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## **O is for Orientalism: The Dynamics of the Sexual Tourist Gaze in Laurent Cantet's *Vers le sud/Heading South* (2005)**

Charlotte Hammond and Andrew McGregor

### **Abstract**

This article explores the Orientalist dynamics of North/South sexual tourism in Laurent Cantet's *Vers le sud/Heading South* (2005). The narrative of the film is structured around the self-interested motivations of three white middle-aged bourgeois Western women who travel from North America to Haiti in the late 1970s in order to explore their sexuality in what they perceive as an island paradise, effectively exiling themselves from the codified social behaviour expected of them in their homeland. The women avail themselves of the pleasures offered by young black Haitian men, often in exchange for money or goods, and fuel one-sided fantasies of romantic love with their local hosts, seemingly oblivious to the Orientalist nature of such an imbalance of social and economic power. The article explores the historical context of the political repression and violence of late-1970s Haiti under the Duvalier regime, as well as the manifestations of spatial politics represented in the film. In its Haitian setting, *Vers le sud* sheds light on a relatively unfamiliar cultural and social milieu for the Western/Northern audience, with the director keenly aware of the exoticism of the subject matter and the impossibility of the film to maintain its neutrality in a problematic engagement with the Orient/South. The article argues that the privileged position of the film's protagonists is matched not only by Cantet's directorial gaze, but also by the intellectual detachment of postcolonial scholars such as the article's authors, who acknowledge that their engagement with the subject matter risks re-enacting the Orientalist dynamics they seek to expose.

Cet article a pour but d'examiner la dynamique orientaliste du tourisme sexuel nord-sud dans le film *Vers le sud/Heading South* de Laurent Cantet (2005). Le récit du film s'articule autour des motivations intéressées de trois bourgeoises occidentales blanches d'un certain âge qui voyagent de l'Amérique du Nord à Haïti vers la fin des années soixante-dix pour explorer leur sexualité dans le contexte de ce qu'elles perçoivent comme une île-paradis, exilées du comportement socialement codifié que l'on attend d'elles dans leurs pays d'origine. Les femmes s'offrent les plaisirs proposés par les jeunes Haïtiens noirs, souvent échangés contre de l'argent ou des biens, et engendrent des fantasmes non-réciproqués d'amour romantique

avec leurs hôtes, apparemment ignorantes de la nature orientaliste d'un tel déséquilibre de pouvoir social et économique. L'article se penche sur le contexte historique de la répression politique et de la violence en Haïti sous le régime Duvalier vers la fin des années soixante-dix, aussi bien que sur les manifestations de politique spatiale représentées dans le film. De par son cadre haïtien, le film met en lumière un milieu social et culturel relativement peu familier au public occidental/du nord ; toutefois, le cinéaste est conscient de l'exotisme de son sujet et de l'impossibilité de maintenir la neutralité du film dans son engagement problématique avec l'Orient/le sud. L'article soutient que la position privilégiée des protagonistes du film est reflétée non seulement dans le regard du cinéaste mais aussi dans le détachement intellectuel des spécialistes en études postcoloniales comme les auteurs de cet article, qui reconnaissent que leur traitement du sujet risque de rejouer la dynamique orientaliste qu'ils cherchent à exposer.

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Tourisse, pas pren portrai'm	<i>Tourist, don't take my picture</i>
Pas pren portrai'm, touris	<i>Don't take my picture, tourist</i>
M'tro laid	<i>I'm too ugly</i>
M'tro sale	<i>Too dirty</i>
M'tro maig	<i>Too skinny</i>
Pas pren portrai'm, blanc	<i>Don't take my picture, whitey.</i>
[...]	[...]
Ous pas'p comprenne en-ien	<i>You don't understand anything</i>
Nan zaffai-m, tourisse	<i>About my business, tourist</i>
Gui mi faille cinse	<i>Give me five cents</i>
Et pi, alle fai chimen ous	<i>And then, be on your way,</i>
tourisse !	<i>tourist!</i>

Félix Morisseau-Leroy, *Tourisse*  
(Diacoute 1970 [1953] pp12-13)

In the now more than forty years since the publication in 1978 of Edward Said's seminal and iconic work *Orientalism*, scholars in Postcolonial Studies have been engaging with his critique of Eurocentrism and Othering. Said's thesis argued that the West, via its political and cultural discourse, positions itself at the center of an Orientalist worldview which presupposes its rehearsed and normalized superiority in opposition to a potentially threatening and frequently exoticized Other, loosely defined as the East. Western civilization is upheld as a greater manifestation of mankind's potential, replete with cultural, political and social sophistication, to be contrasted with the unruly and savage East, into which the Westerner may occasionally venture, often risking life and limb, in the hope of returning home with the spoils of conquest and privilege, and all to the admiration of one's peers. By inventing "the West," Europe created what Said conceptualized as an "imaginative geography" (54) that in turn fictionalized the Orient "out there" (54) as its "contrasting image" (2). As in *Orientalism*, for Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot the Other emerges as a symbolic and material product of the same carefully designed project that invented the West (*Global* 28). Trouillot argues that a North Atlantic geography of imagination requires its "savage slot" or "a space for the inherently Other" (*Global* 1). This essay revisits Said's *Orientalism*, via Trouillot's post-Saidist North Atlantic geography of imagination, to reveal the ways in which Haiti's "inherent" otherness has been framed by foreign tourists, the filmmaker Laurent Cantet, and those of us involved in scholarly research. Through a critique of the ethnographic gaze, and its humanitarian impulses, the final section will call into question our researcher positionality as postcolonial "tourists."

