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PORTS OF PLEASURE, HAVENS OF HARM: THE COLONIAL EXPLOITATION BEHIND ROYAL CARIBBEAN'S AMUSEMENT EMPIRE

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Supervision: Marlene Spanger

Master Thesis

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this study is to demonstrate how the cruise industry, based on the case of Royal Caribbean, operationalizes colonial logic and practices, alongside the systems of mobility and immobility as a model for profit-making.

Design/methodology/approach: Following Gloria Wekker's concept of *cultural archive*, understood as a reservoir of knowledge and meaning, I construct a modern "colonial archive" using media and forms appropriate for the time and economic, social, and political context of contemporary cruise industry. In order to search for the "colonial content" of the archive, I combined my own conceptualization of *colonialism* with analytical tools provided by Stuart Hall's concept of *representation* and Carlo Ginzburg's *evidential paradigms.*

Findings: Royal Caribbean profits rely on the colonial logic, practice, and imaginaries. Although the reason for this business model is purely economical, it entrenches itself in a broader theme of colonial narratives such as: global division of labor, racial hierarchies, colonial imaginaries and identities, and systems of mobility and immobility. These provide RCI with tools to control and economically exploit every group participating in the cruise tourism: passengers, "imported" workforce as well as racialized and vilified local populations. To obscure this colonial logic the company engages in a "civilizing mission" – the narrative of humanitarian and developmental efforts for the greater good of Caribbean peoples – which help to legitimize and solidify their "amusement empire."

Originality/value: This study contributes to the emancipatory and critical analysis of tourism industry, by focusing on a specific case study of Royal Caribbean cruise lines. The study offers a novel application of a postcolonial theory, combined with reinterpretation of Gloria Wekker's *cultural archive.* By treating Royal Caribbean International as embedded in colonial logic, the research reveals how cruise industry operationalizes colonial practices, imaginaries, and identities as a model for profit-making.

Keywords: Caribbean, cruise industry, Royal Caribbean, colonialism, exploitation, migrations, mobility.

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INTRODUCTION

Research process

The Caribbean is a vast and diverse region, home to numerous countries and a wide range of actors influencing the region, including former imperial powers, private companies, international organizations, humanitarian agencies, and private charities. In my research, I needed a "microscope" to focus on a specific part of this larger picture, to avoid getting overwhelmed and to maintain clarity. Initially, my attention turned to Haiti, a unique case of a former colony and a failed state.

Through examining maps of Haiti, studying its history, browsing through the news headlines, and looking into its economy, I came across an article "Cruise ship turns away from Haiti amid protests" published in the *USA Today* on January 20, 2016. The article was brief. It was the sort of article that is easily overlooked by the average reader, such as someone scrolling through news during a commute to work. However, for me, it became a key starting point for my research. The article discussed how a Royal Caribbean[1] cruise ship was prevented from docking at its "multi-million-dollar private resort in Labadee, Haiti" by the local protesters.

This struck me. The year was 2016—in the years leading to it Haiti had turned from a fragile state to one on the verge of complete collapse. Some of the most notable events include the devastating earthquake in 2010, which killed 300,000 people and displaced more than one million (DesRoches et al., 2011). This was followed by a cholera epidemic, introduced to the island by members of the U.N. Mission for the Stabilization in Haiti (MINUSTAH) (Chan et al., 2013), which infected over 800,000 people and claimed nearly 10,000 lives (UN OCHA, 2019). The mission itself had already faced accusations of gross misconduct, including rape and sexual abuse (Vahedi et al., 2021), murder, and political repression (HealthRoots, 2011), while also being viewed as illegal or even an occupying force ("Haiti police," 2011). Surprisingly, it seemed that none of it affected the Royal Caribbean business operation in any way.

[1] Royal Caribbean Group operates multiple cruise brands. This paper focuses mainly on their biggest brand, Royal Caribbean International, as a primary operator in the Caribbean region. Throughout the paper I refer to it simply as Royal Caribbean.

This compelled me to further research, uncovering piece by piece the power of the cruise operators in the Caribbean and a distinct pattern of exploitation present in all aspects of Royal Caribbean business activities. Ultimately, this led me to frame two core questions for my research: *To what extent can Royal Caribbean cruise lines business be conceptualized as colonialism, i.e., operating within the framework of a colonial model of exploitation? And what role does the movement (or lack thereof) of people—human mobility and immobility—play within this system?*

Defining the Problem Area

One of the experts specializing in the cruise industry is Ross Klein, who has published multiple books and numerous articles addressing the problems within this sector. In his work, "Adrift at Sea: The State of Research on Cruise Tourism and the International Cruise Industry" (2017), Klein argues for increased academic attention to cruise tourism as a distinct branch of the tourism industry. Drawing on the study by Vogel (2011), he argues that the existing academic literature is overwhelmingly focused on "technical and practical matters" that aim at "achieving performative ends" and informing the cruise industry on "how it can improve its product" (Klein, 2017, p. 200). Klein notes that this kind of research "tends to view the industry favorably and effectively support the interests and the goals of the cruise industry" (Klein, 2017, p. 200). Both Vogel and Klein argue that what is clearly lacking is quality research that is "emancipatory in nature—research that critically analyzes the cruise industry" (Klein, 2017, p. 200).

I encountered this issue during my own research for this paper. Most of the publications I found were reports on technical or operational matters—the kind that Klein describes as being influenced by and/or having a tendency of being biased in favor of the cruise industry. These publications often lacked a critical lens on the industry's broader implications and consequences.

However, despite a few exceptions, I still observed a significant gap in the research. One major missing piece was a conceptualization of the cruise industry's practices as a form of colonialism. Even highly critical works, such as Klein's "Cruise Ship Blues: The Underside of the Cruise Ship Industry" (2002), did not explore the curious parallels between cruise operations and colonial practices. Some scholars conceptualized the cruise industry's issues as problems of globalization (Wood, 2000), while others focused on the sustainability of the industry—both environmental and economic (Papathanassis et al., 2012; Candura et al., 2022).

Among the literature that did explore the links between tourism and colonialism (e.g., Sealy, 2018; or Wong, 2015), the focus was on the generalized tourist industry, rather than the cruise industry specifically. While that provides valuable insights into different facets of the problem, there remains a significant gap that I sought to explore further. Klein (2017) argues that cruise tourism is distinct from general tourism, and that even within the cruise sector, different companies operate differently. Therefore, focusing on a single cruise company as a case study for this distinct area of the tourism industry will enrich the field.

Emancipatory literature that critically examines the practices of a single cruise company appears to be almost non-existent. During my extensive research, I was able to find only one article that dealt directly with Royal Caribbean and conceptualized its operations as a form of colonialism. Julia Michiko Hori's "Berthing Violent Nostalgia: Restored Slave Ports and the Royal Caribbean Historic Falmouth Cruise Terminal" (2016) examines the issue from the perspective of Falmouth, Jamaica. Hori theorizes the concept of "restorative violence" to explain the "shared spatial and discursive logics of colonization and tourism" (Hori, 2016, p. 673). She connects these practices to broader patterns of American imperial dominance and the physical state violence in the Tivoli Gardens, a neighborhood of Kingston, the year before the "Historic Falmouth" cruise terminal's grand opening. Her analysis focuses on the colonial logic of architecture, urban planning, and corporate discourse.

While Hori's work, along with others, offers important perspectives, these studies tended to frame colonialism primarily from the perspective of historical continuity—the persistence of colonial structures beyond decolonization—emphasizing its symbolic, racial, and cultural dimensions. They often overlook colonialism as a distinct logic and practice of *economic* exploitation that is equally applicable to modern industries. This crucial distinction remains largely under-explored.

Finally, much of the literature I reviewed relied on data from official documents, policies, laws, architecture, urban planning, and available facts and figures. While these sources are valid, I began to think that cruise companies, including Royal Caribbean, are public enterprises operating in a mass tourism market. As mass tourist organizations, they create significant public attention. These companies must actively advertise and promote their services and maintain public relations. Royal Caribbean, for instance, employs a global workforce of around 88,000 shipboard workers, and in 2023 its ships carried over 7 million passengers (Royal Caribbean Cruises LTD., 2024). The sheer number of people involved in this industry—whether as

passengers or workers—has generated an enormous amount of publicly available data: videos, photos, blogs, social media posts, reviews, complaints, news articles etc. However, I could not find examples of research that fully utilized this rich source of information.

I decided to incorporate this data into my research to create a more nuanced picture of the cruise industry. My goal was to understand how the cruise industry, and specifically Royal Caribbean, is perceived, interpreted, and represented by those directly involved. In order to do so, I decided to treat it, following Gloria Wekker (2016), as a type of cultural (colonial) archive, and analyze its element using the analytical tools provided by Stuart Hall's (1996) concept of representation and Carlo Ginzburg's (1992) work on *evidential paradigms.* With this framework in place, I asked: can we see the workings of colonialism in the operations of Royal Caribbean through the eyes of its witnesses?

The aim of this study, therefore, is to demonstrate how the cruise industry, based on the case of Royal Caribbean, operationalizes colonial logic and practices as a model for profit-making. Although the cruise industry is a relatively new sector of the global economy, it follows a similar business model based on exploitation, particularly of labor and local economies in tourist destinations. The industry mirrors the power dynamics and economic dependencies operationalized in the past by colonial powers.

Furthermore, just as colonialism historically relied on controlling human mobility—whether through forced migrations, enslavement, or restrictions on movement—the cruise industry governs human movement in all aspects of its operations. Instead of overt physical force or brutality, that characterized historic colonialism, the cruise industry employs various techniques of coercion managing the mobility and immobility of passengers, workers, and local populations.

Background

To grasp the complexity of the problem analyzed in this paper, it is necessary to briefly discuss the context in which it is situated. Firstly, we need to understand the history of colonial struggle over the Caribbean and the economic and labor system that emerged out of it. Secondly, we must explore the patterns of migrations in the Caribbean region. Lastly, I will introduce the cruise industry—its connection to the colonial past, business model, legal status, and the problem of accountability.

Caribbean – from colonial to present day

The Caribbean region was the first land in the so-called "New World" to be discovered by Europeans, sparking a rapid scramble to establish colonies. Over time, many islands passed into the hands of different countries, but from the 17th to 19th centuries, the main colonial powers were Spain, Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands. By the end of 19th century, the new "anti-imperial" empire stepped in—the United States became a major player in the region after the Spanish-American war of 1898.

Caribbean colonies were crucial in "making colonialism a truly global phenomenon" and were "central to developing eighteenth-century Atlantic capitalism" (Burnard & Garrigus, 2016, p. 2). The region became highly profitable, with both Great Britain and France viewing Jamaica and Saint-Domingue (Haiti) as their most valuable and profitable colonies (Sheridan, 1965; James, 1980). The Caribbean was a primary destination for the Atlantic slave trade, a key part of the triangular trade system. In this system, European manufactured goods were exported to Africa, where enslaved people were acquired, and sold as property in the Americas. The crops produced by enslaved labor in the Americas were then exported to Europe, where the cycle started again ("Triangular trade", 2023).

Today, the Caribbean is an impoverished region on what appears to be the periphery of global affairs, but during the age of empires, it was at the heart of imperial domination and economic extraction machinery. Its "success" was based on two key factors: the plantation system and the brutally exploited unfree labor that powered this "plantation machine" (Burnard & Garrigus, 2016). As Burnard and Garrigus observe, the Caribbean plantations "were among the first Western institutions to implement industrial-style production" (2016, p. 3). Specializing in the mass production of cash crops such as sugar cane, coffee, and tobacco, Caribbean plantations were highly profitable. However, they were not able to sustain themselves without the constant supply of cheap, exploitable labor (Burnard & Garrigus, 2016).

