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'Thanks God, this is not Cancun!' Alternative tourism imaginaries in Yucatan (Mexico)

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This paper analyses the role of tourism imaginaries as generative social practices in the production of places as tourist places. This will be accomplished through an ethnographical analysis detailing the production of two distinct alternative tourist imaginaries in the Yucatan Peninsula (Mexico). Firstly, this paper will explore how the ecotourist imaginary of a 'pristine natural resort' is performed at the Biosphere Reserve Ria Celestun through very specific tourism practices that veil other tourist uses and alternative imaginaries of the place. Secondly, it will explore how the tourist imaginary of a 'golden past' and a 'taste of luxury' at Hacienda Temozon Sur is performed through various highly selective material arrangements and practices that veil contemporary social inequalities as well as a problematic past. The detailed analysis of these processes will reveal these alternative tourism imaginaries as powerful forces in the reproduction of contemporary patterns of spatial segregation, social marginalization, and uneven development in the Yucatan Peninsula.

Keywords: tourism imaginaries; socio-material arrangements; performative practices; uneven development; Yucatan

1. Introduction: tourism imaginaries as generative social practices

Tourism has been the driving economic force of the Yucatan Peninsula (Mexico) since the mid-1970s. This activity is largely associated with the city of Cancun, located on the Caribbean coast and with the hegemonic and institutionalized tourism imaginary of white sandy beaches, palm trees, and turquoise waters. However, over the last few years, alternative modes of travelling and imaginaries have emerged as a direct reaction to this hegemonic way of travelling, imagining, and experiencing Yucatan (Berger & Wood Grant, 2010). Among these alternatives, ecotourism and Hacienda tourism are the two most popular options. Both tourism models gravitate around the often-heard expression that gives title to this paper: 'Thanks god, this is not Cancun!' However, very little is still known about the alternative imaginaries they mobilize, about how these imaginaries work in transforming these places into alternative tourist places and about to what extent they constitute a real alternative to the mass tourism model represented by Cancun.

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This paper explores the pragmatics of alternative tourism imaginary production and practice in Yucatan. It builds on the notion of imaginaries as generative social practices to highlight the active role they have in performing places as tourist places (Appadurai, 1996; Meethan, 2001). The potential of imaginaries as generative social practices has been recently revisited in tourism studies and specifically in the anthropology of tourism. In these disciplines, imaginaries have been commonly approached from a representational perspective (Strauss, 2006). The pioneer works of Castoriadis (1997), Anderson (2006), and Taylor (2003) have been particularly influential in defining imaginaries as shared, collective ethos and cognitive schemas. Priority is given to the psychological processes involved in the constitution of imaginaries and to their creative interplay with the social realm (Elliott, 2002). In the study of tourism imaginaries, this approach has taken the form of discursive, metaphorical, visual, and symbolic analyses of the constitutive referents of particular tourism destinations, their people and myths, and locals–tourists encounters (see Bruner, 2004; Dann, 1996; Krider, Arguello, Campbell, & Mora, 2010; Law, Bunnell, & Ong, 2007; Selwyn, 1996). Special attention has been paid, for instance, to the power of visual tourist imaginaries in shaping tourists' fantasies of travel (Salazar, 2009, 2010); to the influence of fictional places in actively shaping experiences in real tourist places (Joliveau, 2009); or to the unequal identity, sexual and racial relations that tourism imaginaries reproduce (D'Hautessaerre, 2011; Kirsch, 1997).

However, little ethnographical attention has been paid to the actual tourist practices and materials through which tourist imaginaries are produced in a given destination, to the role that these practices and materials have in producing and maintaining that singular place as a tourist place, or to the kind of tourism spaces they contribute to generate (Minca & Oakes, 2006; Tourism Studies Working Group, 2011). This paper will address these points by conceiving imaginaries as something more than images, discourses, or shared collective mental representations. As Appadurai (1996, p. 31) put it,

the image, the imagination and the imaginary, are no longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is somewhere else), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity) [but an] organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility.

Following this perspective, tourism imaginaries emerge as politically active forces (Canclini, 2002; Meethan, 2001; Morgan, 2004) that bring tourist places into being in very specific ways. Tourism imaginaries connect and enact values, desires, technologies, and infrastructures at the cost of veiling others. As Ateljevic and Doorne (2002, p. 618) stress, the 'tourist imaginary is a political process that encodes and reinforces dominant ideology of tourism culture as a global process which manifests locally and explicitly involves the construction of places'. The conception of tourist imaginaries as generative social practices and the acknowledgement of the co-productive nature between imaginaries and forms of travel render tourists, as well as locals, as active agents and not just as passive recipients in both the production of places and the particular imaginaries to which these places are connected to (Cragg, 2006; Edensor, 2009; MacCannell, 2001; Shéller, 2003). In doing so, this notion of the imaginary fully connects and expands debates around the agency of tourists in shaping tourist space as well as of the performativity of tourist places (Bærenholdt Ole, Haldrup, Larsen, & Urry, 2004; Shéller & Urry, 2004).