The ongoing discursive project that maintains Haiti's "savage slot," its fiction of otherness, is evident in Laurent Cantet's 2005 film *Vers le sud/Heading South*. This Franco-Canadian co-production is an adaptation of three stories by Haitian Canadian writer Dany Laferrière taken from his 1997 novel *La Chair du maître/The Master's Flesh*, set in Haiti during the Jean-Claude Duvalier or "Baby Doc" regime of the 1970s. It recounts the story of three middle-aged Western, and in this case North Atlantic, women who are in the practice of "heading South" to the Caribbean in order to indulge in what can only be described as sex tourism, despite the women's either naïve or self-delusional fantasies of baggage-free romance with an exotic Other. This practice involves liaisons with young Haitian males, some of whom are children, who offer their sexual services in exchange for money or gifts

from the women. In what the tourists perceive to be a utopian island paradise, the secluded confines of an exclusive beach resort mask the insecurities of Haitian life. The women appear to be ignorant, deliberately or otherwise, of the violence and oppression of the Duvalier dictatorship playing out across Haiti at the time, still less the legacies of foreign French colonial and US military interventions, occupations and political influence in the region. Whether the women are aware of it or not, this is certainly not the first time the North has imposed itself on the South in an exploitative and self-serving manner, characterized by the Orientalist delusion that crimes such as the sexual exploitation of children are somehow justifiable *in the tropics*. By dressing up exploitation as romantic interest, the women appear to be convinced that they are doing the Haitian locals a favor by bringing their riches and their bodies to the South, albeit for their own gratification.

The women must recreate and perpetuate what Said described as the “supreme fiction” (xii) of Otherness, whereby the Haitian Other is assigned meaning through all kinds of racist desires and associations in the North Atlantic mind. As J. Michael Dash argued, the “supreme fiction” of Haiti has acquired greater authority than the reality:

Like the Orient, Haiti emerges as an inexhaustible symbol designed to satisfy material as well as psychological needs. Images of mystery, decadence, romance and adventure are not arbitrary in either case but constitute a special code, a system of antithetical values which establishes radical, ineradicable distinctions between the Subject and the Other, West and East, the United States and Haiti.

(1)

The women’s facile construction of a necessarily Othered and exoticized Haiti at the start of the film, in order to cater for their psychological and sexual needs, is consistent with the most binary and derided colonial-era interpretation of the term “exoticism,” as discussed by Charles Forsdick in his work on Victor Segalen and French and Francophone travel writing<sup>1</sup>, and particularly with the nineteenth-century understanding of the term, defined by the editors of *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* as “a stimulating or exciting difference, something with which the domestic could be (safely) spiced” (Ashcroft et al 94, qtd in Forsdick *Travel* 33). By the film’s end, the “safety” of such a fantasy is patently and potently challenged, with deadly consequences.

The film's director, Laurent Cantet, is a particularly socially engaged filmmaker, with a style that frequently blurs boundaries between documentary and fictional film, turning his lens to the plight of minorities or individuals as marginalized outsiders as a means of commenting primarily on the French national social and cultural fabric. His earlier films *Ressources humaines/Human Resources* (1999) and *L'Emploi du temps/Time Out* (2001) tackled the social effects of economic rationalism in the workplace and in family life at the mercy of unchecked aspirational capitalism, seemingly at any cost. His best-known film, *Entre les murs/The Class* (2008), won the coveted *Palme d'Or* for Best Film at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival for its exposition of the mismatch between the reality of cultural diversity in France and the maintenance of outdated Republican integrationist ideals in the French classroom. In a similar vein to *Vers le sud*, *Entre les murs*, as well as Cantet's later film *L'Atelier/The Workshop* (2017), demonstrates the naivety of a privileged, older white protagonist who attempts to "help" younger, culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised youths by sharing with them the fruits of an education system from which they will remain excluded. As Martin O'Shaughnessy observes in his comprehensive monograph on the filmmaker's work, "[Cantet's protagonists] start with an assumption that they know a space and their place within it, an assumption that will gradually be unpicked. The predominant movement of Cantet's films is away from certainty rather than towards it" (19). This is clearly the case for the protagonists of *Vers le sud*, which marked Cantet's first venture beyond the social context of metropolitan France. Like for his earlier films, the inspiration to make *Vers le sud* came from the director's observation of the injustices of the world around him, and from a realization of his own relatively privileged position within it. Cantet first visited Haiti when his parents were working there on a humanitarian mission with an NGO, recalling:

L'envie de faire ce film est née du choc éprouvé au moment où j'ai découvert Haïti. [...] J'ai eu tout de suite l'impression de n'avoir jamais appréhendé une telle misère et en même temps une telle richesse culturelle [...]. Le choc entre l'embarras que l'on peut éprouver dans ce pays quand on le traverse en touriste et la fascination qu'il exerce malgré tout m'ont fait dévorer à mon retour tous les livres de Dany Laferrière. (qtd. in Peron and Bernier)