Initially, labor on Caribbean plantations was not necessarily based on African slavery. The early colonial period saw the rise of *indentured servitude,* especially in English colonies like Barbados. As Newman notes, Barbadian planters eager for cheap and obedient labor "reconceptualized and reconstituted bound labor, both as a condition and as a mechanism for violently extracting work from men, women, and children who were bound to their master, and who had no choice but to serve" (Newman, 2013, p. 34). While some indentured servants signed contracts "voluntarily", exchanging labor for food, shelter, or to repay debts (such as for

passage to the New World), during that time, “many more (…) were forced to travel. Some were (…) kidnapped and sent to the island as captive laborers, while many more were imprisoned vagrants, convicts, and prisoners from war and rebellion” (Newman, 2013, p. 34). As Newman points out they were people “who did not control their labor or their bodies, people who were bound, not free” (Newman, 2013, p. 35).

Indentured servants shared much of the brutal treatment inflicted on African slaves. Planters viewed their white servants as “people who had lost the right to life and were consequently undeserving of traditional English rights and liberties” (Newman, 2013, p. 35). As a result, indentured servants endured violence and exploitation similar to that experienced by the African slave population (Rugemer, 2013). During this period, both white indentured servants and black slaves “were treated as chattel” and “property that could be seized by a creditor for payment of debt,” reducing them to “animate capital more akin to livestock than people” (Rugemer, 2013, p. 436-437).

Eventually, the mixed system of white indentured servitude and black slavery transitioned into one based entirely on racial slavery with its gruesome brutality. Both forms of unfree labor were economically driven, as the plantation colonial system required large numbers of unfree laborers to maximize profits for the planter class. The Atlantic slave trade soon provided a nearly endless supply of enslaved Africans. As Burnard and Garrigus put it, “[t]he plantation machine was quintessentially colonial, barely using local resources while depending heavily on goods from elsewhere—capital from Europe and labor from Africa" (2016, p. 2).

This supply of enslaved labor began to dwindle in 1807, after Great Britain—then the largest trafficker in the transatlantic slave trade—banned the trade on all British ships and worked to suppress it on ships flying other flags as well (Dumas, 2016). The real shift in the economic model, however, came with the abolition of slavery. In 1834, Great Britain abolished slavery in all its colonies. France, after on-and-off situation with slavery during the revolutionary period (James, 1980), finally abolished slavery in 1848. Revolted ex-slaves of Saint-Domingue (Haiti) had already done it through its 1801 Constitution. Dutch Caribbean ended slavery in 1863 and Spanish Cuba in 1886.

The planters feared that immediate abolition would disrupt the plantation economy. They saw their “success as being founded upon [a] critical ratio between abundant land and cheap labor—a ratio which slavery had served well and which after abolition needed to be replaced by ‘a new

system of slavery'" (Tayyab, 2013, p. 229). To address this concern, British authorities established a system of *apprenticeship*, in which former slaves were required to work for free for their former masters for 45 hours a week, for a transition period lasting 4 to 6 years, depending on the worker's role (Heuman, 2023). Similar systems were introduced in Dutch colonies, where apprenticeship lasted for 10 years, and in Spanish Puerto Rico, where it lasted for 3 years (Heuman, 2023).

Yet neither the end of slavery nor apprenticeship system brought an end to exploitation. As Bolland notes, "[t]he planters, feeling betrayed by their imperial parliament (…) sought to devise new ways to control labor" (1981, p. 594). Interestingly, this need for sustaining a form of bondage and forced labor was recognized even by revolutionary leaders of Haitian. After abolishing slavery in their 1801 Constitution, they implemented a system called *cultivatorship* —"Emphasising the economic importance of the plantation structure, cultivatorship forced formerly-enslaved people to continue to labour in circumstances similar to those of slavery, often under the same plantation owners" (Borowetz, 2023, p. 7).

Transformation of the labor relations continued in search of cheap and exploitable labor. As the supply of enslaved Africans decreased, Caribbean planters turned again to indentured servitude, this time using as its resource subjects from different parts of the colonized world – "in the 1920s sugar planters in Reunion and Mauritius experienced some success in importing laborers from India whose 'cost [was] not one-half that of a slave'" (Tayyab, 2013, p. 230). What is crucial is that this new "imported" labor served a dual purpose for planters – "[b]esides providing cheap labor, the Indian workers were to be the medium through which planters would reassert control and discipline over Afro-Caribbean workers" (Tayyab, 2013, p. 231). As the result, almost half a million Indians were brought to the Caribbean to serve as indentured laborers between 1838 and 1918 (Tayyab, 2013). Although British authorities worked hard "to ensure that, pro forma, the system was one of 'free' labor based on contract" for planter class it was obvious that they come "as indentured laborers but not as free men" (Tayyab, 2013, p. 233-234). Similar system developed in the Spanish Cuba with Chinese workers "imported" as an exploitable force (Ginés-Blasi, 2021).

Finally, planters during that time brought another innovation to the mechanisms of labor control, namely, the wage/rent system. As Bolland explains, "this mechanism (…) combined the roles of employer and landlord on the one hand and those of employee and tenant on the other," allowing planters to "reduce labor costs by charging rent, or by lowering wages in lieu

of charging rent" while gaining a tool in a form of threatening workers with eviction if they failed to meet the planters' expectations (Bolland, 1981). This system further entrenched the exploitation of labor in the Caribbean long after the formal end of slavery.

The Spanish-American War and subsequent gaining of colonies marked a new beginning in American foreign, military, and economic policy. American actions in the Caribbean and Latin America at the start of the 20th century often followed a similar pattern. The European powers owned the majority of the debt and infrastructure in the recently independent (or fighting for independence) states. Whenever these states would struggle to repay the loans, the European governments would threaten with military intervention (often referred to as *gunboat diplomacy*) (McPherson, 2016). By that time, the US considered the region to be its own "backyard." In that situation, the American forces would intervene, taking control of the financial assets, customs houses, ports, trade, etc., effectively controlling the country's finances (Modeste, 2020). Not only would the US government take control of the finances of former colonies, but the American businesses would also start to dominate their economies. For example, after American occupation, 60% of land in Cuba was owned by American citizens and enterprises (McPherson, 2016) and United Fruit Company (UFCO) became the symbol of American economic domination in Central American and Caribbean countries (Colby, 2011).

After successful military operations, the US would ensure the debts are being repaid while supporting the American economic interests in the region (Lezn, 2018), more often than not, for the demise of the local populations and their economies. This strategy followed in Cuba, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Haiti, and other places (Modeste, 2020). As Modeste points out, the United States "invoked the Monroe Doctrine to stave off bankruptcy or to quell uprisings in the Caribbean Basin, creating a number of 'protectorates.' In the process, the United States also became an 'imperial power,' with 'possessions' in the region." (2020, p.62).

Another chapter began with the slow (and still unfinished) process of decolonization. This process started in Haiti, which declared its independence in 1804, far earlier than other colonies. What followed was a long, back-and-forth struggle for independence across the region. To this day, several remnants of the colonial era remain, now rebranded as overseas territories (UK), overseas departments/collectivities (France), constituent countries (the Netherlands), or organized/unorganized territories (USA).

Today Caribbean countries have a "subordinate status in the global economic order," and their development has been influenced by the same political and economic powers since the beginning of colonization (Harris, 2008, p. 49). Although specific problems depend on the particular country, all of them exhibit similar characteristics. All undergone "uneven and exploitative capitalist economic development" (Harris, 2008, p. 49) They are dominated by corporations and investors from North America, Western Europe, and Japan, which control especially the most developed industries. Their economies have a neocolonial structure and are oriented towards exporting resources and basic goods to developed countries. As Harris points out, "[a]long with their continued emphasis on the export of primary products (raw materials and agricultural goods), the neocolonial economies of the newly independent states of Latin America and Caribbean continued to rely on large, agricultural estates and plantations as the primary units of agricultural production and on the continued use of coercive forms of labor exploitation" (Harris, 2008, p. 69).

Moreover, a new industry, often characterized as the "new plantocracy," emerged (Sealy, 2018, p. 81). This industry is a growing tourist sector in the Caribbean region. In many cases, the entire economies were reoriented to best serve incoming tourists (Wong, 2015). Not only are these economies already penetrated by the tourist industry, but the level of their dependency is growing (Jasinski, 2020).

Another issue is that the region is heavily indebted to foreign banks and international financial institutions. Due to the size of this debt and financial problems, most of these countries are under economic supervision and constraints enforced by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank. (Harris, 2008) It is worth mentioning that the same institutions promoted tourism as a good development tool for the Caribbean (Sealy, 2018). Finally, the region is characterized by high levels of poverty and unequal distribution of wealth and land ownership (Harris, 2008). Although decolonization brought formal political sovereignty to many countries, it did not end their subordinate economic status. Ironically, it was British and later American bankers, investors, manufacturers, and shippers that benefited most from the postcolonial era (Harris, 2008).

Migration patterns

Some studies describe the Caribbean as the area of the world where the effects of international migration are most profound and enduring. Its roots can be traced back to the colonial plantation economy that, needing a large and exploitable labor force, brought first indentured servants

from Europe, then enslaved Africans, and later indentured servants from other parts of the colonial empires, particularly India and China. Migration had become an integral aspect of Caribbean society by the middle of the 20th century. The literature describes how, under the context of Caribbean colonization, migration developed into a social and cultural phenomenon (Flahaux & Vezzoli, 2017).

Today, migrations are a "central dynamic of societies" in the Caribbean region (Cecchini & Pizarro, 2024, p. 216). The majority of Caribbean nations have negative net migration rates, with emigration outpacing immigration inflows. The largest relative net outflow originates from Haiti, Jamaica, and Guyana. With approximately 9 million emigrants in 2020—more than 20% of the overall population—the Caribbean subregion maintains one of the greatest diasporas in the world in relation to its population (Cecchini & Pizarro, 2024). Currently, extra-regional flow outpaces the intra-regional, meaning that more people emigrate outside of the Caribbean than between different countries in the region. The main directions of migration are the United States, followed by Canada and the United Kingdom (Jaupart, 2023); however, some cross-border migrations remain high, particularly in the case of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, with an estimated number of nearly half a million Haitians living in DR (IOM, March 2021).

The driving force behind Caribbean migrations are "economic asymmetries and inequalities" between states within the broader Caribbean region (Cecchini & Pizarro, 2024, p. 216). Cecchini and Pizarro (2024) name specifically the lack of opportunities, economic crisis, natural disasters, political instability, and violence as major push factors; and better employment perspective and educational opportunities, existing migratory networks, and family connections as significant pull factors on the other hand.

In recent years, migratory flows in the region are experiencing a growing trend in irregular migration (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024). These also include human trafficking, particularly of minors and women (Jaupart, 2023). Cecchini and Pizarro (2024) point out that these migrants are especially exposed to exploitation and discrimination. Migrants originating from Latin America and the Caribbean trying to enter the United States are facing increasing obstacles. Their movement is being criminalized and the border is becoming a militarized zone. Particular stigmatization has recently affected Haitians, who have become a major campaign issue in the 2024 U.S. presidential election (Catalini et al., 2024). Words like "invasion," falsified claims of kidnapping and eating domestic animals by Haitian migrants, referring to migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean in multiple derogatory terms such as "animals," "criminals,"

“rapists,” became all too prevalent in the American political landscape, while building walls, fences, camps, and mass deportations its advocated solutions.

On the other hand, what feels almost like a parallel universe, we have a “wonderful paradise” of Caribbean tourism. As mentioned before, international institutions promote tourism as one of the most effective tools for economic development for the region. Some even argue that tourists arriving from North America should be treated as the United States’ foreign aid (Wong, 2015). Discourse of the American public and media surrounding it feels completely detached from the problem of regional migrations. It does not take much to find myriad of news articles promoting Caribbean tourism or simply framing the Caribbean as the paradise on earth, and Caribbean vacation, particularly on a cruise ship, as an emanation of the American dream. Numbers of travelers and potential travelers reflect the effectiveness of that discourse. According to some surveys even 44% of Americans consider going on a cruise vacation in the future (Edmonds, 2022), which seems to be reflected in reality as the industry is once again breaking records in passenger numbers (Oladipo & Vanaik, 2023). Not only is this type of migration praise and advertised, it is also facilitated as Caribbean countries fight over tourists. Very often, the US citizens do not even need to own a passport for a round trip in the Caribbean (Vasta, 2023).