This paper will explore this understanding of the imaginary as a generative social practice by ethnographically focusing on two specific cases: the production, maintenance, and uneven consequences of the imaginary of a ‘pristine natural resort’ through the implementation of ecotourism in the Biosphere Reserve Ria Celestun, on the Gulf of Mexico coast, and the recent construction and maintenance of a ‘golden past’ and a ‘taste of luxury’ for elite tourists at Hacienda Temozon Sur in inland Yucatan (Figure 1).

The Biosphere Reserve Ria Celestun is one of the most promoted ecotourist destinations in the Yucatan Peninsula. Its protected area covers over 80,000 hectares encompassing the states of Yucatan and Campeche and the traditionally fishing municipalities of Celestun, Maxcanu (Yucatan), and Calkini (Campeche) by the Gulf of Mexico coast (SEMARNAT, 2000). The pink flamingo, which nests and breeds at the ria, has become the emblem for natural alternative tourist imaginaries of Yucatan and also one of the most globally distributed promotional images of Mexico in the international tourist market. In this market, pink flamingos represent a more naturally oriented, respectful, and sustainably oriented natural alternative form of tourism in the region. Similarly, Hacienda tourism is the newest tourist product in the Yucatan Peninsula or, as it is stated in its most popular tourist magazine, ‘the newest luxury offer of Yucatan to the world’ (Yucatan Today, 2009b). It is explicitly classified as a variant of cultural tourism (Secretaría de Turismo Yucatan, 2002), it is exclusive of inland Yucatan and it has been recently advertised as ‘Premium Tourism’ together with spas and golf sites, being also referred to as ‘Grand Tourism’ due to ‘the high levels of luxury, exclusiveness and comfort to be found in their finest style and care’ (Secretaría de Fomento Turístico Yucatan, 2009). Hacienda tourism expressly reacts against the standardized tourist experiences associated with Cancun’s all-inclusive resorts. Its specificity builds on the production of imaginaries of a golden past and a taste of luxury for elite tourists (Smith, 1989).



Figure 1. Map of the Yucatan Peninsula (Prof. Juan Córdoba Ordóñez).

By gaining ethnographical knowledge of how ecotourism and Hacienda tourism imaginaries are produced and performed in Yucatan, it will be possible to show not only how these alternative imaginaries constitute active political forces in the uneven production of tourist spaces in this region but also how they are not static, unitary, or given once and for all. As I shall argue, alternative tourist imaginaries are an active heterogeneous combination of socio-material arrangements and performative practices. On paying ethnographical attention to these arrangements and practices, some of the tensions associated within 'alternative' forms of tourism in Yucatan will come into view. Making these tensions knowledgeable is a prerequisite towards a better understanding and, therefore, planning of tourism as a sustainable and participative development tool in the region. The notion of the tourism imaginary as a generative social practice is also a powerful tool to rethink the ethics of travel and of being a tourist (MacCannell, 2011; Smith, 2010). The paper is organized as follows. Section 1 will briefly describe the emergence and consolidation of the hegemonic 'sea, sun and sun tourism' imaginary of Yucatan. It will trace its association with Cancun and contextualize the emergence of alternative tourist models and imaginaries of this place, specifically ecotourism and Hacienda tourism. General methodological notes about the field techniques employed in the study of tourism imaginaries are also offered in this section. Sections 2 and 3 will provide ethnographical discussions of the alternative imaginaries produced and practised at the Biosphere Reserve Ria Celestun and at Hacienda Temozon Sur. Both sections critically examine the heterogeneity and uneven socio-spatial and political consequences of each imaginary's process of production. Comparative remarks on both cases as well as a summary of their value for broader research on tourism imaginaries are offered in the conclusions.

2. Imagining the idealized beachscape and beyond

Located in the northeast side of the Yucatan Peninsula (Mexico), Cancun is one of the Meccas for international mass tourism and, specifically, for the classic sea, sun, sand, and sex tourism (Wallace, 2005). This city is the first tourist destination of the Caribbean region receiving over 3 million tourists and more than 62,000 cruise visitors per year (SECTUR, 2005).

As a tourist enclave, Cancun materializes Britton's (1979) idea of Third-World tourist destinations represented and imagined as paradisiacal, unspoiled, sensuous places. Specifically, the city incarnates the modern myth of the Garden of Eden (Selwyn, 1996), an 'idealized beachscape' which epitomizes the touristy lifestyle of the Caribbean as 'a place to play' which resolves around 'generic types of places: the hotel pool, the waterside, café/restaurant, the cosmopolitan city, the hotel buffet, the theme park, the cocktail, the club, the airport lounge, the bronzed tan, exotic dancing, and the global beach' (Shéller & Urry, 2004, p. 4) (Figure 2).