Although he is working within a former French colony, albeit one which accomplished the "unthinkable" (Trouillot, *Silencing* 27), successfully defeating the French

army to gain its independence as early as 1804, the historical, political, cultural, economic and social context of Haiti is a particularly complex one, with the legacy of the United States' presence, influence and interventions in the region as strongly felt as those of the French.<sup>2</sup> If Said observed the Orient as a "European invention" (1), Dash wrote that "Haiti was almost an invention of the United States" (2), in a tempting reworking of Said's formulation to reflect Haitian history. As O'Shaughnessy observes, "When [Cantet] engages with sex tourism, he is not interested in such a specific topic but instead uses it to investigate the profoundly dysfunctional and oppressive relationships embedded in globalized consumption" (180). Haiti provides an exemplary case study for such an investigation. Commodity production for export to foreign markets in the Global North, and the persistent forms of labour exploitation and ethnocentrism this has engendered, has continued to affirm Haiti's status as a testing ground for global capitalism since its days as France's most profitable colony, Saint Domingue.<sup>3</sup>

The title of this article, "O is for Orientalism," clearly places Orientalism at the center of our discussion, but it also channels the "exotic-erotic" theme at the core of the film's Orientalist narrative, referencing the 1954 French erotic novel *Histoire d'O / The Story of O* by Anne Desclos under the pen name Pauline Réage, and, of course, "The Big O," the seemingly elusive sexual Holy Grail that is the female orgasm. It will be argued, among other things, that it is no coincidence, and not merely an observation on female sexuality, that one of the film's protagonists, Brenda, the embodiment of the bored 1970s post-sexual-revolution housewife, manages to achieve orgasm only while in the throes of sex with her Haitian lover Legba, and only while in voluntary exile. In order for the sexual fantasy to "work" for Brenda and for her female tourist companions, they clearly need to construct in their minds a contrived and imagined exotic paradise, and to project that fantasy onto the space defined by the contours of the beach resort, which itself has been physically constructed for the provision of service, services and servitude to the Western tourist. The women simply *must* imagine Haiti as Other. They need to allow their sexual agency to have free rein, unencumbered by any bothersome awareness of their behavior being a neo-colonialist re-enactment of the dynamics of the plantation, complete with luxury, privilege and exclusivity on the one hand, and slavery, poverty, inequality and injustice on the other. The women affirm their voluntary exile from the civilized Northern center and all of its social and moral constraints, and the position of dominance of the white tourist, in what we might call the Oriental South. For Said, as mentioned above, "The Orient was almost a European invention,

and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (1). It is as much an “imagined community” as Benedict Anderson has suggested in relation to the political, cultural and social identity of nation states, with the equally imagined border keeping the Orient safely at bay and granting free passage only to the Orientalist rather than to the objectified Other, who must stay where he or she belongs until summoned or conjured by the Orientalist. As Charles Forsdick (*Travel xi*) reminds us, travel has historically represented an unequal distribution of mobility rights, with the term initially describing “an essentially colonial practice.”

What we won't be doing here is exploring why, on a personal level, Brenda and her two female companions feel it necessary to exile themselves in order to pursue their sexual pleasure, nor will any judgement be laid upon them, as individuals, for exercising their right to do so. Indeed, one of the film's strengths is its representation of three middle-aged women taking control and demonstrating agency over their sexuality and sexual expression, although we might lament that the white women appear to be able to enjoy the subjectivity of their own sexual gaze only by projecting it onto a non-white or colonized Other. We might also lament that the women's behavior is tantamount, in some instances, to child abuse and pedophilia, all seemingly justified by the assumption that the rules of engagement are somehow different in the tropics, away from the moral and legal constraints of “civilization.” What appears at the outset as a sexual and social liberation for these otherwise under-represented middle-aged women soon becomes problematic, indeed disturbing, when one considers the impact and consequences of the broader context of the women's pursuit of sexual pleasure at the expense of the Haitian locals, despite the token gestures of the gifts that they bear.

Given the aforementioned anniversary of the publication of Said's *Orientalism*, it would appear timely to examine Cantet's film through an Orientalist lens, not only because this has not been done before, despite some otherwise excellent existing scholarly literature on the film, particularly by Cécile Accilien (2011), Martin O'Shaughnessy (2018) and Andrew Asibong (2018), but also because Said's very contemporary work was published in the middle of the Duvalier regime in Haiti, precisely when the film is set. In 1971, Jean-Claude Duvalier replaced his father, François Duvalier, as Haiti's head of state, naming himself “President for Life.” Enforcing his father's vision in the 1960s of an increased dependence on the US (Trouillot, *State* 200), Jean-Claude promoted two (interconnected)



spaces of economic priority for Haiti: tourist enclaves and export processing zones.<sup>4</sup> The persistent state neglect of Haiti's rural majority (referred to as the *moun andeyo*, literally meaning "people on the outside") prompted a wave of internal migration towards the capital of Port-au-Prince, the setting for Laferrière's collection of short stories.<sup>5</sup> Tourism, which was experiencing a second wave of growth amongst North Atlantic consumers during the 1970s, represented another product of Haiti's renewed focus on export-oriented industry (Strachan 8; Carrigan 19). As M. Jacqui Alexander has argued, hotel resorts served as "another kind of export zone" (103), what St Lucian writer Derek Walcott renamed "these new plantations by the sea" (11).