Cruise industry

As this paper analyzes the case of Royal Caribbean, it is essential to briefly present the basic characteristics common across the cruise industry. Although the industry as it exists today is rather new, its roots can be traced back to the colonial era and its agents. In the previous section, I mentioned that the United Fruit Company was one of the major symbols of American economic dominance in Central America and the Caribbean region, frequently violently exercising its power over the former colonies. Interestingly, besides growing and exporting bananas, it can also be seen as a precursor of modern cruise tourism.

As part of the vertical integration strategy, United Fruit Company controlled not only the agricultural production of bananas but also most of the infrastructure necessary to export them. To effectively transport bananas prone to spoilage, the UFCO ordered a fleet of more than 100 novel refrigerator ships. The company management quickly realized the potential for maximizing profits in using their “banana boats” and ports of call as cruise tourism infrastructure. Thus, United Fruit’s white-painted reefer ships were turned into the brand that the company named "the Great White Fleet" (Martin, 2016). Coincidentally, the same name

was given to the show of military force orchestrated by President Theodore Roosevelt, in which the group of sixteen American battleships sailed around the world in 1907 (Winter, 2008). This discursive similarity is not, however, the only link between UFCO cruise business and American militarism. As it happens, the first four ships that the company purchased for its tourist enterprise were decommissioned US Navy transport vessels, three of which served during the Spanish-American war that made the United States a colonial empire in the Caribbean (Martin, 2016). As Martin summarizes, "[b]anana-boat tourism framed many tens of thousands of North Americans' 'close encounters of empire'" (2016, p. 239).

Focusing on the contemporary cruise industry, however, it is important to understand several key facts. The 1960s and 1970s marked the beginning of the modern cruise industry with the establishment of Royal Caribbean, Carnival, Norwegian Cruise Line and, in 1980s, MSC Cruises. Today, just these four companies dominate the global cruise market. The biggest market, by far, remains centered around the Caribbean region, attracting 44,2% of the global passenger number (2024 State of the Cruise Industry Report, n.d.). At the same time, the Cruise Lines International Association estimates that the gross of direct economic impact created by the industry is generated in Europe (59%) and the United States (25%), while only 17% of it ends in the „rest of the world" (2023 State of the Cruise Industry Report, n.d.), which includes the Caribbean region among others. And yet, these spendings support 315.000 jobs in Europe compared to 411.000 in the rest of the world—nearly a 100.000 less jobs (2023 State of the Cruise Industry Report, n.d.). Moreover, while CLIA estimates that only 2% of global travel and tourism market belongs to the cruise industry (2024 State of the Cruise Industry Report, n.d.), yet in the Caribbean cruise arrivals are nearly equal to the number of long-stay tourists (Kalosh, 2024, July 31). This is important for two reasons: firstly, it highlights the specificity of the Caribbean cruise tourism; and secondly, because studies show that cruise passengers spend around 55% less than long-stay tourists, with most of that centered around foreigner-owned duty-free shops, severely limiting the economic gains for tourist destinations (Sealy, 2018).

Times when sea travel was reserved exclusively for the upper classes and wealthy elites are long gone. Mass cruise tourism market needed to find a new, mass customer. To attract middle-class people, companies needed to keep the prices low. Therefore, the business model generally had to be based on minimizing operational costs and maximizing the number of passengers. Today, most of the passengers of the cruise industry come from North America (Georgsdottir

& Oskarsson, 2017), while Caribbean passengers are nearly absent (2023 State of the Cruise Industry Report, n.d.).

Another characteristic, one that is essentially unheard of outside the Caribbean region, is the existence, and particular business importance of private islands and ports—owned or controlled by cruise companies. The "big four" companies, as well as smaller ones such as Disney Cruise Line and Holland America Line, each own at least one private island or destination (Zelinski, 2024). These itineraries are exclusive to their passengers and are isolated from the local communities and economies. Some are left more wild and natural, while others, like Royal Caribbean's Perfect Day at CocoCay at the Bahamas, are turned into elaborate water parks covering the entire area.

Lastly, let us look at the problem of legal status and accountability of cruise ships—a crucial element in the wider problem analyzed in this paper. It is a complicated issue that could, and has been studied on its own (Negret, 2016; Jobson, 2020), but for the purpose of this paper's argument we will cover only the essential aspects of it. Three of the biggest companies—Carnival Corporation, Royal Caribbean Group and Norwegian Cruise Line—are headquartered and publicly traded in the United States, however they are registered as companies in Panama, Liberia, and Bermuda respectively ("Most Cruise Lines," 2020). As a result, they are exempt from almost all taxes in the United States (Leonhardt, 2013).

Another issue is that, as a seafaring business, these companies operate ships that, under international maritime law, must be registered in a specific country, known as the flag state (Negret, 2016). While the country of incorporation governs the corporate taxation, corporate rules and overall legal framework, the flag of the vessel determines the labor, safety, and environmental regulatory regime that the cruise ships are subjected to. To attract companies to register ships in their countries, some states specialized in creating pro-business regulatory framework—these countries became to be known as *flags of convenience* (Negret, 2016).

Royal Caribbean is an interesting case here. The parent company is incorporated in Liberia to take advantage of the corporate-friendly tax and legal system. Their vessels, however, are registered in the Bahamas—one of the notorious flags of convenience. This arrangement helps Royal Caribbean to fully optimize (lower) costs as the Bahamas does not charge any tax on income or capital gains arising from the shipping industry (Bahamian Investment Authority, n.d.). Furthermore, according to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the flag

state exercises an exclusive jurisdiction over the ship flying its flag (United Nations, 1982). However, as Negret points out, following the Rochdale Report published in 1970 in the United Kingdom, one of the criteria of being considered a flag of convenience is that "[t]he country of registry has neither the power nor the administrative machinery effectively to impose any governmental or international regulations; nor does the country even wish or have the power to control the shipowner companies themselves" (Negret, 2016, p. 5). As it happens, most of the Caribbean states are small and underdeveloped, lacking resources to control multinational corporations or keep them accountable. Combined with the significant dependency on tourism—and therefore vulnerability to pressure from the industry—it makes Royal Caribbean, like much of the shipping industry as a whole, to be beyond any effective control.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Colonialism

In order to look for colonial patterns in the actions of Royal Caribbean, it is important to understand the concept of colonialism itself. The problem is that this concept, along with its variations and related ideas, is not easily definable. In this section, I will first try to clarify the conceptual map related to the topic—covering colonialism, imperialism, neocolonialism, and coloniality—and then provide my conceptualization as used in this paper.

The first issue arises with the traditional concept of *colonialism* itself. Depending on the author's perspective, there will be significant differences. For example, let us first look at the common dictionary definition—a place most people unversed in the topic might look for. Oxford English Dictionary defines colonialism as "the principle, policy, or practice of acquiring full or partial *political* control over another country and occupying it with settlers" (OED, July 2023). This definition focuses on the political aspect of colonialism, limited to state activity, which can be a rather simplistic approach. Furthermore, considering the decolonization process, limiting colonialism to political ties between former metropoles and colonies seems outdated as an analytical category for modern times. On the other hand, we have scholars such as Bill Ashcroft who conceptualizes colonialism as a "dominant form of *cultural* exploitation that developed with the expansion of Europe", placing emphasis on the cultural aspect and tying it to the European colonialism (Ashcroft, 2015, p. 1). Somewhat similarly, the Encyclopedia Britannica only provides its explanation of this concept within article dedicated to "Western colonialism", bounding it to a specific spatiotemporal phenomenon (Webster, et al., 2024). In contrast, authors like Ania Loomba argue that colonialism, defined as "the conquest and control

of other people's land and goods" is a widespread and recurring theme in human history, and, as such, is not limited to European conquest (Loomba, 2015).

Another issue is that the term "colonialism" is often used interchangeably with "imperialism" without clear explanation or distinction between the two concepts (Loomba, 2015). Ashcroft refers here to Edward Said's differentiation between these terms, stating that "'imperialism' [stands] for the ideological force" dominant in the metropole, while "'colonialism' [stands] for the practice" that originates from that ideology and is implemented in the colony (Ashcroft, 2015, p. 1). A similar distinction between the two is presented by Loomba (2015).

Due to the tendency to limit colonialism to a historical formation of European or Western colonialism, as well as to direct political control, Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of independent Ghana, coined the term *neocolonialism*. This "new" colonialism became evident in how, even after ending political subjugation to old colonial powers (and some new ones like the United States), they continued to control the economies and culture of their former colonies through the system of indirect control. These included international monetary system, powerful corporations, cartels, and what can be broadly described as a humanitarian-development complex (Ashcroft, 2015).

Another concept, introduced by Anibal Quijano, is *coloniality*. Similar to neocolonialism, this concept emphasizes the continuation of colonial subjugation and control over former colonies (Balaton-Chrimes & Stead, 2017). It refers to a global power structure that came into existence as a result of colonialism, outlived colonial administration (Boatcă, 2013) and still structures global division of labor, science, culture, and more (Maria de Barros & Resende, 2023). Quijano identified race as the primary element of distinction between the colonized and colonizers (2007); therefore, the coloniality of power continues to serve as the global system of social and economic hierarchy structured along racial lines (Balaton-Chrimes & Stead, 2017).

These concepts form a conceptual core of the colonial and postcolonial studies. While each is relevant and useful in their own right, I find them lacking to fully grasp the problem analyzed in this paper. Although concepts of coloniality and neocolonialism come closest to the problem under analysis, neither the historical containment nor all of their characteristics necessarily apply well for the subject being analyzed.

To form a suitable conceptualization, I follow Crooks and Parsons' (2016) differentiations between concepts as analytical categories and concepts as historical ideas. My

conceptualization of colonialism—the name of the phenomenon in its most basic, core and transhistorical form that I have decided to use—belongs to the former. To "distill" this idea to its core meaning from the plethora of concepts, I looked for a pattern that was persistent through all of them and, in my opinion, the most crucial. As a result, I settled on the following conceptualization: colonialism is a persistent logic and practice of exploitation of foreign land, labor, resources, and culture for the purpose of maximizing profit of the colonizer. In this practice the colonizer resorts to various strategies from the colonial toolkit—such as physical force, cultural hegemony, racial hierarchies, knowledge-producing discourse, etc.—to control and coerce its subjects. Therefore, my conceptualization places special emphasis on the economic aspect—the driver and reason pushing entities (peoples, countries, companies etc.) to seek colonial control over others. I find this conceptualization broad enough to encompass non-traditional actors such as Royal Caribbean, whose operations could otherwise easily slip outside the classic, historically and geographically locked definitions of colonialism.

Colonialism-capitalism-mobility nexus

In my working definition, I align closely with the Marxist understanding of colonialism/imperialism and its relation to capitalist economic system. All the authors mentioned in the previous section emphasized the entanglement of colonialist system of exploitation and the birth and rise of modern capitalism. Loomba, for example, underscores that although European colonial practices differed between countries and even among colonies of the same metropole, "they all produced the economic imbalance that was necessary for the growth of European capitalism and industry" (Loomba, 2015, p. 22).

However, where Marx and some of his intellectual followers saw no more than a genesis of the capital—a necessary phase of the capitalist expansion (Loomba, 2015)—others saw it as much more intrinsically woven into the fabric of capitalism's contradictory logic itself. Rosa Luxemburg viewed it as a force driven by "deep and fundamental antagonism between the capacity to consume and the capacity to produce in a capitalist society, a conflict resulting from the very accumulation of capital which periodically bursts out in crises and spurs capital on to a continual extension of the market" (as cited in Veneziani, 2009, p. 196). Similarly, Lenin argued that capital accumulated in the metropole at some point could not be effectively invested without the expansion to and subordination of non-industrialized countries (Loomba, 2015). Alternatively, with no end of capitalism in sight—contrary to Marxist teleological perception

of history—this sustained phenomenon could be explained by world-system theory, where peripheries are to sustain the prosperity of the core (Ashcroft, 2015).