This tourist imaginary of the city has been fostered since its creation as a Tourist Integrally Planned Center in the 1970, and it has been produced and maintained by an initial urban plan which divided the city into two different areas, the tourist area and the worker area, as well as by a strong governmental tourist promotional and marketing campaigns held by the Mexican National Fund Trust for Tourism Development (FONATUR).¹ These promotional campaigns have institutionalized the distinctive imaginary of the place as paradise on earth through the massive reproduction of iconic images of turquoise-blue waters, white-sand beaches, and tropical sunsets as well as through narratives that highlight the uniqueness and exclusivity of the place as a romantic hideaway and a family retreat and as a hotspot for nightlife and enjoyment. These iconic representations and discourses have



Figure 2. Promotional image of Cancun.

been accomplished through a series of ritualized practices and spatial enclosures which have kept the initially planned tourist area of the city as a cocooned, sanitized, affluent, and gated space totally separated from the disordered and heterogeneous urban landscape that characterizes the city of workers catering for tourists (Figure 3).

Cancun's apparent success has been coupled to unprecedented regional urban growth rates and a poor urban planning which have produced a remarkably visible social and environmental uneven development. The city grew from 100 inhabitants in 1974 to more than 600,000 inhabitants in 2005, expanding at sustained rates of over 20% growth per year (SECTUR, 2005). Urbanization took place as a collection of informal settlements

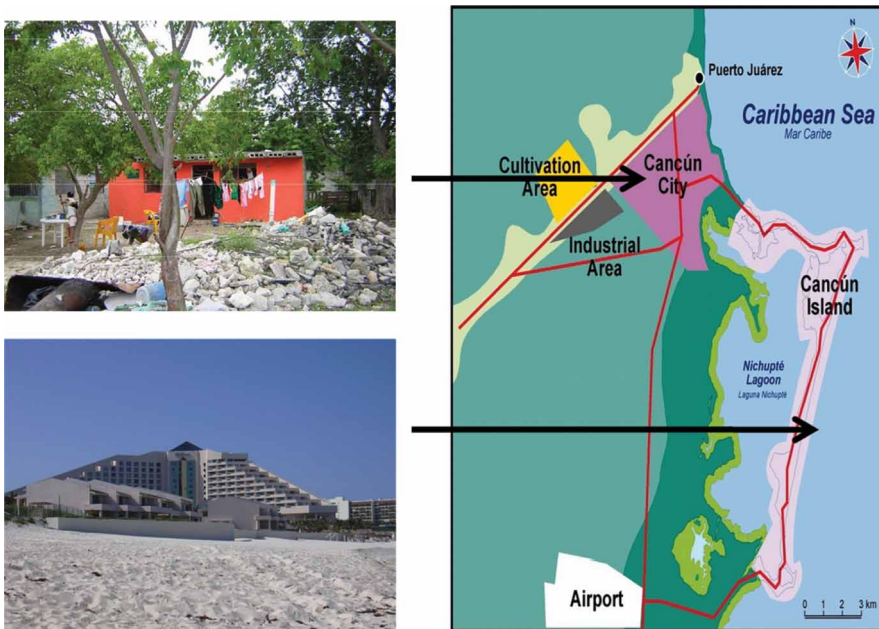


Figure 3. Segregation of spaces for tourists and workers at Cancun.

with a generalized lack of access to basic services. The upsurge of violence and insecurity and the total veiling of the everyday life and spaces inhabited by those who cater for tourists soon became endemic elements of the city's life and a condition for the tourist area to remain competitive in the global tourist market. Environmentally, the idealized beachscape proved to be largely unsustainable, fully dependent on the systematic destruction of coral reefs, large amounts of mangroves, and the regular shortage and contamination of potable water (Redclift, 2006).

Since the late 1990s, alternative forms of tourism, particularly natural and cultural tourism, emerged as a direct reaction to this tourism model and its excesses. In a very short span of time, the Yucatan Peninsula witnessed the proliferation of tourist sites and forms of travel that claimed to be different from the sort of tourist experiences offered by Cancun. Archaeological tourism, cultural and gastronomic tours, itineraries of colonial cities, and eco-destinations became some of these mainstream alternative ways of travelling in Yucatan. Upon arrival to any of these sites, it has become increasingly common to hear tourists exclaiming 'Thanks God, this is not Cancun!' This expression clearly points towards the gestation of an alternative tourism imaginary in Yucatan. However, very little is known about its nature and working logic. What are the main elements composing these alternative imaginaries? Who are the main agents involved in their production? What are their uses and the consequences of their implementation? How are they produced and maintained? Do they perform real alternatives to Cancun's tourist model?

In order to elucidate some of these questions, I focus on two study cases: the production of imaginaries associated with ecotourism in the Biosphere Reserve Ria Celestun and those associated with elite tourism as practised in Hacienda Temozon Sur. These alternative tourism imaginaries and the places they enact are closely tied to an uneven pragmatics of space production in Yucatan. As I will show, in the Biosphere Reserve Ria Celestun, the centrality of the pink flamingo for ecotourism consumption has given birth to what locals refer to as the *pink-packaged Celestun*: a tourist experience built around the imaginary of a pink Celestun that goes hand in hand with a well-delineated local circuit of movements of people, capital, work, and resources. This imaginary and the practices that constitute it completely veil other parallel forms of tourism practices and alternative imaginaries within the alternative. As I shall argue, the pink-packaged ecotourist Celestun is also neglecting a much needed diversification of the tourist enclave, raising therefore important questions about ecotourism as a real alternative to mass tourism.

