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# “Everyone Enjoys a Siesta After Lunch in the West Indies”: Fictions of Labour and Languor

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Article abstract

This paper explores historical depictions of tourism in the West Indies, focusing on Frieda Cassin’s *With Silent Tread*, published in the 1890s and considered the first Antiguan novel. In both form and content, it exemplifies the commodification of the Caribbean as reprieve from the increasingly 24/7 demands of industrialized England, while attempting to elide the strenuous post-emancipation working conditions, chronic illness, and environmental exhaustion. The recurrent fictionalized image of the sleeping Black figure normalizes the rest in which the tourist temporarily indulges before returning, revived, to their imagined natural state of productivity—in 1890, and today. At the same time, rest becomes a potential act of resistance: rupturing the picturesque paradise.

# “Everyone Enjoys a Siesta After Lunch in the West Indies”: Fictions of Labour and Languor

NICOLE DUFOE

In Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place* (1988), a book-length essay describing tourism and Antigua—where, as Heidi Macpherson writes, “the luxury of white ennui” is cast as “responsible for destroying paradise”<sup>1</sup>—Kincaid confronts the reader as visitor, who gazes through the frame of a resort room window: “you see yourself lying on the beach,” she prompts, engulfed in a “beauty” of which “you have never seen anything like.”<sup>2</sup> She continues to paint a fantastical picture of rest and relaxation, as “sometimes the beauty of it seems as if it were stage sets for a play,” and “no real day could be that sort of sunny and bright, making everything seem transparent and shallow.”<sup>3</sup> What this image obscures, of course, is the reality of local life: “what it might be like to live day in and day out” in a place so “deliciously hot and dry” and to work beneath the heat of a sun that “always shines.”<sup>4</sup> Acknowledging the centuries-long history—and ongoing experience—of exploited labour under such unforgiving conditions would, after all, risk the sort of “unease” that could “ruin your holiday.”<sup>5</sup>

A century earlier, another Caribbean writer describes the tourist’s fantasy of tropical ease. In *Froudacity*, John Jacob Thomas’s 1889 rebuttal of James Anthony Froude’s *The English in the West Indies*, the Trinidadian writer, educator, and linguist also highlights what becomes a recurring contradiction in depictions of Caribbean peoples, climate, and culture. Thomas quotes a moment where a newly-arrived Froude observes the bustling Barbadian harbour from the cool comfort of his shaded hotel balcony. “I sat for two hours watching the people,” Froude relays, noting the

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1. Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, *Transatlantic Women’s Literature*, Edinburgh University Press, 2008, p. 35.

2. Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000, p. 13.

3. Kincaid, 2000, p. 77.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

"good humour and satisfaction"<sup>6</sup> he reads on the faces below. As he idles away the afternoon (aided by rum-filled "cocktail"), he notes how the workers "driving carts, wheeling barrows, or selling flying fish" appear "active enough."<sup>7</sup>

"Active enough." Thomas singles out the ambiguous modifier. "Some critic might [...] be tempted to ask—'But what is the meaning of that little word 'enough' occurring therein?'"<sup>8</sup> The answer, he muses, could be that "Mr. Froude, being fair-minded and loyal to truth" wants to avoid an "entirely ungrudging testimony"<sup>9</sup> of the island's Black residents. This of course is sarcasm. Rather, the "enough" plays into what Thomas calls the persistent fiction of Froude and his fellow Victorian "liberal-souled gentry"<sup>10</sup> of "the incurable idleness, of the Negro," which "was, both immediately before their emancipation [...] and for long years after that event, the cuckoo cry of their white detractor."<sup>11</sup> For Froude, "it was laziness, pure and simple, which hindered the Negro from exhausting himself under a tropical sun, toiling at starvation wages to ensure for his quondam master the means of being an idler himself, with the additional luxury of rolling in easily come-by wealth."<sup>12</sup> The men Froude watches are "active enough" to produce the goods streaming out of these still-British islands, but not so much that Froude cannot read their labour—and very existence—through a patina of leisurely ease. As such, his passive voyeurism and daily siestas become naturalized, as work dissolves into the oneiric "haze of a hot summer morning"<sup>13</sup> and under the glare of a Caribbean sun.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, as tourism supplemented and eventually usurped plantation-based economies, a fantasy of rest and relaxation was grafted onto what continued for many to be sites of excruciating labour, rampant illness, and environmental destruction. These two opposing realities—comfort and peril—are embedded in writing from and about the Caribbean from the Victorians to the present, whether Froude's imperial hubris or Thomas and Kincaid's ironic critiques.