What distinguishes colonialism of the modern era is its complex relationship with mobility on one hand and restrictions imposed on it on the other. Loomba points out that the practice of economic extraction was much more complicated and not always straightforward: "it restructured the economies of the latter [colonized], drawing them into a complex relationship with their [colonizers'] own, so that there was a flow of human and natural resources between colonised and colonial countries" (Loomba, 2015, p. 21). This sheds the light on the importance of migration in colonial practices, as the global asymmetries are essential to the system. During the pre-decolonization era, colonialism was a system in which "[b]oth the colonised and the colonisers moved: the former not only as slaves but also as indentured labourers, domestic servants, travellers and traders, and the colonial masters as administrators, soldiers, merchants, settlers, travellers, writers, domestic staff, missionaries, teachers and scientists" (Loomba, 2015, p. 22). This, of course, did not imply any sort of reciprocity or balance, as profits almost always found their way back to the metropole (Loomba, 2015). As I will argue, this system of mobility remains relevant today in the practice of entities like Royal Caribbean, which operates within the colonial logic of exploitation.

The civilizing mission

Imperial conquest and colonization of foreign lands with time requires an ideological explanation. The age of empires marked Western European nations, with their growing sense of superiority, as a civilized world. Just like social binary of "us" and "others," "civilization" cannot exist without its antithesis, its "inferior counterpart" (Osterhammel, 2005, p. 7) – the uncivilized, the barbarians. This basic binary of colonial discourse, along with the fundamental assertion that the latter are incapable of successfully managing their own affairs, provide the foundational structure of modern colonialism (Ziai, 2015).

In this sense, the idea of a *civilizing mission* can be summarized as a strong belief in the underlying superiority and greater legitimacy of one's own collective way of life that drives to the self-proclaimed right as well as an obligation to actively promote and disseminate one's own norms and institutions to other peoples and cultures (Osterhammel, 2015).

This ideology became a core of a modern European and later American imperial projects (Osterhammel, 2005), working as an "ideological justification for such political-economic

domination in the first place" (Gill, 2022, p. 315) and "a framework for imagining the institutions needed to stabilise the hierarchies resulting from imperial expansion" (Phillips, 2014, p. 698). It served to "construct identities, i.e. it exert not only representing but also subjectivising power" (Ziai, 2015, p. 27). On one hand it modeled "the colonized as not-quite-human but redeemable through the 'gift' of racial uplifting" (Lopez, 2015, p. 2243). On the other, it produced "a 'samaritan' identity" (Ziai, 2015, p. 31) of a colonizer.

Samaritan identity and mission formed a deeply rooted perception of a benevolent colonialism. As Gill points out, "[i]nstead of emphasizing power, control, and self-interest [it] emphasized goodwill, selflessness, and the supposed humanitarian nature of their [empires'] global endeavors" (Gill, 2022, p. 311). In his own eyes, the colonizer is a generous provider of security, culture, employment, as well as medical and sanitary advancements (Osterhammel, 2005). From this perspective all the brutality and injustice of colonialism is triggered "by the spoiled mentality of indigenous peoples" that are "forcing" the benevolent, father-like figure of a colonizer to act contrary to his gentle nature (Ziai, 2015).

This ideology, first and foremost, hid the truth about the nature of colonialism. Ziai (2015) argues that developing a colony first meant draining its economic resources and not improving the standard of living. Lopez (2015), based on the US occupation of Haiti, observes how even the modernizing efforts were directed on infrastructure that primarily supported the colonial administration and military, and served as a narrative legitimizing the occupation.

With time the objectives of the "mission" started to change and tie itself to the rising capitalist system on a global scale. This change, led by the British, operationalized "two sets of normative practices with unlimited operational scope: international law and free market" (Osterhammel, 2015, p. 19). In line with the belief of Victorian elites of a "domesticating effects of the market" (2015, p. 19), the mission and goal of a colonizer was therefore to teach the colonized how to "make use of commercial opportunities" generously offered by the empire (2015, p. 23).

British Empire pioneered in one more phenomenon: militarized humanitarianism as a tool of foreign policy. The ban on slave-trade and the navy campaign that fallowed "created all sort of pretexts for interference and intervention across the globe" (Osterhammel, 2005, p. 17). In 1920s United States' occupation of Haiti ushered nongovernmental organization into the service of American imperialism shifting a "'modernizing mission' towards a 'softer' form of militarized humanitarianism" (Lopez, 2015, p. 2241).

However, as Pomeranz (2005) claims, the ideology of the civilizing mission had a fatal flaw—accepting it would create a paradox in which any empire claiming success of its mission would be advocating for its own dissolution. Moreover, the growing discontent and opposition to colonialism, the rise of universal human rights discourse, and questions about feasibility of keeping the empire intact with brutal military force alone led to the need of finding a new way of protecting metropoles' influences. Therefore, "a mission stressing economic development provided a seemingly defensible basis for a colonial contract" and, importantly, "'development […] implied a need for continuing guidance" (Pomeranz, 2005, p. 37-38).

The object of this new discourse has shifted away from biological terms and towards issues of economic geography (Ziai, 2015). Thus, post-war period marked the beginning of a new development mission. In this new world all people are equal, "only some are not as progressed on the universal scale of development… they are underdeveloped" (Ziai, 2015, p. 30). As it happens, it coincided with the booming United States' economy and its hunger for new markets (Ziai, 2015). Imperial centers realized that development agenda could make an "empire a valuable market for (…) manufactures and financial services rather than just a source of raw materials" (Pomeranz, 2005, p. 37-38).

Depoliticized, diluted, turned into supposedly "technical" issue (Alcevich, 2018) it survived the demise of old empires in this new "genetic mutation" (Osterhammel, 2005, p. 8). Pomeranz underlines that "the commitment of many colonial nationalists to developmentalism is among modern imperialism's most important legacies" (2005, p. 18). Yet, with all its non-political discourse of humanitarianism and selfless commitment to development, it "has often proven particularly effective to reinforce US objectives of international security and political hegemony" (Alacevich, 2018, p.264).

METHODOLOGY

Colonial archive

Colonial empires were deeply bureaucratic machines; therefore, it is no surprise that one of the basic data sources one looks into when analyzing colonialism are imperial archives. These are typically the products of broad state apparatus necessary for daily functioning of colonial empires: state papers, laws, documents, letters, visual materials, as well as collections of private correspondence, memoirs, etc. Archived and organized, they serve as a valuable source of data for historians or anyone interested in the colonial past. However, today there is a common

understanding among scholars of colonial and postcolonial studies, that archives were never neutral or passive. They played, and still play, an active role in constituting and sustaining power structures. As Reid and Paisley point out, archival documents "created the very subject on which they claimed to report" (2017, p. 2). Therefore, following Ann Laura Stoler, while not rejecting archives as valuable source of data about the past, we must see them "not as sites of knowledge retrieval but of knowledge production" (2002, p. 90).

By bringing together Stoler's remarks on the imperial archive and Edward Said's concept of *cultural archive*, Gloria Wekker wrote a book "White innocence: paradoxes of colonialism and race" (2016), which challenged the common self-representation of contemporary Dutch society. Her concept of cultural archive is not about the archive "as a set of documents or the institution in which those documents are housed" (Wekker, 2016, p. 19), but rather "an unacknowledged reservoir of knowledge" (Wekker, 2016, p. 2) stored "in the heads and hearts of the people" (Wekker, 2016, p. 19). She finds the reflections of that reservoir not in "institutional archives or fiction, but [in] popular media—newspapers, television, social media—and, to a lesser extent, from art" (Andeweg, 2022, p. 234). Wekker uses her concept of cultural archive more as an analytical tool (Andeweg, 2022) in order to "read all of these contemporary domains for their colonial content" (Wekker, 2016, p. 19).

It is important to note that Wekker is not analyzing colonial past itself—she takes it as a given (Andeweg, 2022)—but rather the effects it has had on Dutch people over 400 years. Therefore, as she describes it, she looks for remnants of colonial "past in the present" (Wekker, 2016, p. 20). As explained in the previous section, I conceptualize colonialism here as a certain logic and practice of exploitation, not a historical formation or process. I am analyzing it as it is now, based on universal characteristics, not as it was in any historical incarnation; or, to tautologically paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu's quote used by Wekker (2016, p.20), I am looking for the presence of the colonial present in the present.

This paper is based on two core, informed observations: first, the existence of colonialism as a specific logic and practice in modern times; and second, the possibility of colonialism existing outside the state apparatus (even if not necessarily in isolation from its imperial policies). With these key assumptions, we can see that this common reservoir of meaning and knowledge is not only reflective of the past but of our present colonial realities too. Just like historical imperial archives, in its institutional and documentary forms, were based on the observations of colonialism made by its contemporaries—perpetrators, victims, or passive witnesses—my

archive comprises of variety of data sources used to memorialize modern realities by *its own witnesses*. Like Wekker, I am reading this archive looking for "colonial content" (2016, p. 19). However, I treat this reservoir of knowledge as forever unfinished, constantly being shaped, influenced by the past but equally representing and shaping the colonial present. As Stoler would argue, my usage of the archive, just like Wekker's, is more akin to "'the archive' [with] a capital 'A'" and serving as a "metaphor for any corpus of selective forgettings and collections" (2002, p.94). While equally true, I argue that contemporary colonialism exists, and therefore the modern colonial archive (in its more traditional understanding) is in the making, using media and forms appropriate for the time and economic, social, and political context. Therefore, while conceptually close to Wekker's cultural archive and influenced by Stoler's ideas on imperial archives, I opt to call the concept used in this paper the *colonial archive*—better reflecting the reality of contemporary nature of colonialism I analyze. While providing historical context when necessary to expose the persistence of colonial logic across different time periods, my focus is the colonial model of exploitation itself, as well as its contemporary manifestation in the Royal Caribbean's operations.

Analytical tools

Representation

The first element of my analytical toolkit is the concept of representation as presented by Stuart Hall. In *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices* (1997) Hall explains that representation is a crucial element in the culture circuit. Using signs and symbols, we make sense of the world – "We give things meaning by how we *represent* them—the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions associated with them" (Hall, 1997, p. 3)

I use this analytical tool for two reasons. Firstly, as Hall point out, representation is important because, by creating meaning we "regulate and organize our conduct and practices – they help to set the rules, norms and conventions by which social life is ordered and governed" (1997, p. 4). In this sense, Hall is clearly inspired by Foucault's concept of discourse and its relation to power.

Secondly, Hall shows the significance of decoding and interpretation in the process of representation. He argues that signs and symbols do not have a fixed meaning. This "unfixing [of] meaning […] opens representation to the constant 'play' or slippage of meaning, to the

constant production of new meaning, new interpretations" (Hall, 1997, p. 32). It means that active interpretation is crucial for representation, and the question about the intentions of the person producing meaning is less relevant. Since people do not control how others interpret things, the role of the interpreter is just as important in this process.

Evidential paradigm

As pointed out, the imperial archives were not neutral in presenting the reality they reported on—neither in what and how they presented it nor in what was included and excluded from the archive—hence the question of authenticity, reliability and trustworthiness are ever-present (Stoler, 2002). While cross-examination and comparing the narratives of multiple sources is useful, it might not always be sufficient.