In the case of Hacienda Temozon Sur, the imaginary of a golden past and the construction of luxury for elite tourists are accomplished by a selective recovery of architectures, a specific ordering of nature, and several practices devoted to pamper tourists' senses. As I shall argue, these socio-material arrangements and practices veil contemporary processes of spatial segregation and social inequalities as well as a problematic past. They maintain the Hacienda as an enclosed and segregated space for tourism consumption, reproducing in doing so some of the social and environmental problems associated with Cancun's tourism development.

Empirical materials for both study cases were collected following a multi-sited ethnographical approach (Marcus, 1995) during the years 2004, 2005, 2008, and 2010. I lived at Celestun and conducted participant observation and semi-directed interviews with tourists, local population, and governmental and non-governmental institutions (February–April 2004; January–April 2005). Specifically, I used a tourists–tourists and tourists–locals encounter diary, in which I followed and traced the trajectories of tourists and those locals' catering for them, writing down their conversations and impressions while walking, touring, and talking and being particularly attentive to their pauses and face-to-face encounters.

This helped me to trace the cartography of their movements and to gain knowledge of the heterogeneity of the place as a tourist place.

Evidence for the case of Hacienda Temozon Sur derives from daily visits to the place (March–July 2008), as well as on-site secondary research (October 2010). Ethnographical research at the Hacienda was always surrounded by a problem of access. As a gated community, my presence always needed to be negotiated in advance and access to guests and workers was highly restricted. Data for this research mainly derive from semi-directed formal interviews with the Hacienda's managers and from informal structured interviews with guests and workers at the Hacienda's restaurant and outside the Hacienda.

In both cases, I completed and thematically ordered a dossier of news and a dossier of visual and discursive representations of the places, at international, national, and local levels. I did so by exploring secondary sources such as tourism guides, brochures, posters, magazines, and the Web and secondary sources such as statistics, tourism development plans, architectural plans, and scholarly materials only locally and regionally available. I also elaborated a diary of photographs with the images and sites where tourists stopped to take their pictures, talked to them about their motivations for selecting the places as holiday destinations, and directly asked them about their imaginaries of the place before, during, and after their trips or visits to certain attractions.

3. Performing alternative imaginaries at the Biosphere Reserve Ria Celestun

The imaginary of the Biosphere Reserve Ria Celestun as an ecotourist destination and, specifically, as a pristine natural resort depends on the combination of a series of discourses, images, movements, affects, and technologies (see Bærenholdt Ole et al., 2004; Coleman & Crang, 2002) that produce the place as an 'enclavic' tourist natural resort (Edensor, 2000). Ecotourism was promoted in Celestun in the late 1990s as part of the global urge to convert natural protected areas into more economically profitable spaces for the Mexican economy as a developing country (Córdoba Ordóñez & Córdoba Azcárate, 2007). Ecotourism was then encouraged by FONATUR as a sustainable alternative to the crowded beaches of the Riviera Maya and as an opportunity to see, sense, and experiment tropical nature 'for real' (Yucatan Today, 2009a). Nature, however, was soon reduced to a single animal species being, in doing so, redesigned and repackaged for global consumption purposes (Duffy & Moore, 2009). The pink flamingo, stylized while flying, soon became the key promotional icon not only of the place but also of an alternative natural and sustainable mode of travelling in the Mexican tourism international market.

In tourist promotional brochures and guidebooks and when touring virtually the place, Celestun emerges as a small picturesque fishing community that has been re-converted into a successful ecotourist resort. As it is repeatedly stated, 'the principal attraction of the place is the pink flamingo and boat rides to admire this spectacular species are available by local guides after which you can enjoy eating wonderful fish dishes at the restaurants from the beach' (SEMARNAT, 2000). No official images exist beyond the ria and the beach, the pink flamingo, and the fresh fish. Nature colonizes the mainstream ecotourist imaginary of the place through representations and narratives about the exuberance of the estuary, its exotic fauna and flora, and the lack of human presence (Figure 4).

This institutionalized tourist depiction of the place as a pristine natural resort is widely corroborated once physically at the place through tour-operated ecotourist movements and the practices and local infrastructures devoted to cater for them. Tours arrive at Celestun on a daily basis. They come from Cancun, the Riviera Maya, and Merida, where the place



Figure 4. Pink-packaged tourism in Celestun.

is marketed as a natural escape and as the place to go to add a bit of adventure to the all-inclusive experience. Tours arrive at Celestun in big, glossy, and air-conditioned buses or rented cars, which stop at the ria to admire the pink flamingo and then drive non-stop to the beach where tourists are dropped off at one of the already concerted restaurants to eat some fish. At the ria, tours to admire the pink flamingo are organized by FONATUR and guided by *lancheros* (local men in charge of tourist boat rides). There are only two itineraries, the short and the long rides that cost 400–800 pesos. Tourists can opt to take a guide in their ride who will ‘translate nature’ for a plus of 50–200 pesos. The major aim of the tours, as some tourists put it, is ‘to photograph flamingos’, ‘to get close to them’ even sometimes ‘to be able to touch them’ (Córdoba Azcárate, 2006). The highly patterned Celestun that emerges from their practices and discourses is colloquially referred to as the ‘pink-packaged Celestun’, an enclavic space performed to coincide with its official representations as a natural paradise. Celestun is enacted as a ‘single-purpose space’ (Edensor, 2000, p. 329) which provides all that is promised and imagined: a safe, comfortable, and predictable spectacle organized around the pink flamingo, a sort of ‘soft ecotourist experience’ (Weaver, 2001) which privileges comfort and service over environmental commitment.

