encounters largely defined as violent and transgressive and as such, celebrated and mourned in equal measure, it is nevertheless the image of the empty beach, a beach free from the detritus of human existence that persists in Western consciousness. But never *only* an empty beach and a phone number. Gérard Blitz's first poster for Club Med has come to frame the beach dialectically since the post-war years. No matter the rising sea levels, hurricanes and tsunamis affecting coastal life around the world. No matter the pollution caused by hotel chains worldwide, the damaged coral reefs, the extinction of coastal wildlife. No matter the ghettoization of local populations and the persistence of slave economies produced by the tourist and service industries, the neo-colonisation and ethnic cleansing. As colonial guilt and post-war shame are washed away with the tides, military strategy is rewritten as risk assessment and brand management policy. Despite appearances, the beach continues to operate as battlefield, camp and colony.

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