In this paper, I analyze a variety of publicly available data sources. Some, like internet forums and reviews, give no guarantee that people who wrote them are presenting the truth, or in fact whether they have even been on a cruise themselves or have any experience with it. Therefore, first I needed to ask myself the question of how relevant is that they are in their entirety reliable facts. The mass tourism industry in the age of internet relies heavily on public perception. Whether true or not, these accounts nevertheless, in Foucauldian terms, produce knowledge about places and people; they contribute to the discourse as much as they are influenced by it, much like imperial archives created and sustained fictions and myths.

On the other hand, I faced a second, related problem in my analysis. On the contrary to the openly colonial nature of material stored in the imperial archive, the witnesses of the colonial present, whose account I analyze, are not always aware of it. How can one read "colonial content" (Wekker, 2016, p. 19) in texts related to leisure and travel when their participants do not interpret it in these terms?

As mentioned above, Hall's concept of representation and his insistence on the importance of interpretation in the meaning production process is one way of countering this obstacle. However, to resolve that problem, I am guided in my analysis by Carlo Ginzburg's (1992) work on *evidential paradigms*. Ginzburg argued that, just like a detective, a scholar can trace larger truths and patterns by looking for small, seemingly insignificant clues. This approach gives "the ability to construct from apparently insignificant […] data a complex reality that could not be experienced directly" (1992, p. 103). The point of this meticulous analysis of small details and reading between the lines "is less to distinguish fiction from fact" but rather "to track the

production and consumption of those 'facts' themselves" and thus "the social and political conditions that produced" them (Stoler, 2002, p. 91). By combining Wekker's concept of cultural archive, Hall's concept of representation and Ginzburg's evidential paradigms, I am able to trace the colonial where its presence is not immediately obvious.

ANALYSIS

Colonial towns and the new plantation

The colonial world is a world cut in two. The dividing line, the frontiers are shown by barracks and police stations.

(…)

The settlers' town is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about. (…) The settler's town is a well-fed town, an easygoing town; its belly is always full of good things. The settlers' town is a town of white people, of foreigners.

(…)

The town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire.

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

The ship

A floating city

Colonial towns that Frantz Fanon refers to were traditional cities, towns, villages, located somewhere on land, settled for decades or centuries. Looking at pictures of Royal Caribbeans'

ships, marvels of engineering, I cannot stop thinking about the 1995 post-apocalyptic movie called “Waterworld”. In this dystopian future, the world presented to the viewer is completely covered by the world-ocean; the remaining elements of human race occupy cities floating on the open seas.

To others, the video of RCI’s new ship reminds of something else. Something seemingly less threatening, sugarcoated, easier to digest – Walt Disney’s Wall-E:

“*I get some serious wall-e vibes”*

and

“It’s ludicrous. In an overindulgent way” (Reddit, user: VofGold, posted: 02.02.2024)

Someone else responds to say how exactly they interpret that:

“we splurge in consumption. The more the better” (Reddit, user: UppedCardiologist523, posted: 02.02.2024)

They recognized in RCI’s cruise ship the Axiom Starliner – a gargantuan spaceship, from a sad yet charming animated movie about the galactic life of an overindulged humanity that, after destroying the planet Earth, decided to go on a galactic cruise, while the nation of robots cleans the polluted planet in their absence. That comparison is not a coincidence. After all, Axiom Starliner was modeled after a cruise ship.

Another comparison presents itself upon further search. To some people, obvious point of comparison are military ships, specifically aircraft carriers – the biggest and most expensive ships.

“Over twice the size of the largest aircraft carriers” (Reddit, user: JCall2609, posted 02.02.2024)

And it is. The symbol of a naval military capabilities, aircraft carriers never sail alone – they are leading a carrier battle group. They are a powerful offensive weapon that only superpowers, or aspiring superpowers, can afford.

This is not the only relation between cruise ships and battleships. The dominant color of cruise ships is white. As mentioned in the previous sections, the history of a cruise industry in modern

sense can be traced back to the Great White Fleet of United Fruit Company, which both used the same name as Roosevelt's Great White Fleet, the show of American naval power, as well as decommissioned US Navy ships.

Moreover, Julia Michiko Hori, in her work "Berthing Violent Nostalgia…" (2016), showed that this likeness between cruise ships and military ships is not based purely on the aesthetics. By analyzing the technology present on both types of ships, she claims "kinship" between them. In this sense that kinship is specifically striking in the context of phenomenon called "militourims" – "a phenomenon by which 'military or paramilitary force ensures the smooth running of the tourist industry, and the same tourist industry masks the military force behind it'" (Hori, 2016, p. 680).

If one tries to find some sort of visual size comparison of Icon of the Seas, the image they are presented with is a side-by-side comparison to HMS Titanic build in the zenith of the British Empire. This catalog of fascinating comparisons keeps growing.

A cruise ship, therefore, can be summed up as being massive, overpowering, dystopian, and yet entertaining and indulging. The fleet of new RCI's ships, both the older Oasis class and even more so the brand-new Icon class, brings that image to mind – floating cities. The latter, according to RCI, can hold 5.610 passengers and 2.350 crew members (Icon of the Seas Fact Sheet | Royal Caribbean Press Center, n.d.). A floating city, bustling with people and activities – theater, cinema, ice-skating ring, pools, bars, restaurants, cafés, shopping streets, climbing walls, casinos etc. Anyone can take a tour – internet is full of videos showing the viewer around the ship.

Ship as a colonial town

To see this dystopian structure, I pick a video with somehow contradictory name: "Utopia of the Seas Full Cruise Ship Tour", published on YouTube platform by @RoyalCaribbeanBlog (published 19.07.2024). The tour, even compressed for the sake of entertaining quality of the video, takes more than an hour. During that time, the guide shows all different "neighborhoods" of the cruiser – there are eight.

This massive cruiser is a colonial world in itself. The ship is full of restaurants serving different "international foods" – oriental as well as metropolitan. You can even experience a colonial past in the more interactive way. The tour guide takes the viewer to "Utopia Station". Guests are welcomed by the enormous traditional split-flap schedule display. The restaurant is located

inside the 19th century railroad car – a symbol of colonial infrastructure, so crucial to the expansion of western empires, key to subjugate and exploit their colonies. Inside passengers sit at the window tables. Windows are filled with high-quality displays. From there they see a different, long-lost world – they are sitting at the train going through the freshly colonized "wild-west," the American frontier. Going back to the shopping street they can visit stores with jewelry—gold, silver, pearls—or exotic alcohols—here rum is the king.

The ship is divided along similar lines as a colonial town. As I will explore this topic in the next section of the analysis, I will not go here into detail. However, the ship is a strictly hierarchical place. The first group consists of passengers. Their role can be compared to that of travelers and explorers coming from the imperial core. As mentioned in background section, majority of cruise lines' clients are coming from United States, Canada, and western Europe. The second group I call the agents of an empire. Just like colonial administrators, the cast of officers, higher management and some entertainers, travels and works in this colonial town, making sure that it operates smoothly and efficiently. Their role, living conditions, race and/or country of origin are different than those of the third group, the "imported" labor working below deck. Throughout "Utopia of the Seas Full Cruise Ship Tour" video, one can observe mostly white, western passengers and entertainers, and people of mostly Asian origin working in restaurants or as cleaning staff.

This hierarchy does not go unnoticed. Indian edition of Business Insider (perhaps it would be valid to question why Indian and not American) published an article titled "There's a strict hierarchy on cruise ships that creates a huge gap between the highest and lowest-paid workers" (2019, November 28) based on interviews with former employees of Royal Caribbean. Their accounts show not only the titular strict hierarchy but also very clear interpretation of what this hierarchy amounts to in employees' eyes:

"'*Whenever it comes to an officer or a manager, they like to treat each other with respect. But if you're not a manager or an officer, they just see you as their slave,' said a former photographer for Royal Caribbean International.*"

and

"*He noticed that some staff members and officers would have crew members who were in training run personal errands for them, like picking up laundry, food, or alcohol. 'They're*

almost like slaves who live on these minuscule tips by the officers,' he said. 'It feels really colonial.'"

But perhaps the most blatant, yet to my surprise mostly unnoticed, emanation of racial hierarchy are present in the form of "Washy Washy" people. Cruise ships need to ensure the sanitary standards onboard as any kind of outbreak on the open sea is potentially dangerous and damaging. The form this care takes, however, can be seen as deeply disturbing. A passenger of a brand-new Icon of the Seas posted a YouTube video titled „Icon of the Seas | Washy Washy" (@HappilyEverYady, published 06.02.2024) which shows a group of Southeast Asian workers, dressed as food, reminding passengers to wash their hand before eating by singing parody versions of popular songs. As it happens, horrifyingly similar name, 'Washee Washee,' was a 19th century derogatory term for Chinese migrant workers in the United States, typically associated with cheap laborers working as cleaners.

What is perhaps the most interesting, is that these racialized categories, as it sometimes happened in history, do not have to be associated with "race" at all. Going through my colonial archive I came across a recurring theme of racialized language directed at passengers:

"That doesn't even look fun to me, lol – too many people" (Reddit, user: ISuspect*******, posted 02.02.2024)

To which another user responded:

"And it's the Wal-Mart crowd too" (Reddit, user: PriorFudge928, posted: 02.02.2024)

Walmart customers, in the United States, are typically associated with poor and uncultured masses. It triggered an internet phenomenon known as "People of Walmart". Walmart also happens to be the biggest employer in the United States – offering mostly low-paid jobs. Another user also directed me to the racialized class problem by attacking an RCI's passenger and author of a negative review:

"So you booked a little rock bottom low budget cruise and was expecting what? Grow up, if you can't afford a high end or mid level cruise then stay your a— home." (Reddit, user: Outrageous_Lack_1522, posted 11.02.2024)

It must be pointed out that during the colonial era the idea of white poor representing an inferior race was not unheard of "as the poor classes, women and children were in similar ways seen as

inferior in a racial hierarchy as the non-Whites: poverty was seen as organic pathology" (Ziai, 2015, p. 28). These "'inner barbarians' were just as strange—and sometimes as frightening—as exotic savages" (Osterhammel, 2005, p.24). Therefore, the question I had to ask myself was: is the role of Royal Caribbean's cruise passengers more complex, ambiguous, or even dual-natured?

Private itineraries

Symbolic ownership

As previously mentioned, a special characteristic of Caribbean cruise industry is the existence and particular importance of private itineraries – islands and ports exclusive to passengers of particular cruise line. Royal Caribbean is heavily investing in that section of the market. Their three main destinations are "Historic Falmouth", "Labadee," and "Perfect day at CocoCay". Each of these presents a different approach to private itineraries and a set of varying problems.

My analysis cannot proceed further without first addressing something as simple yet symbolic as the itineraries' names. Just as European colonization left its legacy on the Caribbean islands' names, Royal Caribbean engages in a similar game. Names, in this context, are not merely designations but symbolic constructions that reflect corporate imagination and historical reinterpretations.

One notable example is the seemingly simple case of corporate branding in RCI's trademarked phrase "Perfect Day at CocoCay." The name "Coco Cay" is displayed on maps and promotional materials. However, this name is itself a product of RCI's branding efforts. After taking control of the island previously known as Little Stirrup Cay, the company officially renamed it Coco Cay to evoke a more "exotic" and marketable image (Coco Cay Aka Little Stirrup Cay | the Bahamas, n.d.).

A similar rebranding effort can be observed in Labadee, located on a small peninsula in Haiti. The name "Labadee," another registered trademark, was modified from the original "Labadie," which comes from the surname of a French colonizer, La Badie. This change was likely made to accommodate English-speaking clientele's pronunciation preferences. This subtle alteration sanitizes the historical connotations of the name, aligning it more closely with a marketable tourist image without acknowledging its colonial origins.

In Falmouth, Jamaica, a different but equally symbolic practice is evident. The port's logo welcomes passengers with the name "Historic Falmouth." While the town of Falmouth is indeed filled with British colonial architecture, the "Historic Falmouth" Cruise Port itself is a manufactured space closer to a theme park.