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6. James Anthony Froude, *The English in the West Indies or the Bow of Ulysses*, Spottiswoode and Co., 1888, p. 43.

7. Kincaid, 2000, p. 44.

8. John Jacob Thomas, *Froudacity: West Indian Fables by James Anthony Froude*, Gebbie and Company, 1890, p. 43.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

12. *Ibid.* p. 44.

13. Froude, 1888, p. 37.

Literary descriptions of a static, idyllic, Caribbean have long evoked the ekphrastic by employing the language of framing and sight and the aesthetics of the picturesque: an artistic technique which, as Evelyn O'Callaghan describes, refashions "the work of ploughing, seeding, reaping [...] into naturalized (hence invisible) aspects of a charming landscape."<sup>14</sup> The refusal to depict the living reality of Caribbean peoples also recalls W.J.T. Mitchell's definition of ekphrasis as a tool of "political, disciplinary, or cultural domination." In attempting to capture the visual in prose, the "'self' is understood to be an active, speaking, seeing subject, while the 'other' is projected as a (usually) silent object."<sup>15</sup> As I will explore in my readings below—and what Kincaid and Thomas suggest through the tourist's gaze—the sleeping or idle (and by extension silent) Caribbean figure ultimately threatens to overtake the active viewer. "Beauty," writes Mitchell, "the very thing which aestheticians [...] thought could be viewed from a safe position of superior strength, turns out to be itself the dangerous force." Like Shelley's famous description of Leonardo's Medusa, a figure who "reverses the power of the ekphrastic gaze," it becomes "less the horror than the grace" that "paralyzes" the touristic observer.<sup>16</sup>

With this theoretical lineage in mind, which I will augment through a short history of the fantasy and fear of tropical rest and the biopolitical motivations behind descriptions of Caribbean life as merely "active enough," I turn briefly to Victorian travel writers such as Froude, Charles Kingsley, and Anthony Trollope. This piece will focus, however, on a close reading of Frieda Cassin's *With Silent Tread*, a novel where the locals "seem to use everything ... for sleeping on or in."<sup>17</sup> Published in the 1890s and considered—when considered at all—the first Antiguan novel, the island setting is commodified as a "picturesque"<sup>18</sup> place of rest, while at the same time haunted by the racialized lassitude of dangerous dormancy and degenerative disease.

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14. Evelyn O'Callaghan, "Caribbean Picturesque from William Beckford to Contemporary Tourism," Evelyn O'Callaghan and Tim Watson (eds.), *Caribbean Literature in Transition, 1800–1920*, vol. 1, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. 67–84, p. 72.

15. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 157.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 172. Building on work by W.T.J. Mitchell (and others), Mary Lou Emery notes how postcolonial writers, including Kincaid, repurpose ekphrasis to demonstrate how what was supposed to be about beauty is really about power, in "Refiguring the Postcolonial Imagination: Tropes of Visuality in Writing by Rhys, Kincaid, and Cliff," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1997, p. 259–280.

17. Frieda Cassin and Evelyn O'Callaghan (dir.), *With Silent Tread: A West Indian Novel*, [nd], Macmillan Education, 2002, p. 47.

18. Froude, 1888, p. 52.

While penned in the third person by a white Caribbean author, this short text is largely focalized through the English Marion Aird, who has come to “vegetate for six months”<sup>19</sup> with her West Indian relatives. The bulk of the novel follows Marion’s visit: introductions to local characters, lazy afternoons with her beautiful cousin Morea, and colourful vignettes describing local landscape and white Creole culture. Occasionally, the narrator hints at the threats of leprosy and miscegenation running “in secret undercurrents”<sup>20</sup> beneath the pretty façade. This anxiety, I argue, reflects unspoken shame regarding the island’s violent history and an ongoing denial of the exploitation of post-emancipation Black labour that certainly in Cassin’s time, and still in Kincaid’s and our own, upholds the life of leisure. Soon, as if infected by too much tropical ease, Marion begins to lose her initial vigour. She starts to sleep in late, while Cassin’s narrator takes a similarly lackadaisical approach to developing plot and character. Much like the paradisiacal Caribbean vacation, *With Silent Tread* remains dreamlike and transient: quickly consumed and effortlessly forgotten. The novel closes with just that. Marion and Morea suddenly return to England, where the West-Indian-born Morea succumbs to the emergence of latent leprosy. As her beauty and ease transform to contagious illness and lethargy, Cassin moves to erase Morea, and the West Indies, ending with Marion looking forward to the promise of a very English future, and a very English morning. I end, however, with a gesture towards the potential of rest as a form of resistance, which I find glimpses of within Cassin’s colonial novel. Perhaps repose, rather than action, could be the force that breaks through the illusion of paradise.