Throughout the film, Cantet is careful to allude only indirectly to the historical and political context of 1970s Haiti, allowing, even daring, the spectator to become complicit in the enactment of the women's fantasies of inconsequential sexual encounters in the Caribbean. As "la perle des Antilles" during the colonial period, Saint-Domingue served as a pleasure playground, where the French colonial elite played out their sexual fantasies (Dayan, *Haiti* 172). If sex was central to colonial white European constructions of Otherness (Kempadoo 29), in the 1970s Haiti's economy continued to depend (and still depends) on a racialized and sexualized image of the country (suspended in time, backward, and "beyond civilization" (Sheller, "Natural" 34)). Transactional sex (Kempadoo 42) became a viable strategy for women, girls, and an increasing number of young men, to negotiate an uneven global economic arrangement. The character of Legba, a young Haitian boy who exchanges sex for the material goods, food and other gifts offered by the white women tourists in *Vers le sud*, embodies this nexus of economic dependencies.<sup>6</sup> In Dany Laferrière's short story of the same name, we learn that Legba is from the small border town of Ouanaminthe and, due to a lack of infrastructure and investment in the border region, has emigrated to the capital in search of work. Legba, aware of his precarious economic situation as a *moun andeyo* of Haitian society, enacts sustained material relationships with the white middle-aged women during the duration of their stay in order to survive.

As Duvalierist corruption and violence grew, the burgeoning chasm between the haves and the have-nots widened (Trouillot, *State* 17). In the opening scene of Cantet's film, as Haitian hotel worker Albert awaits the arrival of North American tourist Brenda at Port-au-Prince airport, a Haitian mother approaches him and offers her teenage daughter as a gift of marriage. The woman suggests that her husband was kidnapped and killed by Duvalier's

thugs, the *Tonton makout*, tasked with instilling what local people referred to as a “climate of terror” (Trouillot, *State* 169). Her only hope rests in securing an economically advantageous marriage for her daughter, an example of the sexual-financial security sought to ensure Haitian survival under the dictatorship (Charles 142-144). Brenda, on the other hand, arrives and is promptly transported to the “safety” of the Hotel Petite Anse. Cantet’s subtle references to the history of Duvalierism throughout the film puncture the all-inclusive “lieu clos” of the hotel complex and suggest a complexity that is missing from most tourists’ experiences of the Caribbean (Strachan 267).<sup>7</sup> Highlighting the self-containment of this modern “plantation” space in his critique of sex tourism in the Caribbean, Cantet’s film equally risks repeating fetishizing narratives of Haiti’s insularity and boundedness that have fixed the black republic as “exceptional” since its independence in the early-nineteenth century (Trouillot, “The Odd”; Benedicty et al.). As Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes, the French called Haiti a *singulier petit pays* and it is this “distinctiveness that attracts many foreigner-tourists and academics, for good or for bad” (“The Odd” 5-6). The emergence of anthropology in the nineteenth century (Trouillot, *Global*), and documentary as a genre,<sup>8</sup> has contributed to the maintenance of Haiti’s “peculiar” framing: both its popularity and the negative attention devoted to the country. The latter includes the perpetuation of tired stereotypical narratives that do not move beyond viewing Haiti as “the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere” or the “most dangerous tourist destination” (Ulysse 55).<sup>9</sup> Colonial narratives of Saint-Domingue (and those produced during significant periods of foreign interest in Haiti, such as the US occupation of 1915-1934) have persistently cast the destination as an exceptional site of desire and danger for the traveler.

Cantet’s film suggests that Haiti is not only an invention of the US but also a place where the North American can re-invent herself. As Colin Dayan observes, “Haiti has always been there for the taking: a place to disappear into, to find what you have lost, or to make yourself new” (“In Haiti” 303). For the Orientalist, in this case the white North Atlantic woman travelling by herself, Haiti is a place to *become* Other, to simulate colonial sexual fantasies and imagine a hybridization and creolization that is neither desirable nor socially accepted back home. As the third female protagonist, French-Canadian tourist Sue, puts it, “At home black guys don’t interest me. Here they’re very different . . . here, everything is different.” The women emerge as what Aimé Césaire would describe as “amateurs d’exotisme” (31), with their self-serving oversimplification of exoticized difference mirrored in Jacques Meunier’s mocking declaration: “Là-bas, ce n’est pas pareil!” (141-142, qtd in

Forsdick *Segalen* 33). The women's geographical and cultural displacement facilitates what Forsdick (*Travel* 13) calls a "neo-exoticism, or what Jacques Lacarrière [32] classes as a search for "'ce qui est différent, ce qui est dissemblable' [...]." Forsdick goes on to observe that "colonial exoticism tends to perpetuate perceptions of the discrete cultures inherent in diversity, to accentuate the polarities of difference, and to deny the implications of contact" (*Travel* 32). In this paradise apart, where anything goes, the women gaze upon the sexualized and racialized Other, who is reduced to an available, an affordable and, in the end, a disposable commodity. As Ellen declares, "they're a dime a dozen. Take your pick!"