As Hori (2016) effectively demonstrates, the port was constructed on an artificially extended coastline, designed to mimic an imagined colonial port sanitized off historical violence. It erases any memory of the town's significant role in the slave trade. Instead, visitors see a curated narrative of a miraculous "rebirth" following the "unfortunate" decline attributed to the abolition of the slave trade and slavery:

"As Royal Caribbean's strategic planning and selective memory would have it, the history of Falmouth is marked and legitimated by three foundational events: first, the era of sugar prosperity; second, the abolishment of slavery that led to the port's 'unfortunate' decline; and now, finally, the revival of the port's original eighteenth-century 'glory' at the advent of the 'Historic Falmouth' Cruise Port." (Hori, 2016, p. 670)

This sanitized townscape has its purpose. As explained by the founder and president of IDEA Orlando, a studio that designed Historic Falmouth Cruise Port, companies have to answer to passengers' ideas of what a Caribbean town should look like: "If this is it, and it doesn't look like the post cards, I think I'll stay on board" (Front Door of Tourism – Building Destinations, Not Just Piers, 2012).

In these examples, RCI's naming practices illustrate how corporate branding engages in subtle acts of historical erasure and takes symbolic ownership of places it occupies.

Colonial spectacle

Within these private resorts, Royal Caribbean engages in a colonial spectacle full of "exotic" performances. In Labadee, for example, RCI provides two pictorial maps that frame the space in a manner that evokes a colonial past, while erasing its inherent violence. One map presents a narrative of a glorified explorer:

"WELCOME TO LABADEE® Christopher Columbus was the first European to set foot on this spectacular peninsula of Hispaniola in 1492, when the Santa Maria ran aground off the coast on Christmas Day. Five centuries later, Royal Caribbean has transformed this secluded paradise into Labadee, a tropical retreat and playground, created exclusively for its guests."

The claim made here is more of a reflection of the marketing team's wishful thinking, rather than a historical fact, yet it creates an atmosphere in which guests are framed as modern explorers following in Columbus' footsteps. Another map highlights inner areas for tourists to visit, with names such as "Buccaneer's Bay," evoking the spirit of Caribbean piracy, "Columbus Cove," and "Town Square," which is described as the "cultural hub" of the area.

Within and around the port and "private island," a true colonial performance unfolds. Hori (2016) observed that in Falmouth, Jamaicans dressed in fictitious "tribal" clothing entertain cruise guests with their dances and music. This display, however, does not always meet the expectations of visitors. One tourist expressed dissatisfaction with the entertainment:

"Cruise port ok overall with many tourist and jewellery shops. Very clean and well kept. One major complaint was quality of live music. Sat in afternoon on balcony overlooking terminal. Live music was very loud, repetitive and not at all tuneful. Seemed to consist of very heavy drumming with some poor vocals. No one stood around listening. Could have been so much better and entertaining." (TripAdvisor, user: David S, 10.02.2024)

In Labadee, the performances appear in more "traditional" forms. One visitor described an excursion featuring local crafts:

"…took the official excursion option that spent the most time outside the compound. Boated around the genuinely beautiful bays nearby and saw some traditional fishtrap making and woodworking at a beach outside the wall." (Reddit, user: astrofreak92, 05.03.2024)

This narrative was countered by another user who revealed the staged nature of these performances:

"…it wasn't real. What I'm saying is those local vendors aren't even real local vendors. I used to go to the bars with the dudes who would sit out there and make 'traditional fish traps' it was all an act. Which kinda is the most real Haitian experience: getting scammed." (Reddit, user: FlapjacksInProtest, 05.03.2024)

This display of colonial imaginaries often extends beyond the port. Due to the fear of the "native" areas of Falmouth, some passengers opt for organized excursions. This is where a spectacle of a loved, benevolent colonizer takes its full form:

"We were very skeptical about this port, as we read it was unsafe and a bad place to visit. We decided we were on vacation and did not want to be confined to the port, because we were scared to get out and see what Jamaica had to offer. We booked the GO NATIVE tour through Royal Caribbean, and are so glad we did! It was an amazing tour! We went to a church from the 1700s, visited Montego Bay, went to a school and got to visit with the children and they sang for us. Then we went to a plantation that gave us fresh coconut water and fresh fruit grown right there on the plantation." (TripAdvisor, user: Sbrownhere, 16.06.2019)

Another tourist described a similar encounter:

"There was no hard sell by the guide so we decided to take him up on the walking tour of Falmouth. His name was 'Blackface' he had this printed in bold letters on his paddle board. A very nice young man who had a lot of local knowledge and showed us many places of interest around Falmouth. We visited two churches, local beach and fishing village and two schools. The school visits were a highlight of this tour with the headmistress inviting us in to the open courtyard to meet the children and see them learning about their Jamaican heritage." (TripAdvisor, user: BigSlimJim, 26.10.2018)

These descriptions, involving schoolchildren singing for guests, visiting plantations, and being offered fresh coconut water, could easily be written in a 19th century colonial-era journal entry. They reflect the persistence of colonial imaginaries where contemporary tourism reproduces the hierarchical dynamics of colonial encounters.

In stories from Labadee, I found a reflection of what Hori described as a "fetish of the imperial gaze" (2016, p. 679) – a fascination with the sight of "savages" and "exotic" lands from their superior position, both racially and geographically. One visitor shared their excitement about a zip-lining over the island:

"My husband and I did the zip lining excursion over the island. It was absolutely beautiful! All of the staff were wonderful and we felt safe." (Reddit, user: AmbitionLost3986, thread r/royalcaribbean, 11.02.2024)

Another highlighted their fascination with observing villagers from a distance:

"Also Nellie's Beach/Columbus Cove! It was super cool because you can kind of see activity from the village across the way." (Reddit, user: Thesehoesaint, 19.02.2024)

Other practiced an imperial gaze from the balconies of cruise ships towering over the area, sharing pictures of croissant breakfasts (Reddit, user: kahuna_splicer, 19.02.2024) and champagne drinking (Reddit, user: Flat_Razzmatazz_375, 19.02.2024) with the view of Saint-Domingue, a former French colony, beneath them.

To some, these artificial, exclusive places steeped in colonial narratives can even become spiritual homes. Following in the footsteps of figures like Cecil Rhodes or Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, they find their resting place in the paradise colony. One visitor recounted:

"My grandpa loved Labadee. So much. When he passed, we, as a family, boarded a cruise he had previously booked for us all to go on together. We brought his ashes with us, and the amazing crew aboard our ship tendered us to a quiet, isolated bay where my dad and I poured the ashes and had a reflective moment." (Reddit, user: Technical_Paper_9310, 19.02.2024)

Places of exclusion and militarization of boundaries

In one of its marketing campaigns called "Nation of Why Not," Royal Caribbean, in a promotional video, proclaimed "Welcome… to the Birth of a Nation." As Hori (2016) pointed out, this phrase bears a troubling reference to D. W. Griffith's infamous film "Birth of a Nation". This unfortunate choice of words underlines, even if unintentionally, company's problem with colonial narrative.

This perception of separateness, or even independency appears prevalent among visitors and online commentators. Many see Royal Caribbean's private resorts as resembling nation states. One user wrote:

"Labadee is what I refer to as a 'tourist cage.' (...) You're visiting Royalcaribbeanistan, not Haiti." (Reddit, user: numtini, 30.09.2024)

Another user sarcastically referred to it as:

"The Democratic People's Republic of the Seas." (Reddit, user: gm0ney2000, 30.09.2024)

Some visitors conveyed similar notion unintentionally, showing surprise upon discovering the peninsula was not actually a separate island:

"I went on a cruise with my family in 2004 and we were supposed to go here. They did indeed call it [Labadee peninsula] *a private island; I didn't know until right now that it's not."* (Reddit, user: scothc, 05.03.2024)

Others emphasized the separation as equivalent to a border:

"Kayaked over to the other beach and realized we'd illegally entered Haiti and kayaked back." (Reddit, user: Funmachine, 05.03.2024)

The idea of private resorts as independent states became evident in an argument comparing the gated resort of Labadee to the neighboring Dominican Republic. One user remarked:

"Haiti and DR are physically on the same island. The chaos and violence have managed to stay on one side of that imaginary line on a map. Why can't the same be true of the isolated resort? BTW the most common substitute port for Labadee is in the DR! You're swapping one imaginary dividing line for another." (Reddit, user: Mind_man, 30.09.2024)

This leads to the topic of constructing spaces. Similarly to Fanon's concept of colonial towns, Royal Caribbean's private itineraries are divided into two exclusionary spaces: a safe, clean, well-fed town full of foreigners, and an unknown, dangerous and destitute "native town." Between them are the barriers reminiscent of Fanon's "barracks and police stations."

Passengers portray the exclusive resorts as safe and comfortable. These resorts are described as islands of civilization surrounded by backward areas:

"Logistically, it has everything a tourist would want. It's safe, it's clean, ADA accessible, has running water, toilets, electricity, the food is safe to eat, it's family and elderly friendly." (Reddit, user: WeOwnThe_Night, 30.09.2024)

On the other hand, across the wall, lays a dangerous land filled with suspicious and threatening people:

"Don't leave the port area unless you're on an excursion. Trust me it's not enjoyable. Constant people aggressively selling/panhandling. It's a very have/have-not feeling there and is honestly a very depressing experience." (Reddit, User account deleted, 01.11.2022)

The theme of a "depressing experience" recurred regularly. Many described the sight of poverty and crumbling homes as inconvenient and uncomfortable to witness:

"Beautiful port, well maintained, handmade crafts along local cuisine options. Once you leave the compound and go into the town, it becomes unpleasant rather quickly. The visit to the historic square was depressing and a waste of time. Trash and debris everywhere." (TripAdvisor, user: jm o, 16.07.2022)

Another user recounted a conversation that revealed a telling perspective:

"I was on my first (and last) cruise in 2007 and a couple was describing Labadee to me, right down to people begging at the fence. I asked them if that bothered them and they replied that it did, because they didn't pay all that money to look at poverty. That wasn't the point of my question, but that answer told me a lot." (Reddit, user: The_I_in_IT, 05.03.2024)

The new plantation

Here we come to the pivotal point of analysis. As previously mentioned, the tourist industry in the Caribbean is sometimes described as a "new plantocracy" (Sealy, 2018, p. 81), signifying the shift of Caribbean nations carrying the legacy of plantation economies toward a new monoculture of tourism. Just like the old plantocracy, the new one transcends the economic sphere and spills over into political and social arenas.

By analyzing RCI's "colonial towns"—their ships and private itineraries—it becomes evident that these spaces function as a new type of plantation. This plantation, however, differs from historical ones. An unchanged and crucial element remains the precarious, "imported" labor. However, the new plantation presents a significant innovation: treating its guests as both beneficiaries and "laborers."

It is not difficult to find instances of racialized language directed at RCI's customers. As prices decreased, the business model shifted toward attracting a mass clientele, less wealthy, "un-cultured", and so-called "people of Walmart." The terminology reflects a "racialized" view of working-class. Yet, there is a more structural aspect to this change. As the prices of tickets declined, the profit-making model became increasingly dependent on additional services that the company could charge for.

This shift is where what I call the "colonialism-capitalism-mobility nexus" first unveils itself. Firstly, the cruise ship becomes a space for the company to extract profit from its passengers. A cruise ship is a tightly controlled environment—stranded in the middle of the sea, with no alternative providers of food, drinks, entertainment, or means of contact with the outside world.

Just as plantation economies were highly profitable through the cultivation of "cash crops," passengers become both beneficiaries and laborers—their attention and physical needs serving as the cash crop from which the cruise line profits. One passenger briefly summarized this dynamic:

"I was blown away initially by how low some of these cruise prices are - now I've realized that they make all their money from the extra fees, the food and drink deals, the specialty restaurants, the tips, the wifi use, and the excursions" (Reddit, user: Frogma69, 02.02.2024).