### “WHERE THE SUN NEVER SETS”<sup>21</sup>: THE VICTORIAN VISITOR’S SUNLIT SLEEP

But first, “The story begins” (as Cassin titles the first chapter) with Marion stepping off a steamship and into a Caribbean harbour.<sup>22</sup> This is not, however, the novel’s initial scene. Cassin opens instead with what she calls “A Picture”: “A man was lounging painfully along the hot dusty road leading to the town, in one of the smaller West Indian islands.”<sup>23</sup> As well as troubling time, space, and perspective (who is this

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19. *Ibid.*, p. 51

20. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

21. Froude, 1888, p. 362.

22. Cassin, [nd] 2002, p. 44.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

man? when, where, and by whom is this picture painted? how does it relate to what follows?) it immediately marks the island as a place where the pleasure of rest carries pathological potential: where it is possible to lounge painfully.

The man's pain springs from an illness "which, sometimes openly, but more often in secret, invades the circles of West Indian Families"; his very humanity stripped, "Leper Pete" becomes an abject "object" of "universal pity and disgust," whose "bleared and heavy eyes" reveal the "terrible scourge of leprosy."<sup>24</sup> The stigmatization of leprosy traces to the ancient world, associated both with race and sexuality; while there is nothing inherently hemispheric about the disease, it became increasingly associated in European imaginations and medical discourses with tropical climates and peoples.<sup>25</sup> By the time of Henry Press Wright's *Leprosy, An Imperial Danger* (1889),<sup>26</sup> the illusory connections between race, leprosy, and colonialism were for many irrefutable.

Pete's drooping eyes and blurred vision keep him in a state of perpetual exhaustion, the pathological extreme of the temporary vacation, while also denying him the reprieve of death. "O Lard—wish I could die!" he pleads. "Wy can't I die anyway? Me weary."<sup>27</sup> Leprosy and my central theme of tropical languor are not synonymous. But alongside the physiological effects—the heavy lids, the lassitude of Pete and eventually of Morea, whom he infects in the initial scene—I read an overlap between the characterization of the dormant disease and the insidious lethargy that threatens to overtake the white European's holiday.<sup>28</sup> For the Victorian travel writer Theodora Lynch, Antigua was plagued not only by leprosy but also an "incessant drowsiness." A certain "repose pervades the scenery,"<sup>29</sup> as she experienced "so great a prostration of strength, that I could with difficulty drag one leg after another."<sup>30</sup> Beautiful Antigua was "by no means a healthy island."<sup>31</sup> For many nineteenth-century white writers, there exists a latent (and sometimes blatant) fear of slipping

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24. *Ibid.*

25. Rod Edmond, *Leprosy and Empire: A Medical and Cultural History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

26. Henry Press Wright, *Leprosy, An Imperial Danger*. London, Churchill, 1889.

27. Cassin, [nd] 2002, p. 36.

28. One Victorian treatment for leprosy was work, based on the belief that lepers had a "want of will"; nobody wanted the goods (Edmond, 2006, p. 63).

29. Theodora Elizabeth Lynch, *The Wonders of the West Indies*, London, Seeley, Jackson & Halliday, 1856, p. 295.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 260.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 283.

too far from the prescriptive light of Victoria's sightlines. Left unchecked, the dream of restful escape may become something worse than the foggy "nightmare"<sup>32</sup> of London they left behind. Like the leprosy that haunts *With Silent Tread*, tropical torpor may be contagious.

The attribution of style, affect, and virtue to climate has of course long carried social, political, and colonial motivations.<sup>33</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, Mary Stepan argues:

Tropical nature stood for many different values—for heat and warmth but also for a dangerous and diseased environment; for superabundant fertility but also for fatal excess [...] for lazy sensuality and sexuality but also for impermissible racial mixings and degeneration.<sup>34</sup>

Such paradoxical depictions were also linked to a belief that European bodies malfunctioned outside of temperate zones. In 1905, the American Charles E. Woodruff published *The Effects of Tropical Light on White Men*, proposing that after brief stimulation "too much light"<sup>35</sup> causes exhaustion, insanity, and suicide. Woodruff argues that "the death rate of a place is proportional to its sunshine," attributing Seattle's high life expectancy to the (grey, British) climate.<sup>36</sup> For Woodruff, this does not mean the white man should not travel but rather that he must take frequent breaks; the conquest of the tropics required the "necessary siesta."<sup>37</sup> *With Silent Tread's* depictions of sleep and energy, I argue, are part of this lineage of tropical pathology.