Historically, the very visual activity of travel writing has predominantly been the domain of the white man (Nixon 6). While women participated in the discourse of Orientalism, several critics have commented on the glaring omission of (both Orientalist and Oriental) women in Said's work (Varisco 155; Lewis 17). Cantet's cinematic attention in the early 2000s to the privileged positionality of the white woman tourist in *Vers le sud* reflected the media interest at the time in Western women who were increasingly travelling to countries in the Global South for sex.<sup>10</sup> This is not an entirely new phenomenon, particularly in the Caribbean, yet there remains a dearth of scholarship on the history of the white female colonial gaze in the Caribbean.<sup>11</sup> In eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue, European and North Atlantic women contributed to the intellectual categorizing and describing of an increasingly racialized and divided Creole society. Leonora Hassal Sansay's *Secret History or The Horrors of St Domingo*, comprises a series of letters that narrate her travels from Philadelphia to Cap-Français (now Cap-Haïtien), Saint-Domingue, during the Haitian Revolution in the late-eighteenth century. During this time of upheaval in the colony, Sansay laments:

St Domingo was formerly a garden. Every inhabitant lived on his estate like a Sovereign ruling his slaves with despotic sway, enjoying all that luxury could invent, or fortune procure.

The pleasures of the table were carried to the last degree of refinement. Gaming knew no bounds, and libertinism, called love, was without restraint. The Creole is generous, hospitable, magnificent but vain, inconsistent, and incapable of serious application; and in this abode of pleasure and luxurious ease vices have reigned at which humanity must shudder. (18)

The colony of Saint-Domingue is portrayed as a sealed-off pleasure garden for the mobile French colonizer, who indulges in debauchery and unrestrained vice. Mimi Sheller flags the continuity of this exoticizing European gaze, and sexualized image of the region:

It was through the intertwining tendrils of an Edenic nature, the exercise of mastery, and a proximity to enslaved others that European and North American writers explored the risks and desires of being in the Caribbean. These elements of the imperial gaze have subtly informed the ways in which later tourists came to gaze upon the landscape and experience bodily the pleasures of Caribbean travel. (“Natural” 26)

Recent forms of disaster tourism in Haiti, fueled by the prevalent NGO culture which has dominated since the 2010 earthquake, are a legacy of this imperial gaze. Bandyopadhyay and Patil furthermore chart the predominance of young white women participants in contemporary volunteer tourism, which, as they argue, repeats and extends a colonial logic that first and foremost promotes the self through the act of “saving” and “helping” others (645).

In *Paradise and Plantation*, Ian Strachan observes, like Walcott, that “tourism has grown out of and sustains the plantation economy” (9).<sup>12</sup> In their exploitation of local poverty, tourists in Haiti can exacerbate economic inequalities and repeat the social and racial divisions established by the French colonial plantation (and reasserted by the US occupation). As the film moves to the beach resort of Petite Anse, the social classifications of laboring local and pleasure-seeking tourist are both defined and undermined by the characters. The beach space represents a place of leisure for the white North American women on holiday, but a place of work for the local population. The local black Haitians allowed access to the beach space are there primarily to serve the tourists. Despite the exclusionary spatial policy of the all-inclusive resort, which provides a safe zone for the tourist yet prevents local non-workers and non-guests from entering, Legba and his group of friends are shown to negotiate (and to a certain extent command) this tourist space through their informal sex work. While Albert and the waitresses serve their clientele, dressed in stiff black and white uniforms, Legba rises late following a night’s work and relaxes on the beach, claiming the space as his own as Albert looks on with resentment. However, in the scene where Albert denies Legba entry to the restaurant stating that “ce sont les règles de la maison,” it is Brenda who

ultimately overrules Albert. She insists that Legba, as their invited guest, must be treated with respect whilst admonishing the locals' racism under her breath. This misplaced concern highlights her own ignorance of her contribution, as a privileged foreign white woman, to the unequal power relations that characterize tourism and connect it to the colonialism, racism and imperial occupations that have marked Haiti's history.

Brenda's assertion of her dominant positionality, usurping Albert's authority, symbolizes Haiti's subjugation in the face of US imperialism, particularly during the second period of Duvalierism in the 1970s. In the scene where Albert tells his own story to the camera, he connects his current situation working in service to "imperial tourism" to the memory of an imperial history of exploitation by making reference to Haiti's military occupation by the United States between 1915-1934. He describes how his forefathers fought against the Americans in his hometown of Cap-Haïtien, one of the strongholds of the Caco rebels who led the resistance against the US occupation. He also suggests the shame he feels imagining if his late father were to learn of his "recolonization": his subservient role waiting on North Atlantic tourists a generation later. Albert refers to the Northern tourists who invade Haiti in the seventies as "les nouveaux occupants pas armés." These new occupiers fly in and out on short stopover trips, contributing to what Sheller has called an "islanding effect" that privileges the mobility of incoming foreigners (the mobility rich) and contains the mobility of internally displaced peoples ("The Islanding" 187). This im/mobility regime reveals a deeply racialized border control, recalling the colonial containment of black bodies in motion and the boundary-keeping of the plantation enclave. As Jamaica Kincaid writes in *A Small Place*, "when the natives see you, the tourist, they envy you, they envy your own ability to leave your banality and boredom, they envy your own ability to turn their own banality and boredom into a source of pleasure for yourself" (18). Brenda is the only tourist to cross the boundaries of the beach enclave and, via her relationship with local boy Legba, appears to passively succumb to "tropicalization" (Sheller, "Natural" 26). Her desire for black Otherness and close proximity to "nativeness" (at the market or on the dancefloor) prompts concern amongst her fellow travelers who warn against "siropy love" in the tropics.