The problem arises, however, as soon as the cruise ship docks at the port. When passengers disembark to explore independently, the cruise line loses control over them and potential profits. This dynamic is likely one of the reasons the cruise industry is the most successful in the Caribbean. While the Mediterranean region offers similarly beautiful scenery, sun, and crystal-clear water, the Caribbean stands out due to the availability of private, exclusive itineraries.

Royal Caribbean, like most cruise lines operating in the Caribbean region, seeks to maintain control over passengers even when they disembark. Fear and the desire for safety become crucial tools in this control mechanism. One passenger shared their experience:

"We had several people warning us about the area of Falmouth in terms of safety (including the staff on our cruise ship). Since we had two small children, we decided not to risk it. However, we didn't want the trip to pass without at least putting our feet on Jamaican soil" (TripAdvisor, user: Kenny S, 21.01.2024).

Leaving the resort premises is often framed as inconvenient, unpleasant, depressing, or even dangerous. Many passengers, warned by online reviews or the ship's crew, choose to stay in the fully controlled and monopolized area managed by RCI. Local vendors seeking to sell their products within the resort must pay rent—another source of profit for RCI—and are entirely dependent on the cruise line's goodwill.

There are, of course, passengers who do not want to remain confined to a commercialized port area. These individuals are presented with a "stick and carrot" approach. As seen in multiple reviews, passengers who wish to explore but fear the locals often opt for excursions booked through Royal Caribbean, as the company maintains complete control over everything that is offered on their premises.

Royal Caribbean's profits rely on the system of "colonial towns| and the restrictions on mobility it entails. This system reinforces the division of space into two mutually exclusionary spheres: the sanitized and secure area for foreigners and the impoverished and feared "native" town beyond its borders. The militarized boundary between these two spaces serves to maintain this segregation. Such a structure can only thrive in poverty-stricken, desperate nations inhabited by racialized peoples whom passengers can fear.

Labor

"Imported" and local labor

As established, the workforce on Royal Caribbean cruise ships is divided into three primary groups: officers, managers and entertainers, and crew members. This structure is governed by a strict hierarchy, rooted in an unofficial racial/class system. The allocation of roles and responsibilities is influenced by this hierarchy, which mirrors broader patterns of global labor division.

According to data provided by Royal Caribbean in its annual report to the American Stock Exchange Commission, 31% of the shipboard workforce comes from the Philippines, 18% from Indonesia, and 14% from India (Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd., February 21, 2024). This means that 63% of the entire workforce originates from Asia. The reliance on Asian labor is deeply rooted in the colonial legacy, as the Caribbean region relied on exploitable "imported" Asian workers after the abolition of black slavery.

This dynamic does not come as a surprise to those familiar with the cruise industry. Several commentators have pointed out the persistence of exploitative labor practices:

"I'm sure the workers on the ship are paid somewhat close to minimum wage." (ExMormonite, 02.02.2024)

"I wonder why the crew is always from the Philippines or Indonesia.. I just can't imagine why that would be hmmm I wonder .." (Reddit, user: 901bass, 02.02.2024)

"I'm Asian (Filipino). This is why they ALWAYS ALWAYS hire from third world countries. You will BARELY see an American working onboard Royal Caribbean." (Reddit, user: Ok_Chemistry_7289, in r/maritime, 02.07.2024)

Moreover, despite being flagged under Caribbean nations such as the Bahamas, cruise ships rarely employ workers from these regions:

"Funny thing is Royal Caribbean is usually Caribbean country flagged (mostly Bahamas) and there aren't a lot of Caribbeans working onboard." (Reddit, user: Ok_Chemistry_7289, in r/maritime, 02.07.2024)

RCI openly acknowledges and even takes pride in ethnic/geographical composition of its workforce. In its corporate documents, the company declares: "As a global operation, we take great pride in the broad diversity of our workforce and the value it brings to our company" (Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd., February 21, 2024). The emphasis on diversity echoes historical narratives of European empires, which often highlighted the "imperial diversity" of their subjects. Similar remnants of this imperial mentality can still be observed in British narratives surrounding the Commonwealth.

The cruise industry perpetuates an unofficial racialized employment system where geographical and ethnic background largely determines job opportunities. Commentators have pointed out that access to high-ranking positions is often restricted to individuals who meet specific racial and citizenship criteria:

"For high-ranking positions 3 to 5 stripes, your first and top requirement is you need to be white. If you are a POC, you need to be a citizen or have a dual citizenship from any European country or the US with extensive job experience. Of course, they don't say it out loud like this…" (Reddit, user: Ok_Chemistry_7289, 03.07.2024)

Furthermore, the barriers faced by Asian workers highlight the persistence of racial hierarchies:

"If you are Asian, you have to have a dual citizenship with the US or any European country with an extensive job background on the position you want. Then, maybe MAYBE, they consider you for a high-ranking position." (Ok_Chemistry_7289, published 03.07.2024)

This highlights the continuation of colonial labor practices within the cruise industry. Despite the rhetoric of diversity, the racialized and hierarchical employment structure remains deeply entrenched in colonial practice. The reliance on "imported" labor from Asia and the barriers faced by workers reflect enduring patterns of colonial exploitation.

Working and living conditions

Looking for stories of cruise workers in my "colonial archive" proved difficult. What is often served in social media apps and traditional media can be misleading. What I mostly encountered were glorified, little lives of western, mostly white social media creators speaking with an American accent. Similarly, some news outlets like to engage in promoting it as a reliable and interesting way to travel the world "for free." To give an example, Business Insider published an article titled "I work on a cruise ship after leaving my 9-to-5. Now I get to travel and do things like manage the slides and the surf machine and bartend" (Hull, 2023, July 19). The white American interviewee provided a completely different perspective than realities of life as a below-deck crew member. For her "[w]orking on a cruise has been a rewarding experience" as she "had the chance to travel the world and meet some incredible people."

Anything else than a glorified picture of traveling the world for free is challenging to find. As an inspector of the International Transport Workers' Federation, explained, "this is a hidden world" (Wazir & Mathiason, 2017, December 2). The picture painted by western social media creators seems, however, far from reality to the biggest group of shipboard staff, "imported" laborers working predominantly in the lowest-paid jobs below deck. Access to their stories is limited for one more reason: any form of criticism and "insubordination" can result in being blacklisted and unemployable by cruise operators in the future. The data I found, however, show a disturbing picture.

As soon as the new crew employee boards the ship, he/she might be faced with a striking example of their mobility being limited for the time of the contract: "Within the first week of boarding the ship, I knew that the job would be a nightmare. (…) Aboard the company confiscated my passport and visa," a former employee of RCI, a young Mexican woman, wrote to the Washington Post (Marquez, 2022, January 25). The nightmare she refers to was shared by others, as shifts on RCI cruise ships are long and breaks are scarce:

"Anywhere between 10 to 13 hours a day cut in half. You get a break in the middle usually 2 to 4 hours depending on what station/restaurant you get assigned to." (Reddit, user: Ok_Chemistry_7289, published 03.07.2024).

This claim aligns with a story about the cruise industry presented by the Guardian (Wazir & Mathiason, 2017, December 2) with a telling title, "Cruise liner crews slave below decks":

"The reality is excessive hours, fatigue and low wages. Many ships use agencies that charge workers to get them work. Many cruise ships keep a portion of a worker's wages to ensure they don't abscond." (...) "Instead of interacting with their wealthy guests, many cruise ship workers suffer sweatshop working practices, poor living conditions, and intimidation from their superiors if they complain."

Wages

Royal Caribbean proudly claims to have a "competitive compensation structure" for its "human capital" (ROYAL CARIBBEAN CRUISES LTD., February 21, 2024). While this may as well be a typical corporate language, it gains a different meaning within the context analyzed in this paper. Although the information about wages is not disclosed and openly available, scattered information found for my research allows for general outlook of disparities in compensation between "imported" labor and higher-paid Western workers.

Reports from Business Insider suggest that salaries in the cruise industry can be as low as $600 per month for certain positions (Towey, 2023, April 28). In contrast, entertainers hired in the United States can earn substantially more for far less work. For instance:

"Jack explained that musicians tend to earn $4,000 (£3,129) a month while working for one and a half hours a day, six days a week. So, in total, he said he does 'just nine hours 'work' a week,' which equates to approximately just 36 hours a month. 'In other words, that's $111.11 an hour!'" (Battison, 2024, March 12).

This difference reveals the uneven wage distribution embedded in Royal Caribbean's labor practices.

Closer to the lower end of this pay range is the salary of a kitchen assistant employed by Royal Caribbean, as revealed in a payslip which I managed to obtain for my colonial archive. The document shows a guaranteed salary of $1,449 per month (Reddit, user: cyberchief, 30.10.2024).

The same payslip sheds light on another tactic used by the company to reduce its labor costs. Despite the relatively low wages paid to workers, Royal Caribbean employs a simple mechanism involving "automatic gratuities" — a form of tip automatically charged on each ticket for each day of the cruise. This system transfers part of the company's labor costs to passengers disguised as employee-appreciation fee. As one user explained to their audience:

"By relying on guest-paid gratuities to fund employee wages, RCI effectively shifts its labor costs to passengers - allowing them to maintain competitive fares at the expense of 'hidden' fees through these gratuities" (Reddit, user: cyberchief, 30.10.2024).

This practice reveals corporation's strategy designed to minimize operational costs, while presenting the illusion of fair employment practices.

The civilizing mission

Humanitarian aid

After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Royal Caribbean faced criticism for continuing to operate its Labadee resort while the country was collapsing into chaos (Staff, 2015). In response, RCI issued a press release titled "ROYAL CARIBBEAN CRUISES PROVIDES HUMANITARIAN RELIEF TO HAITI AFTER EARTHQUAKE" (2010, January 15). The statement started by underlining the company's contribution to development – "Royal Caribbean Cruises, one of Haiti's largest foreign investors for almost 30 years…"– and pledged one million dollars in relief funds. The true point of that press release, however, was to defend the continued operation of Labadee resort: "In addition to our financial contribution, Royal Caribbean will continue to provide economic support through the continuous business we bring to Labadee."

Continued and undisturbed operations of a guarded vacation resort was now a matter of humanitarianism. The business was a crucial part of the mission itself. As one person recalls:

"Around April, 2010, I was on my first cruise through the Caribbean, and it was Royal Caribbean. Our first stop was in Haiti. (...) As we got off the ship at the private Royal Caribbean port, what did I see? Tons upon tons of supplies being offloaded onto the pier. Helping those in need isn't a new thing for Royal Caribbean" (Reddit, user: Flurger, 28.09.2017).

Several months later, in October 2010, RCI announced plans to open L'Ecole Nouvelle Royal Caribbean, a school for children in Labadee. Years later, the company will remind the world of its humanitarian mission in a press release titled "L'Ecole Nouvelle Royal Caribbean Sits as a Beacon of Hope" (Royal Caribbean Group, 2024, September 13):

"Situated on a hill surrounded by lush tropical trees (...) the school serves as a testament to Royal Caribbean Group's deep commitment to Haiti. (...) We hope these children will develop into leaders who will guide Haiti's recovery in the future"

We can see how the press team draws in our minds an image of 'exotic' educational facility, inside an untamed tropical forest. The company that built it has a goal of „inspiring" members of „communities of Labadee" (RCI's trademarked name) to reach out for opportunities, and assures the public of their mission to educate future leaders of Haiti.

In 2011, however, John Weis, associate vice president of Royal Caribbean, presented a slightly different vision of a future awaiting L'Ecole Nouvelle Royal Caribbean's graduates:

"The vision is that we'll connect the education and the jobs together. We'll have a steady supply of well-educated people, and they'll be prepared to work on board the ship." (SARAH MASLIN NIR, May 4, 2011)

This statement exposes the alignment of RCI's humanitarian actions with its business interests, framing the education as a tool for ensuring a labor supply for future needs of the company.