The way populations throughout the empire slept (or didn't) has long been affected, and managed, by colonial interests.<sup>38</sup> Language of controlling biological processes, including sleep, signals biopolitics, augmented by Achille Mbembe's necropolitics. In Mbembe's model, which foregrounds race, Foucauldian biopower does not sufficiently describe the governance of bodies by the state, which controls

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32. Froude, 1888, p. 21

33. David N. Livingston, "Tropical Hermeneutics and the Climatic Imagination," *Geographische Zeitschrift*, vol. 90, no. 2, 2002, p. 65–88.

34. Nancy Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature*, London, Reaktion Books, 2001, p. 21.

35. Charles Woodruff, *The Effects of Tropical Light on White Men*, New York, Rebman Company, 1905, p. 202.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 306.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 343.

38. Matthew Wolf-Meyer, *The Slumbering Masses: Sleep, Medicine, and Modern American Life*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2012, p. 8–9.

not only the mechanisms of life, but also of death: “the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die.”<sup>39</sup> In extreme cases, such as the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and its legacies, this also means the ability to keep subjects as the “*living dead*.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, “the slave’s labour is needed and used, so he is therefore kept alive, but in a state of injury.”<sup>41</sup> In my analysis, the fictionalized emancipated Black Caribbean inhabits an afterlife of Mbembe’s state of injury through a state of chronic exhaustion. This allows the sleepy Caribbean subject to serve as foil to the mythically infallible work ethic so central to Victorian liberalism and sustains the false belief that it was this attitude, rather than the labour of the oppressed, that built the empire. Transforming the West Indies into a site of relaxation also assuages residual shame connected to the “hemorrhaging of the most useful arms and most vital energies of the slave-providing societies.”<sup>42</sup> Finally, the motif of the idle or sleeping Black figure normalizes the rest in which the tourist indulges before returning, revived, to their imagined state of natural productivity.

By the mid nineteenth century, portrayals of industrialized England as a crowded blur of light and dark, work and rest, were commonplace; many still held on to the dream of an endlessly-expanding empire as both resource and reprieve. James Anthony Froude happily leaves frosty London for the “soft air of a perennial summer,” where, as he reminds readers, “the sun never sets.”<sup>43</sup> First, “sleep came back soft and sweet” as “the worries and annoyances of life vanished.”<sup>44</sup> But this gentle slumber becomes a foreboding “West Indian languor”<sup>45</sup> that seeps into the days. Still, he finds himself equipped “to make life pass deliciously”<sup>46</sup> as he becomes acquainted with the power of the nap. If the local Black population “can sleep, lounge, and laugh away their lives as they please, fearing no danger,” so can he.<sup>47</sup> Some two decades earlier, drifting between Jamaica and Cuba, the ever-productive Anthony Trollope describes the ship’s

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39. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, Steve Corcoran (trans.), Durham, Duke University Press, 2019, p. 66.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

43. Froude, 1888, p. 362.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 80.



sails flapping “idly”<sup>48</sup> against the mast. But the meticulous author quickly revises his adjectives. The sails were not “motionless” but rather “progressless.”<sup>49</sup> Movement without direction; fertility without growth. Trollope’s reading of “sleepiness” as the West Indian’s “most prevailing characteristic,”<sup>50</sup> is meant pejoratively. But the pause also becomes its own commodity: a release from dreary Britain, and as we shall see in Cassin, from the form of the Victorian novel. When Charles Kingsley experiences his early days in the West Indies in a “repose which yet was not monotonous,”<sup>51</sup> however, the “yet” remains key. If made a habit, this “sunlit sleep”<sup>52</sup> could slip from a pleasurable escape into a stagnant stupor.

### “THIS SLEEPY LITTLE ISLAND”<sup>53</sup>: CASSIN’S ANTIGUA

Before European intervention transformed the demographics and topography of the island that would come to be called Antigua—including the near eradication of Indigenous populations—the Carib people treated this small bright spot in the ocean as a sort of vacation destination: somewhere to visit but not fit for long term habitation.<sup>54</sup> By 1750, the cartographer Emanuel Bowen described it as “a fine isle” but with “not one Single Spring of Water.”<sup>55</sup> As Kincaid’s essay reminds us, Antigua is a small place—only about nine by twelve miles in size—but at one point a profitable player in the sugar and tobacco economies. By 1789, however, the land was already “impoverished by long culture.”<sup>56</sup> Even when sugar prices spiked, it came at a cost of human and environmental degradation. This continued after abolition. On an island like Antigua, “freedom rang hollow,”<sup>57</sup> as Natasha Lightfoot puts it; there was little ostensibly freed populations could do but continue working for exploitative plantation owners. If only active enough, it was not because people were too tired *to*

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48. Anthony Trollope, *The West Indies and the Spanish Main*, 2nd ed., Chapman and Hall, 1860, p. 5.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 351.