The film's depiction of female sex tourism in Haiti is consistent with what bell hooks observes as the pervasive commodification of Otherness in the contemporary period (21). O'Shaughnessy notes that "[a]s the world becomes offered up for consumption, otherness (world music, exotic holidays, foreign food) promises new delights, a way of 'spicing up' the

jaded consumer's experience and making it more intense and satisfying" (110). The language used here evokes what Niobe Thompson has described in the context of film director Tony Gatlif's representations of the Romani ("gypsies") as "the pornographic hypocrisy of [...] white culture's relationship with these people: valued for their raw and intoxicating musical culture and yet feared and reviled as neighbors and fellow citizens." Like the character of Stéphane in Gatlif's film *Gadjo Dilo* (1998), who ventures into the depths of Romania on an Orientalist mission to make rare recordings of Romani singers and musicians for exhibition back home in France, the protagonists of *Vers le sud*, Brenda, Ellen and Sue, are similarly hunting for a cultural artefact, namely the real or imagined sexual prowess of the Haitian locals and the delivery of the elusive orgasm that will sustain them through the next chapter of their socially codified existence back home in North America.

At the end of the film, when the fantasy is destroyed by the encroaching political violence in Haiti, there is little genuine concern among the women for the welfare of the Haitian locals. Legba falls foul of the government militia, the *Tonton makout*, and finds himself in real danger. Despite the fact that all three women have competed throughout the film for his affections and attention, Ellen seeks to take sole possession of Legba and to bring him home with her. It is an apparent gesture of almost maternal care, one that recalls the incestuous nature of Brenda's first fling with Legba, after declaring that she and her husband had practically adopted him when he was a poor and starving child of fifteen, at which point Brenda took advantage of him. Later, on the beach, when Brenda dances intimately with the even younger child Eddy, Ellen, with disturbingly ambiguous mock judgment, calls Brenda a "cradle snatcher." In any event, Ellen's offer to Legba of a passport to salvation at best plays into the dynamics of the rescue of a poor native by a white savior, perhaps an allusion to US intervention in Haiti, and, at worst, evokes the slave trade, whereby Ellen would bring her sexual servant back to North America as a trophy from her exploits in the tropics.

When Legba and his Haitian female companion are found murdered, their bodies dumped on the now forever-tarnished beach, a scene eerily reminiscent of this first time we come across Legba in the film, motionless and asleep on the beach, like a sea creature that has washed ashore, an object that is seemingly inseparable from the landscape, Brenda nonchalantly decides to move on to consume more of the Caribbean as a tourist, listing the names of islands as if reading off a menu of exotic delicacies for her delight. After all, as the

Haitian police detective reminds the viewer at the end of the film, “un touriste, ça ne meurt jamais.”

Earlier in the film, when Brenda ventures beyond the borders of the resort to the local market, she is accompanied by Legba, who, dressed in the clothes that she has bought him, carries the shopping bags and acts as mediator between the tourist and the locals. This image replicates the colonial stereotype of the planter’s wife who takes her slave with her to market to select and carry her purchases. Brenda’s visual consumption of Haiti is intensified at the marketplace, itself a site of local consumption and commodity exchange. The Caribbean market has historically been depicted in touristic postcards as a site of local labor (that of the market women who trade therein) and picturesque local flavor. For Patricia Mohammed,

The marketplace affords a glimpse of the domestic and authentic, rather than the contrived hotel or touristic playground settings. There is a tactile feel to goods in markets, earth and sweat, colors of green or ripe fruits and vegetables, a quick lesson in flora and fauna, in smells and tastes of a society. (25)

While the Haitian women at the market sit lowdown and motionless, the mobile tourist, Brenda, moves around photographing the Haitian women at work. For the white tourist eye these black laboring women are at one with the exotic “flora and fauna.” Some young men pass by and strike poses for Brenda to capture, as if actively desiring a form of self-representation via the white lens. This seems at odds with the protests of the objectified Haitian Other evoked in Felix Morisseau Leroy’s poem *Touris pa pran pòtre m* (1953), which highlights a long and weary history of the external “aestheticization of labor” (Thompson, *An Eye* 77) in this context. As a key mode of touristic representation, photography, like tourism, remains an uneven exchange, a means of objectifying and possessing the Other’s appearance and controlling their visibility. While Brenda’s gaze within the market scene suggests proximity, like Cantet’s filmic lens, its asymmetry also ensures distance between the tourist-viewer and local object of the gaze, keeping each firmly bound in their place.

