

*Tourism, Magic and Modernity: Cultivating the Human Garden.* By David Picard. New York: Berghahn Books. 2011. xvi+192 pp. US\$70/£42 cloth. ISBN: 9780857452016.

Can we plausibly conceive of Réunion as a large garden? This is the question posed to the author of this entertaining and yet deeply profound book (p. 134), and his answer is a resounding ‘yes’.

David Picard first visits the island of Réunion – an overseas department of France, located in the Indian Ocean but an integral part of the European Union – to undertake fieldwork for his PhD in anthropology (obtained in 2002). He subsequently revisits his site, deploying patient participant observation and social immersion in the life of local actors, complemented by interviews, historical and other archival research. He builds a series of cameo shots to argue that, for all its secular and rational bent, modernity cultivates an awe and enchantment for the special and the mystique; these romantic and ‘magical’ attributes are blatantly strutted in tourism, and even more particularly so in exotic tropical island ‘paradises’.

Picard talks in detail about the German tourists he had been guiding for some two years; the guide-turned-‘creole hero’ Orom and the museumification of his hometown of Salazie; the youths employed to garden a ‘tourist site’ along the Saint-Gilles river; and the acrimonious politics of coral reef conservation programs. These discrete, flowing narratives form the backdrop to keenly insightful observations on the representation of this lush volcanic island as heritage garden, and of its ‘natives’ caught in a bind: suffering high levels of unemployment and inferior housing conditions, they at once seek the affirmation of being as French as their metropolitan counterparts; yet perform as quaint and rustic folk to the tourist gaze. Hence, the concept of ‘the human garden’.

Réunion has indeed been reformulated in such a way as to elicit different tropes and other desired features – including the aesthetics and ontologies of a fabled allegorical Eden – which then are projected onto its overall ethnoscape, and are expected to be assiduously cultivated as the mechanics of being and belonging – a ‘cultural technology’ (p. 139) – in this ruthlessly interconnected world, where tourism is implicated in the island’s economic survival. In this sense, Réunion is yet another island laboratory, a microcosm for the broad engineering crusade that humankind has launched in the modern period. Here, armed with science, everything – including the authentic past manifestations of nature and culture – can be constructed, cultivated and maintained, providing us (and visitors) with supremely raw, pure and pleasant (and therefore simply magical) experiences, whether of wilderness or of primitive communities. The very (European) idea of landscape is a form of visual gardening that imposes forms and frames of/on virtuous ideascapes.

Islands speak languidly to the invention of bucolic, desirable places, captured initially in paintings that circulated among urban European elites, and now exported worldwide and enshrined in toto, and in an over-representative fashion, from local nature parks to UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Peter Sloterdijk affirms that islands have shifted from the register of the found (objects of discovery) to that of the made (objects of praxis). Even back in 1516, Thomas More made sure that his original Utopia would be deliberately engineered as a material island from the peninsula that spawned it.

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