Ecotourist itineraries motivated and coupled to the imaginary of a pink natural resort become the best expression of the commodity form of tourist experience (Wang, 2006). They have also proved to have uneven spatial consequences at a local level as through their practice, ecotours heat the spaces of the ria and of the beach transforming them into contested sites, or ‘contentious hotspots’, where tourists, tourism activities, and their benefits concentrate and where locals fight to stay still (Córdoba Azcárate, 2010).

These tours, as I am going to show, also veil other alternative imaginaries within the alternative. Unwrapping them is a necessary step towards understanding how a particular site can hold, at the same time, more than one tourist imaginary and how this is achieved in practice.

3.1 *Alternative imaginaries within the alternative*

Ethnographical observation at Celestun soon pointed out alternative ways of imagining and performing the place as an ‘alternative natural’ tourist site. By closely following different tourist practices at the community, I could notice that ecotourists were just one of the groups of tourists visiting Celestun and that there were other alternative ways of imagining and practising the place which largely differed from the hegemonic official representation and tourist practices constitutive of the ecotourist destination as an alternative to Cancun. These alternative imaginaries within the alternative, as well as their practices, are institutionally veiled in the performance and images of Celestun as an ecotourist destination. From these images and practices, Celestun emerges not as an enclavic space, but instead as a ‘heterogeneous tourist space’, where tourism is ‘an unplanned and contingent process’ and where ‘tourists and locals mingle in improvised ways’ (Edensor, 2000, pp. 331–340).

Specifically, I could distinguish four other alternative tourist imaginaries of the place. All of them played an active role in performing the tourist Celestun beyond the pink-packaged enclave and they did so in various different ways, serving as clear ethnographical evidence for the concept of the imaginary as a heterogeneous field of generative social practices. I describe each of them in what follows (Figure 5).

First, Celestun is imagined and performed as a ‘place to eat fresh fried fish’. This imaginary is fostered and produced by the ‘tourists of the beach and restaurants’ as they are locally called in Celestun. These tourists are part of those Merida’s middle classes that were out-priced from the Caribbean in the 1980s and 1990s when its beaches were *de facto* privatized by the arrival of multinational tourism and all-inclusive hotels. In the imaginaries of these tourists, Celestun emerges as a nearby and still affordable tourist place in which it is still possible to see the sea, swim, and eat good-quality fish. However, these tourists are being increasingly displaced by ecotours, especially during the high season when, if tours are expected, they are generally not offered tables at the beach restaurants. As a result,



Figure 5. Alternatives within the alternative.

these tourists have started to make use of other informal services at the community connecting to sites that lie beyond the official tourist map of the place such as the fishing port and the surrounding salt lagoons.

Second, Celestun is also imagined and practised as 'a place to retire' or as 'a place to begin again'. This is another alternative tourist imaginary of the place which is performed and maintained by a group of foreigners locally known as the 'going native gringos'. This is a heterogeneous collective mostly composed of old professionals and retired Canadian couples for whom Celestun emerges as a more affordable and quiet coastal destination to invest in second homes beyond Cancun and the Riviera Maya. The tourist place they perform and inhabit is outside official tours. This collective make use of the community services as the market, the internet centre, and certain restaurants, but their interaction with local people and their involvement in the local economy are still very limited, spatially segregated, and highly restricted.

Third, Celestun has become an increasingly popular destination for backpackers and independent eco-travellers, mostly from Europe and Canada who imagine and practise Celestun as 'a place to foster wild encounters with nature'. This is a heterogeneous collective of travellers who could be defined according to Weaver's (2001) continuum of hard and soft ecotourists. Backpackers could be described as 'hard ecotourists' with a strong environmental commitment, while independent eco-travellers could be defined as 'structured ecotourists' with the stronger environmental commitment of hard ecotourists but enjoying the 'soft' comforts associated with an ecotourist-developed destination (see also Weaver & Lawton, 2007). These tourists arrive at the place in the local bus or rented cars knowing beforehand the community's inscription in a Biosphere Reserve. Once there, their discourses fluctuate between the happiness in finding something different from Cancun and the extreme dissatisfaction once they learn that the alternative natural experience can only be lived via organized tours. It is the way in which each of these groups practise the same destination as a 'natural resort' which weaves together their particular alternative imaginaries of the place. Most backpackers do not take the official tours to admire the pink flamingo. They find them expensive, crowded, and severely organized. Alternative, irregular tours have been locally organized at the beach and find in these kind of travellers a big economic opportunity. Independent travels sometimes take the exclusive tours offered by some hotels but generally both collectives move around the community outside planned itineraries. They eat at local restaurants, visit cantinas, and always interact with locals at the beach, the port, and the market.