In another scene, Ellen takes photographs of Legba lying naked on her bed. While we can appreciate the reversal of roles, whereby the sexual gaze is typically male and projected onto an objectified, silent and submissive female, the shift in roles makes us even more

acutely aware of the powerful and exploitative dynamics of the sexual tourist gaze, as Ellen constructs her *mise-en-scène*, with Legba's body resembling modelling clay that can be shaped and manipulated according to her taste and pleasure. As well as being a metaphor for her tourist gaze, Ellen's photography also mirrors Cantet's directorial gaze through the filmic lens, as he directs every movement and position of his actors, deciding what will be visible in the shot, what will remain hidden from view, and what will likely draw our attention. Through this doubling of the frame, we become aware of our own voyeuristic consumption of the scene as spectators, from the relatively safe distance of the Western or Northern world. In both cases, we are conscious that the moment is ephemeral. Once Ellen has finished indulging her urge to "capture" her object of desire via photography, providing her with "proof" of her Orientalist conquests, she will return home enriched by the experience, while the captured subject in the image remains permanently subjugated to the will of his captor. This returns us to Niobe Thompson's notion of "pornographic hypocrisy" that we discussed earlier. The photograph represents an unequal exchange that is exclusively for Ellen's benefit, just like Brenda's orgasm is for her, neither of which is dependent on the sexual pleasure being mutual.

Similarly, as spectators of the film, we are momentarily seduced by the exoticism of the setting and captivated by the expression of female sexual agency and empowerment being played out before our eyes, but our engagement with the people now categorized as Other ends along with the film's final credits. The "exotic" setting and the plight of the Haitian people has entertained us for a time, and now, having drawn our momentary satisfaction from the encounter, we move on to the next distraction with the kind of mobility of which the Haitian locals can only dream.

This brings us to another layer of the Orientalist dynamic that implicates us, as White Western writers, viewers of films and readers of academic texts, trained and funded by academic institutions in the North, as we discuss, for the length of an article, monograph or conference, such topics as the exploitation of formerly colonized societies as represented in film, literature, art, music and elsewhere, prior to turning our attention to another topic. As invested as we might be in the subject matter at hand, we are pursuing an intellectual exercise that is likely to remain an end in itself, or a call only to further intellectual endeavor, rather than a call to action to resolve, or even to attempt to resolve, the real-world issues being



discussed. The very real plight of the people essentially becomes conceptualized for the sake of a theoretical construct.

In “Dance, Haiti and Lariam Dreams” Barbara Browning offers a self-reflexive meditation on her study of US-based artist-anthropologists in the field of Dance Studies, many of whom spent time researching and living in Haiti, including the filmmaker and scholar Maya Deren. Browning acknowledges an “impulse to try to fathom the interpenetration of Haiti’s aesthetic, spiritual and political experimentation” (110) with her subjects of study but also within her own critical practice. Browning’s exemplary critique of the positionality of these non-Haitian scholars (herself included) responds to Trouillot’s call for “anthropology [...] to turn the apparatus elaborated in the observation of non-Western societies on itself, and more specifically, on the history from which it sprang” (*Global* 13).

We see ourselves and our own privileged White position in a detached intellectual engagement with the real-world issues facing the subjects of our academic work, in much the same way as Cantet is conscious of the unequal exchange represented by his directorial gaze. As White Western scholars of postcolonialism working within the postcolonial societies (of Australia and Wales) we cannot avoid a critical and reflexive interrogation of the uneven power relations between observer/observed or researcher/researched, which have traditionally benefitted the researcher over and above the communities researched. To leave this unchecked would be to risk, even inadvertently, reproducing the binary colonial logic and Orientalist exploitation this article seeks to expose.

Several North Atlantic academic associations have organized annual conferences in Haiti’s biggest and most luxurious hotels. By way of example, the Karibe Hotel in Port-au-Prince, a popular conference venue, is situated directly opposite the Jalousie slum area. Many of Jalousie’s residents work at the hotel, yet the community itself lacks basic sanitation, access to water and electricity. The houses perched on the hillside of Jalousie are also vulnerable to flooding, landslides and, of course, earthquakes. Instead of tackling these glaring issues of fundamental infrastructure and public safety, in 2013 former president Michel Martelly gave the residents of these precariously situated houses tins of colorful paint to sugar-coat their façades in an attempt to improve the view for visiting tourists and academics luxuriating in the plush hotels on the opposite hill. Jalousie’s masked façades are one example of the masquerade of development following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. We

are reminded here of the ominous warning expressed by the Haitian mother at the start of *Vers le sud*, that every person, for better or worse, wears a mask.

One of the biggest masks was revealed to belong to the Director of Operations of the major international NGO Oxfam, Roland van Heuwermeiren, who, far from upholding the noble ideals of Oxfam in its mission to alleviate global poverty and facilitate disaster relief in the world's most vulnerable regions, was involved in a scandal that saw him alleged to have hired underage Haitian girls to take part in sex parties at his villa, while Haiti was still reeling from the devastation of the 2010 earthquake (Haiti Support Group). In February 2018, following an investigation of senior Oxfam workers in Haiti, Mary Beard, Professor of Classics at Cambridge University, tweeted:

Of course one can't condone the (alleged) behaviour of Oxfam staff in Haiti and elsewhere. But I do wonder how hard it must be to sustain 'civilised' values in a disaster zone. And overall I still respect those who go in to help out, where most of us [would] not tread.