Development effort

A big part of a civilizing mission narrative was empires' alleged commitment to development of its overseas territories. Similarly, Royal Caribbean, alongside its humanitarian efforts, claims that its operations significantly contribute to the economies of Caribbean nations.

Although none of these countries has the technological or financial capabilities to construct the ships for the company's fleet—these are built in European shipyards located in France, Italy, and Finland (Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd., February 21, 2024)—Royal Caribbean claims that its private cruise itineraries stimulate regional development by improving infrastructure and bringing tourists to the area. Let us analyze an example of the Historic Falmouth cruise port in Jamaica, which was built on an artificially extended coastline. Projects like this are expected to boost local economies and provide employment opportunities, particularly during the construction phase — a promise Royal Caribbean made (Hori, 2016).

In practice, however, the port's construction was neither locally led nor carried out. The design came from the American firm IDEA Orlando (Historic Port of Falmouth, Jamaica — IDEA, n.d.), the project was financed by a loan from the Danish export promotion bank, and

construction was carried out by the Danish company Pihl & Son (Hori, 2016), with underwater work handled by the Dutch firm Boskalis ("Falmouth Cruise Ship Terminal Project…", n.d.).

As we also established, due to concerns for their safety, cruise passengers rarely leave the RCI controlled resorts. Given that cruise passengers typically tend to spend around 55% less than long-stay tourists, and when they do it mostly stays in foreigners-owned duty-free shops (Sealy, 2018), we should be skeptical about the claimed economic gains provided by cruise passengers' presence.

It can be said that the result is a port built by foreigners and for foreigners. It exists solely to maintain Royal Caribbean's business operations and increase its profits. This echoes the narrative of colonial powers about their deep commitment to development of colonies, while primarily constructing infrastructure that reinforced their own presence and control.

Constructing identities

The look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession—all manner of possession: to sit at the settler's table, to sleep in the settler's bed, with his wife if possible. The colonized man is an envious man. And this the settler knows very well; when their glances meet he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, "They want to take our place." It is true, for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place.

Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth

Besides its role as an "ideological justification for (…) political-economic domination" (Gill, 2022, p.315), the civilizing mission serves to "construct identities, i.e., it exerts not only representing but also subjectivising power" (Ziai, 2015, p.27). On one hand, it modeled "the colonized as not-quite-human but redeemable through the 'gift' of racial uplifting" (Lopez, 2015, p. 2243). On the other, it produced "a 'samaritan' identity" (Ziai, 2015, p.31) of a colonizer.

A reflection of this construct is easily observable in the accounts of Royal Caribbean cruise ship passengers. The way they describe local populations often mirrors colonial images of "barbarians." These "uncivilized" others living on the other side of the wall are portrayed as aggressive and dangerous. Passengers describe being harassed and frightened:

"They would not leave us alone!"; "the vendors were unbearable"; "tried to sell you drinks, which by the way looked super sketchy. I would never trust drinks from there"; "we couldn't handle it anymore and felt unsafe"; "The woman at the bar screamed at the top of her lungs"; "he came out running, absolutely enrage" (Reddit, user: AmbitionLost3986 in thread r/royalcaribbean, 11.02.2024)

"I'm talking aggressive and shoving things in our hands to force us to buy them to the point that we were scared." (TripAdvisor, user: Abbie J, 05.11.2024)

"Why is any ship visiting Haiti !!!!. horrible - dirty - unsafe - the locals are pushy and all criminals! This is not a country - it's a gang heaven. Really feared for our lives, Worse than Jamaica if you could imagine!" (TripAdvisor, user: Frank Williams, 24.03.2024)

In this world, even seemingly friendly interactions are depicted as hostile:

"Sadly, we were unable to venture (couple) outside port area very far, CONSTANTLY BEING HARRASSED by AGGRESSIVE LOCALS, asking to be your best friend and show you around etc." (TripAdvisor, user: Victor S, 18.04.2023)

The "natives" are presented as degenerated and having a corrupting influence on the visitors:

"My husband was almost pushed down by someone right near the port....obviously high." (Reddit, user: Levitb2, 01.11.2022)

"Only port I've ever been offered sex from a random person in the street. Oh and drugs, lots of offers to buy drugs." (Reddit, user: KneeDrop1T, 01.11.2022)

They are both sexualized as well as sexually dangerous:

"...the male dancers had disturbingly tight pants on which hid nothing. I was impressed, but also weirded out a bit." (Reddit, user: rjross0623, 17.06.2024)

"Hope it doesn't sound sexist but I wouldn't venture out alone at all if I was female . Male ... maybe but you still will be hassled like crazy and its insane." (Reddit, user: trytobuffitout, 01.11.2022)

„I visited Labadee three years ago. A man in the marketplace tried to lure my 16-yr old daughter to somewhere more secluded." (Reddit, user: gomigoes, 05.03.2024)

At times, locals are completely dehumanized, likened to insects or prehistoric monsters locked in the reservation:

"Im talking about the swarms of people. Being surrounded by ten vendors at once is alarming." (Reddit, user: CoverCommercial3576, 01.11.2022)

"Labadee is just like Jurassic Park --- great as long as the electric fences are working. (This was a joke told by a comedian on a RCL ship, before anyone calls me a racist.)" (Reddit, user: therin_88, 19.02.2024*)*

These descriptions reveal the persistence—or reproduction—of colonial identities in modern contexts, in which people living in the Caribbean "colonies" are seen through the lenses of danger and depravity, as well as exoticism and eroticism.

Moreover, the ideology of a civilizing mission has long relied on the core assumption that "uncivilized" are unable to effectively govern their own affairs. This idea, rooted in 19th-century racial and colonial thought, can also be spotted today. While gathering material to the colonial archive, I came across suggestions that Haitians are culturally predisposed to unstable forms of government. When engaging in discussion about the safety of passengers disembarking in Labadee, one person presented particularly telling opinion:

"I think Haiti has a culture where people, in general, prefer a failed state. As long as the government is weak and ineffective, Haitians can do whatever they want without red tape and government interference." (Reddit, user: beevherpenetrator, 05.03.2024)

Such views shift the blame for Haiti's dire situation entirely onto Haitian people. Any responsibility of the colonizer is erased. The "spoiled mentality" is seen as the root cause of problems faced by the country:

"Which showcases one of the tragedies of Haiti. It should be a tropical paradise teeming with tourists. But overpopulation, deforestation, and of course crime, ended that dream." (Reddit, user: GoldenEagle828677, 05.03.2024)

Out of this narrative emerges the "samaritan" identity of a benevolent colonizer. Many tourists expressed pity for the locals, framing them as helpless and in need of charity:

"The town is really filthy and stinks. I feel sorry for the local people..." (TripAdvisor, user: margekanow, 14.08.2019)

"What's sad is sometimes tourists from the ships will walk up to the fence and throw food like bananas, and watch the locals scramble for it." (Reddit, user: bundymania, 05.03.2024)

"...[we] *felt bad about the contrast between our luxury and the poverty on the island. Numerous staff members on the island told us that working for RC has given them opportunities they never would have had otherwise."* (Reddit, user: journmajor, 30.09.2024)

Many tourists believe it is the responsibility of Royal Caribbean to teach locals proper behavior. One person even expressed his hope that the company would take action to correct local vendors:

"I can't believe they are allowed to behave like this and hope RC steps in at some point." (TripAdvisor, user: Guide28731901898, 19.11.2024)

This narrative proves the persistence of colonial mentality and its role in organizing encounters of "civilized" and "uncivilized." These identities, however, are not always stable. One black passenger described his unsettling experience at Labadee:

"Went there in 2011, and it bothered me so much I just went back to the ship. Being a black kid and seeing other children my age who looked like me on the other side of the fence was a slap in the face." (Reddit, user: YesThisIsVictor, 05.03.2024)

The sight of people who looked like him—impoverished and excluded on the other side of the fence—left him feeling deeply humiliated. His experience disrupts the comfortable binary and shows the significance of a racial identities.

Back to the colonies

The narrative presented here paints a picture of mostly cultured, reasonable, humane, compassionate, and civilized tourists, who were brought to the Caribbean by the self-proclaimed agent of humanitarianism and development. In contrast locals are portrayed as violent, dangerous, desperate, and dehumanized local – people who must be separated and

controlled. This leads some to wonder why Royal Caribbean would not take a full possession of a colony in their amusement empire:

„Is there no reason Royal Caribbean, or a consortium of cruise companies, couldn't just buy up the rest of the country and make it like a full vacation destination? I mean I get the gangs and the crumbling infrastructure but I feel like if anywhere could be an isolated experiment in government by corporation, Haiti is a perfect location." (Reddit, user: GrandmaPoses, 05.03.2024)

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to demonstrate how the cruise industry, based on the case of Royal Caribbean, operationalizes colonial logic and practices as a model for profit-making, a to show the role of the human mobility and immobility in that model. This purpose formulated in two research questions:

To what extent can Royal Caribbean cruise lines business be conceptualized as colonialism, i.e., operating within the framework of a colonial model of exploitation? And what role does the movement (or lack thereof) of people—human mobility and immobility—play within this system?

To answer them I decided to first conceptualize colonialism as a persistent logic and practice of exploitation, and analyze different elements constituting of, what Gloria Wekker (2016) called, a „colonial content". By reinterpreting Wekker's concept of cultural archive I incorporated into this „common reservoir of meaning" publicly available data produced by the witnesses of colonial realities of a cruise industry. Then I analyze the elements of this colonial archive using the analytical tools provided by Stuart Hall's (1996) concept of representation and Carlo Ginzburg's (1992) evidential paradigms.

Within this framework I was able to show the persistence operationalization of colonial logic and practice on all levels of Royal Caribbean business operations. Firstly, RCI employs colonial narratives of the past as a part of enticing form of entertainment. The company exploits the „exotic" images of colonial past by referring to tropes such as the „rebirth" of a „Historic Falmouth", following in Columbus' footsteps in Labadee, summoning the spirits of piracy in

the „Buccaneer's Bay", or hosting its passengers in „Utopia Station" train-restaurant rolling through the American frontier.

Secondly, it relies on colonial imaginaries and identities. Due to the persistence of colonial binary of „us-civilized" vs „others-uncivilized", the fear of the „native" and construction of mutually exclusionary areas of a „colonial town", Royal Caribbean can control and economically exploit each group taking part in the cruise industry – passengers, laborers, and Caribbean local populations.

Thirdly, it engages in a „civilizing mission" narrative. Whenever needed to legitimize and solidify their presence and economic activity in the region, Royal Caribbean invokes narratives and practices from the humanitarian and developmental textbooks. At the same time, RCI seems to be the main beneficiary of its mission.

Lastly, the analysis explained the role of mobility and immobility in this model. By taking advantage of a simplified, unobstructed mobility of western passengers, limited mobility and scarce economic prospects of its Asian workers, and criminalized mobility and militarized borders of Caribbean nations, RCI business model is deeply reliant on the existing system of mobility and the unequal global distribution of wealth.

While the theoretical framework and methodological approach helped to counter the major issues posed by the problem analysis, the study encountered certain limitations. Although the colonial archive collected for this study consisted of multiple sources, types of media and perspectives, a big part of the analysis had to rely on the anonymous internet data. It must be noted, however, that even these, in Foucauldian terms, reflect and shape the discourse. At the same time, the analytical tool of evidential paradigm provided "the ability to construct from apparently insignificant […] data a complex reality that could not be experienced directly" (Ginzburg, 1992, p. 103) and "to track the production and consumption of those 'facts' themselves" and thus "the social and political conditions that produced" them (Stoler, 2002, p. 91).

The work of interpretation is however never fully finished. As Hall claimed: "unfixing [of] meaning […] opens representation to the constant 'play' or slippage of meaning, to the constant production of new meaning, new interpretations" (1997, p. 32), Therefore a constantly changing, produced and reproduced colonial archive, combined with the „unfixing of meaning" of its elements, leaves wide open doors to reinterpretations and reshaping of narratives.

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