Fourth, Celestun has been a traditional place to go on holidays for inland locals or 'vacacionistas' as they are known in the community. Vacacionistas are mainly low-income families who have traditionally come to Celestun during special festivities marked by the religious calendar. The dramatic increase of prices and the *de facto* privatization of public areas and services that have followed the predominance of pink-packaged tourism in Celestun have severely affected their tourist practices. For vacacionistas, Celestun is imagined and performed as 'as a place to see the sea for the first time'. Vacacionistas arrive at the community in crammed vans or family-rented minibuses. Once in the plaza, they use alternative routes to the tour-operated buses looking for empty beach spaces far away from restaurants. Sounds, smells, and rhythms inundate the atmosphere when they visit the community. Ever since ecotourism was implemented at the community, no infrastructures have been developed to cater for these other tourists and a whole range of local irregular services have emerged to meet their demands. By following these tourist practices at the community, it is possible to observe how everyday private spaces are transformed into sites of encounter and informal economies. Private toilets become public toilets for a couple

of pesos, bedrooms become hotel accommodation for entire families, and kitchens are transformed into improvised stalls that offer fried fish. Temporary and rudimentary camps are erected on the beach. In their imaginaries, Celestun is a place where it is possible to see the sea, very often for the first time, a place dreamed of all year around and a family holiday escape from the ordinary.

Looking at the heterogeneity of tourist imaginaries at this community, it becomes evident that the place is something more than a straightforward alternative ecotourist destination to the crowded beaches of Cancun and the Riviera Maya. Marketing devices such as tourism brochures, magazines, or official representations of the site are not enough to account for the heterogeneous nature and active role that tourist imaginaries have in the production of Celestun as an alternative destination. Other alternative imaginaries of the place as an alternative destination have been largely institutionally ignored and subsumed under the imaginary of Celestun as a natural escape. However, as I have shown, the community is actually morphologically transformed in heterogeneous ways through the production and performance of these other alternative imaginaries within the alternative. The lack of infrastructures, activities, and official services devoted to a different way of doing and being a tourist in this place raises serious questions regarding the role of ecotourism as a real alternative tourism model.

The analysis of Celestun shows how different tourist practices (and actors) weave heterogeneous imaginaries of the same tourist place and how tourists are not mere passive consumers of imaginaries but active forces in bringing them about. Moreover, we have seen how the same tourist place can hold several parallel imaginaries at the same time and how, in doing so, the same place gets differently performed as a tourist enclave. The case of Celestun shows how the institutionalized alternative imaginary of the place as an ecotourist resort veils these other tourist practices that could certainly become a real economic alternative at the community. The next case study will show in detail the political nature of the production of tourism imaginaries.

4. Crafting a controversial elite tourist imaginary at the Hacienda Temozon Sur

Hacienda Temozon is located in the village of Temozon Sur, 1 of the 13 localities of the inland municipality of Abalá.² This Hacienda is the oldest of a group of five restored Haciendas – Hacienda Temozon Sur, Hacienda Santa Rosa, Hacienda San Jose, Hacienda Uayamon, and Hacienda Puerta Campeche – which are simply known as ‘The Haciendas’. ‘The Haciendas’ are the product of a private entrepreneur project led by Roberto Hernandez, former chairman of Grupo Financiero Banamex, Mexico’s largest bank, to transform ex-haciendas henequeneras into profitable tourism enterprises. As the embryo of the enterprise, Hacienda Temozon Sur was acquired after years of complete abandonment in 1996. After 2 years of restoration and coinciding with the regional wave of policies promoting alternative forms of tourism for the peninsula, Hernandez turned the Hacienda into an exclusive hotel. For this purpose, and having already acquired some of the other Haciendas, he created a business group, Grupo Plan, and formed a partnership with the USA-based enterprise, Starwood’s Luxury Collection. This Collection is an international selection of hotels, resorts, and spas which, according to their promotional brochures, offer ‘unique, authentic experiences that evoke lasting, treasured memories’. Each hotel and resort in the Collection, as they put it, is ‘a distinct and cherished expression of its location; a portal to the destination’s indigenous charms and treasures’ (Starwoods Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, 2009). Within the Luxury Collection, The Haciendas are specifically marketed as an alternative to the crowded beaches and standardized experiences of all-inclusive

resorts at Cancun and the Riviera Maya. Specifically, The Haciendas are promoted as a culturally aware and environmentally responsible tourism offered to elite tourists and not to mass tourists. That is, to ‘rugged individuals with interest, time, and money who disdain minimal accommodations and services’ (Smith, 1989, p. 67). Hacienda Temozon Sur is specifically promoted as a ‘luxury boutique hotel’, a ‘distinctive place where to live as “in the 19th century, but still receiving high-end luxury collection”, as “a superb residence in the Heart of the Yucatan Peninsula which recreates the *belle époque* of the Mexican southeast”, and which in so doing, “creates opportunities for locals who would never have had the chance (...) to earn a living in rural Yucatan” after the henequen crisis’ (The Haciendas, 2007a).

