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Fear and Fantasy: The Elsewheres of Post-9/11 Tourism

Before the industry can talk about really turning the corner we need a sustained period of uneventful air travel. Rod Eddington (2003), Chief Executive, British Airways.

Eddington's observation on the need for a period of "uneventful" travel is even more germane today than it was in November 2003. The key point of this commentary – which incidents such as the March 11, 2004, Madrid train bombings reinforce – is that post-9/11 travel has been characterized by growing fear, anxiety, and frustration, a situation with a direct bearing on the tourism research environment. Whether such apprehension may also have an influence on the structure of tourism, such as the choice of destinations, is a related question that warrants attention. Surely it is indicative of deeper problems that the only sector of the airline industry that is flourishing is devoted to ferrying top business people. Executive jets are at the service of their passengers, and as an advertisement for Marquisjet nicely phrases it, "No lines, no stopovers, no taking off your loafers."

Travel is down in all my research sites. For Mexico as a whole, arrivals dropped by 14.8% during the first four months of 2003, following smaller declines in 2001 and 2002. Last summer, the Travel Industry of America warned that tightened security measures might well reduce foreign tourists' visits to the United States (Swarns 2003). But the inconvenience of complex and unpredictable regulations pales in comparison to the long delays, cancelled flights (more than a dozen over the 2003-2004 Christmas-New Year holidays), and the fighter jet escorts that could hardly have had a calming effect on passengers from Mexico and Europe. Apparently, American officials were at one point ready to deny French aircraft entry into United States air space, and some British pilots refused to fly with armed marshals on board. We will return to the issue of fear, a complex matter. That we live in dangerous times is not in question, but fear lends itself too easily to manipulation. As one commentator (Rosen 2004) has expressed, a climate of fear "fuels the public's demand for draconian and poorly designed laws… to eliminate risks that are, by their nature, difficult to reduce." Basically, he argues that we are faced by a combination of genuine terror and brilliant fearmongering.

If fear is pervasive in contemporary travel, it is also the case that many tourists prefer a world of fantasy to contact with actual societies. Visitors to southern Mexico, where I have been working for the past decade, are often surprised to learn that "the Maya" have not, inexplicably, "disappeared," but are very much with us – some six million strong. Apparently, fantasies of a whole people vanishing are not easily dispelled. The attraction of Maya spirituality is

remarkable: Quetzil Castañeda (1996, p.186) discusses how Americans now arrive in charter groups to undergo training as "Maya shamans." One of the many ironies is that this quest is unrelated to the rich ceremonial life of the living Maya. Tulum, one of the locations that my colleagues and I study, was recently the subject of a *New York Times* lead article (Gross 2004). It is described as "Yoga Central," a place where the North American visitor is urged to "melt your boundaries," an injunction that apparently does not cover excursions across cultural barriers.

What these and similar instances reflect is a potent construct – part fable, part staging – that feeds on travel tales, guidebooks, and media representations. The power of such an "imaginary" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) to arrange histories and categorize societies should not surprise us. In southern Yucatán, previously little-visited locations have, in less than a generation, been transformed into “must experience" destinations (Daltabuit and Pi-Sunyer 1990; Pi-Sunyer and Thomas 1997; Pi-Sunyer 2002). As a result, this zone has taken on the features of a cultural-mythical space arranged to meet the experiential needs of visitors and more or less permanent expatriates.

May tourism-as-cultural-imaginary operate as a buffering mechanism from real or perceived danger? My impression is that this is a valid assumption in numerous instances, and certainly many tourists seem uncomfortable outside "the bubble." In a recent paper, Peter Tarlow (2003) writes about tourism in what he terms a "postenchanted world," a place "in which no one is safe from the threat of terrorism or new illnesses." He argues that for such environments both originality and genuineness are essential – at least in marketing. I believe that what he is describing is the tension between security and too much reality. If so, some travel may have begun to merge with other forms of spatial mobility (necessary, but seldom perceived as "leisure") including migration and pilgrimage. No doubt, most participants in Tulum's expensive and demanding yoga retreats participate in a special experience, but none of this has much to do with the "host society." Perhaps such tourism is a distinct example of what Liisa Malkki (1997) calls "accidental communities of memory," emotive but temporary little worlds.

In conclusion, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that fear and anxiety will manifest themselves in sundry ways in these post-9/11 times, but in all cases one should be prepared for distortion. As Tarlow (2003, p. 29) notes, visitors to African game parks "find it hard to believe that they are not in an artificial safari park" somewhere in Europe or America.

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