Beard's comments reinforce an image of Haiti as a perpetual disaster zone, where most would not dare to tread, and furthermore recall the historical Othering of the colonies, whereby civilizing European minds are unable to control their debauchery and luxurious vices, through no fault of their own.<sup>13</sup>

So, while we, as scholars of postcolonialism, viewers of films and readers of academic articles, may not be as "narcissistic" as Asibong suggests that the protagonists of *Vers le sud* are, in so far as they are "dependent upon the adoration of poor Black others in order to feel alive or real" (10), our intellectual engagement with the subjects of our analysis nevertheless grants us what Said termed:

[a] *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand. [...] The scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader, or the soldier was in, or thought about, the Orient because he *could be there*, or could think about it, with very little resistance on the Orient's part. [...] [T]here emerged a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in

the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial, and historical theses about mankind and the universe [...]. (7-8)

Notwithstanding Said's problematic use of gendered pronouns, in the end, we, as White Western scholars, viewers and readers, are not far removed from the privileged position of Cantet's White directorial gaze. Like the filmmaker himself, we are invested in the social and cultural dynamics at play in the narrative and their representation of a cruel and harsh reality for the people of Haiti; however, like Cantet moving on from Haiti to showcase his film at prestigious film festivals around the world, we, the authors of this article, have travelled across the planet to present our research on the Othering of the Caribbean at conferences in some of Europe's and the world's primary cultural "centers." We are certainly not seeking to undermine the intrinsic value of academic research, but we can at least acknowledge our complicity in making these issues the subject of our work, without necessarily doing anything concrete to resolve them, beyond raising awareness of them among our relatively privileged scholarly communities. In so doing, we recognize the potential for Orientalism to manifest itself in unexpected and unintended ways, indeed for it to wear different masks.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of the evolution in meaning of the term “exoticism”, see chapters two and three of Charles Forsdick’s *Victor Segalen and the Aesthetics of Diversity: Journeys Between Cultures* (Oxford UP, 2000) and the chapter “Travelling Concepts: Postcolonial Approaches to Exoticism and Diversity” in Forsdick’s *Travel in Twentieth-Century French and Francophone Cultures* (Oxford UP, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> The multilingualism of the film (English, French and Creole), another first for Cantet, places it at the center of current debates around multilingualism and social power, cultural diversity and decentering in the field of French and Francophone Postcolonial Studies.

<sup>3</sup> Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot described Haiti as “the first testing ground of neocolonialism” (*State* 57).

<sup>4</sup> The popularity of Haiti as a tourist destination for US travellers in the 1940s and 50s (often referred to as its golden era of tourism) can be attributed to the US occupation and the ensuing flood of imaginative images of Haiti in circulation. See, for example, William Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* (1929), written during the US occupation, which depicted Haiti as a desirable site of escape and exotic adventure (Twa 201).

<sup>5</sup> On the increasing economic and spatial polarization of Haiti under Duvalierism see Trouillot, *State* 177-185.

<sup>6</sup> The name Legba references the Haitian Vodou spirit of the crossroads who acts as the guardian between the visible and invisible worlds. For reflections on Dany Laferrière’s use of this name see Accilien’s “Soleil, Sexe et Sable” (207).

<sup>7</sup> Edouard Glissant describes the plantation as a “lieu clos” (77). See also Strachan on what he terms the “plantation hotel” (7).

<sup>8</sup> John Stewart has written, “Anyone wanting to consult the film version of Haiti would find a much greater corpus in the documentary category than in the feature category! (118).

<sup>9</sup> The BBC 2 holiday programme “The Misadventures of Romesh Ranganathan”, which aired in June 2018, clearly demonstrates how these negative clichés have persisted in relation to Haiti. See Ranganathan’s article for the *Guardian*, “Dogs, Dives”, and the response of Haitian ambassador to the UK, Bocchit Edmond (“The True Haiti”).

<sup>10</sup> Other depictions of female sex tourism include Tanika Gupta’s play *Sugar Mummies* and Ulrick Seidl’s film *Paradies: Liebe/Paradise: Love*.

<sup>11</sup> On white women in the Caribbean see most notably Dayan (1995), Bush (1981), Jones (2007) and Wekker (2016).

<sup>12</sup> Following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the tourist industry was earmarked (along with low wage garment manufacturing) by President Martelly’s government in cooperation with a nexus of international donors (US policymakers, Inter-American Development Bank [IDB], NGOs) as a key component of “reconstruction.” Aside from job creation, given that many of the large hotels in Haiti are owned by multinational companies, it is unclear whether such projects represent a sustainable solution for the local economy. The living conditions in

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the surrounding communities, from where staff are recruited to work in these luxury complexes, are poor, and most residents do not have access to basic sanitation and water. In 2015, while approximately 62 590 Haitians displaced by the earthquake were living in temporary camps in and around Port-au-Prince (“Haiti-Social”), a luxury \$45 million Marriott hotel was inaugurated in the capital facilitated by foreign investment from Irish-owned telecommunications group Digicel and the Clinton Global Initiative (Katz). A room at the Marriott starts at \$170 and many of its clientele are development workers, in Haiti to perform charitable work.

<sup>13</sup> The fallout from the tweet included Beard posting an image of herself in tears, a familiar retreat behind a mask of *white fragility* (DiAngelo). See Priyamvada Gopal’s blog post airing the debate.