But how is the imaginary of this *belle époque* accomplished in practice? Is it a real alternative tourist strategy to mass tourism? Ethnographical fieldwork has shown that this imaginary has been fostered through a highly political process involving a controversial recovery of architectures, a selective craftsmanship of nature and several practices to pamper elite tourists’ senses. These material arrangements and practices and the elite imaginaries they help to perform do not yet represent a real tourist alternative model to Cancun. In what follows, I argue why this is the case by ethnographically looking at how the alternative has been materially crafted.

4.1 *Crafting the alternative imaginary: architectures, gardens, and the senses*

According to the general manager, the idea with Hacienda Temozon Sur was ‘to restore the original designs, the paintings and the decorations [but] drawing a line where the historical part ends and the luxury experience begins’ (McCosh, 2009). This line was precisely delimited in the reconstruction processes for tourism consumption. Reconstruction works focused on the enclosure of the Hacienda and its conversion into a gated space (Bagaen & Uduku, 2010). Inside this gated space, all references to the Hacienda as a quasi-feudal socioeconomic system based on a highly segregated distribution of buildings and workspaces were systematically erased (Alston, Mattiace, & Nonnenmacher, 2009). This has been possible by the creation of a romanticized staged scenario in which tourists’ experiences and imaginations are equated to those of the owners of the Hacienda, the *hacendados*, and where Yucatan’s history has been materially anchored to the imaginary of a golden era. For example, the Casa Principal and the major buildings in the Hacienda have been carefully painted with traditional colours; original materials such as iron, stone, and wood have been maintained for major visible structures and furniture and decoration in common areas and rooms at the Casa Principal recreate at first glance the French style of the Hacienda’s former owners. Old European furniture has been preserved and put into new usages – for example, the old pharmaceutical cabinets now transformed in mini bars or tourist bookshelves – and Renaissance paintings adorn every room, giving tourists the taste of inhabiting a European palace in the middle of tropical Yucatan for a few days (Figure 6).

The rest of the buildings and traditionally workspaces at the Hacienda have been re-functionalized following the same pattern. The Old Machine House has been converted into a museum space in which restored everyday objects of the Hacienda are exhibited together with a collection of black and white images of the Hacienda’s owners’ private albums. The objects and images collected and stored in these sites almost exclusively portray the everyday life of luxury and amenities around the *hacendado* and his family scarcely showing the hard work done by *peones* (workers) at the Hacienda. Images show, for example, family celebrations such as weddings and christening rituals, the *hacendado*



Figure 6. Main restored tourist buildings within Hacienda Temozón Sur.

dealing with paperwork at his office, his frequent travels to Europe or the States, or gentlemen meetings at the Casa Principal. In all of them, the *hacendado* and those around him wear European clothing and accessories. Objects on display, such as bicycles, lady's umbrellas, or baby's toys, reveal the luxuries around the *hacendado's* life. The sight of these images and objects on display not only fixes the Other for tourism consumption (Echtner & Prasad, 2003; Graburn, 1999) but it also encourages tourists in a travel to an idealized past in which the unequal socioeconomic system that operated behind those objects and practices is absent.

A careful craftsmanship of nature is another crucial element in generating the imaginary of a golden era and in keeping the Hacienda as an enclosed space for elite tourism consumption. Following the formal gardening of the Palace of Versailles, the 37 hectares of Temozón's gardens have been constructed according to mathematical formulas, where geometry, monumentality, perspective, and the controlled movement of bodies are the rules. Panoramic visions from the Casa Principal over adjacent buildings are secured by respecting the elevated structure of this building as well as by the delineation of symmetric paved pathways which have the Casa Principal as their centre of reference. A panopticon control over spaces and activities is provided, confirming the centralized power of the *hacendado* over the *peones*, just like the Versailles Palace confirmed the power of absolutist kings over the population. This physical layout not only secures the tourists' control over the movement of those who cater for them but also the vision of a perfect environment in which the tropical forest is made present preserving all its exuberance without all its annoyances. For the latter purpose, several gardeners collect daily leaves and other organic residuals that are later dutifully composted; birds are kept in cages and exotic plants in flowerpots, and tropical insects are kept away through daily fumigation. A botanical garden is maintained in which the rhythmic sound of the water in fountains and artificial pools embraces clients as they walk by. Carefully planned fresh shades are maintained all around the gardens and

clients are able to read, in English and Mayan, the labels of several of the most important botanical plants.

Through this careful ordering of nature, crowded beaches, contaminated lagoons, illegal garbage dumps, wild flora and fauna with their associated risks are substituted with polished, exuberant, and domesticated nature which tourists are able to contemplate from a privileged position. This craftsmanship of nature is crucial in the maintenance of the imagination of a golden era as it veils the Yucatecan contemporary reality of hectares of abandoned henequen fields and a less civilized nature with all its problems and risks: strong deforestation and its associated problems as erosion and desertification (Eastmond & Faust, 2006), and disordered tropical jungles transformed into illegal garbage dumps with pestilent smells and associated health problems.

In the production of the imagination of a golden era, these material arrangements are accompanied by a constant attention and pampering of tourists' senses through practices that demand highly professionalized workers and the seclusion of tourists' selves. These practices include, for example, the generation of unique flavours and the practice of therapeutic body massages. Local Yucatecan ingredients are re-elaborated at the Hacienda's restaurant with French techniques. This fusion of Yucatecan and French foods generates a particular imagination of Yucatan in the privileged palates of those able to enjoy a meal at the Hacienda. This is a Yucatan as perceived and experienced by the local oligarchy of the henequen times where meat is accompanied with wine and not with beer, fish is offered and cooked with elaborated European condiments, chocolate and orange desserts take the place of chili-covered fruits and fresh bread combines with traditional corn tortillas. Through the consumption of these elaborated dishes, tourists are invited to indulge their palates and to travel not towards 'real' encounters with the Other – in this case inland Yucatan Mayan communities – but towards pleasurable encounters with themselves (Hjalager & Richards, 2002; Warde, 1997). As one client put it with enthusiasm in an interview, 'eating here I feel like somewhere else (...) It is not easy to find good wines in Yucatan and coffee with baked bread is the most precious thing to eat in the mornings'.

Body treatments also offer tourists the possibility of 'distancing from the outside world' in intimate and exclusive atmospheres (The Haciendas, 2007b). These treatments, mostly body massages, are in charge of a few local women working for the Hacienda under the label of 'ancient Mayan sobadoras'. These women have been trained by Grupo Plan as professional therapists in an effort to 'bring Mayan wisdom and tradition' to the Hacienda's guests while helping Mayan families in their daily sustainability (The Haciendas, 2007b). Yet, this endeavour has required re-signifying the work of rural Yucatecan midwives and healers ('parteras' or 'sobadoras') for tourism consumption. In doing so, the sobada has lost its traditional meaning and symbolism as a practice performed by old expert rural women to help other women in labour to become a practice performed by trained young professionals and directed to tourists' inner selves (Figure 7).

The generation of unique food flavours and the experience of professional body massages are practices that help to perform and maintain the imaginary of a golden era at Hacienda Temozon by contributing to secure tourists' experiences in the realm of the exclusive. Architectonical and natural arrangements create a temporal continuity between a golden past and the exclusive present of the Hacienda. Through these material arrangements and practices, a bucolic and distinctive alternative imaginary of the Caribbean is crafted for tourism consumption. Tourists' experiences are directly addressed, through furniture, architecture, and objects on display, to have a taste of the *hacendado's* privileged life, while the conflictive nature of the henequen times is abstracted and Yucatan's history narrated from a reductive point of view. At the Hacienda's restaurant and spa, tourists are submerged into a



Figure 7. Contemporary landscapes of inland Yucatan.

timelessness luxurious microclimate in which the endemic poverty and lack of opportunities as well as of basic infrastructures affecting rural Yucatan are veiled. The restricted and professionalized nature of the services provided at the Hacienda as well as its nature as a gated community raises direct doubts about Hacienda tourism being a real development alternative.

5. Conclusion

'Thanks God, this is not Cancun!' is a common expression articulating the alternative tourist imaginaries of those who try to escape the standardized 'sea, sun, and sand' tourist experience provided by Cancun in the Yucatan Peninsula. In this paper, I have shown how the articulation of these alternative imaginaries requires not only the production of different discourses and representations of the alternative but also the mobilization of a wide array of practices and material arrangements. As we have seen in the case of Celestun, the imaginary of a pristine natural resort is performed through highly patterned tourist practices to see the pink flamingo at the ria. Similarly, in Temozon Sur, the imaginary of the alternative is produced through a carefully arranged set of architectures and a manicured natural landscape and through the seclusion of tourists' selves in cocooned, glamorous, and segregated atmospheres. Both examples provide powerful illustrations of tourist imaginaries as more than simple reflections of places but instead as active forces in shaping them.

Yet, as I have argued, tourist imaginaries are never homogeneous, unified, or uncontroversial entities. They are always heterogeneously produced, contested, and re-performed even, within a single tourist destination. The cases of Celestun and Temozon Sur demonstrate that tourism imaginaries are political entities with the power to produce alternative landscapes but also to veil other *alternatives within the alternative*. This is evident in

Celestun, where the institutionalized alternative imaginary of the place as an ecotourist resort could be rendering invisible other tourist practices and imaginaries that could certainly become a real economic alternative at the community. Likewise, the seclusion of tourists' selves promoted by Hacienda tourism, which prevents any encounters with locals beyond the staged scenario of a golden past, raises the question of what kind of alternative Hacienda tourism really provides.

Conceiving tourism imaginaries as socio-material, heterogeneous, and politically active forces in the production of tourist places from an ethnographical perspective has proved useful not only in bringing to the fore the multiple ways in which 'the alternative' is practised in Yucatan but also in pointing at the uneven social and political consequences that these alternatives bring forth. Acknowledging these uneven scenarios is a first step towards the development of more inclusive and socially just tourism development models in this region.

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Notes

1. See Clancy (2001), Córdoba Ordóñez and Córdoba Azcárate (2007), and Torres and Momsen (2006) for a detailed discussion about the city's initial plan.
2. For a detailed analysis of these processes, see Córdoba Azcárate, García de Fuentes, and Córdoba Ordóñez (forthcoming).

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