51. Charles Kingsley, *At Last: a Christmas in the West Indies*, London, Macmillan, 1878, p. 7.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

53. Cassin, [nd] 2002, p. 81.

54. Brian Dyde, *The History of Antigua: The Unsuspected Isle*, MacMillan Caribbean, 2000, p. 7.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

57. Natasha Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom: Antigua and the Aftermath of British Emancipation*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2015, p. 9.

work but rather too tired *from* work. At the same time, another industry emerged. Antigua soon became a place of luxury for the white elite. The Governor of the Leeward Islands in 1881 awoke to "coffee and bread in my bedroom until I dress, and drop in, for a second time, into the marble bath," then fruit, claret, and the "day wrapping up by luncheon."<sup>58</sup> The island contained simultaneous realities: at once a chronically exhausted landscape and work force and a site of beauty and rest.

Cassin never names her "sleepy little island,"<sup>59</sup> an imprecision that speaks to a colonial tendency to imagine tropical environments as interchangeable. Given the author's slim biography and some details of plot, however, it is likely Antigua. O'Callaghan describes Cassin as white and Caribbean-born.<sup>60</sup> The author may have been as unwell as her characters, as an 1896 note in the American *Woman's Journal* mentions a twenty-four-year-old Cassin (making her about eighteen when the novel was published) founding "the first West Indian magazine of fiction," with health "not equal to carrying it on."<sup>61</sup> The twentieth-century rediscovery of the text remains equally enigmatic, having been retrieved from a wastepaper bin in a public building in St. John's, Antigua by the author Ralph Prince.<sup>62</sup> With such a dearth of information on the author and her only novel, the scarcity of secondary criticism comes as little surprise. A short 1981 essay by Bernadette Farquhar lists *With Silent Tread* as Antigua's "first work," and provides the material history.<sup>63</sup> While unimpressed by the novel's literary value ("quite banal"), she praises "the intense view it gives of Antiguan society," and its use of dialect.<sup>64</sup> *With Silent Tread* has garnered slightly more interest of late, particularly regarding the racialization of leprosy and the place of the Creole, who—as O'Callaghan borrows Homi Bhabha's phrase—remains "white but not

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58. Dyde, 2000, p. 186.

59. Cassin, [nd] 2002, p. 81

60. Evelyn O'Callaghan, "Introduction," Cassin, 2002, p. 2.

61. "Women of the Press," *Woman's Journal*, 18 January 1896, p. 18

62. Bernadette Farquhar, "Old and New Creative Writing in Antigua and Barbuda," *Bulletin of Eastern Caribbean Affairs*, vol. 7 no. 5, 1981, p. 29–34: "No date appears on the copy which I read [...] However, references made in it to the Queen's birthday and an oblique reference to the Engor Education Act suggests a date between 1837 and 1901" (p. 31); she assumes a later date, which the *Women's Journal* confirms. I accessed a copy of the article thanks to Jacqueline Thompson of the University of the West Indies.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 32–33.

quite.<sup>65</sup> My goal is not to rehabilitate Cassin or to overstate her novel's historical or aesthetic significance. I remain captivated, however, by how *With Silent Tread* encapsulates the contradictions of the Victorian tropical fantasy.

When, in the opening picture, Pete kisses the child Morea as she hops along in her white sun-bonnet (accompanied by a "negro nurse [...] strolling leisurely"<sup>66</sup>), he ruptures the stasis of the postcard-pretty scene. Pete's leprosy-ridden body bars him from manual labour. But as he "rubbed his mutilated features against [Morea's] flower-face"<sup>67</sup> in retribution for mistreatment by her mother, his former employer, he still carries out the work of creating plot. The girl may be cleaned up and left to rest and recover but her story will inevitably return to the repercussions of Pete's initial act. It will take some time, however. Chapter One leaves Pete to linger out of sight and mind and re-introduces the island some years later (we surmise) from the perspective of an "unmistakably English girl," Morea's visiting cousin Marion. We meet Marion wide eyed, and certainly wide awake, as she enters the "glowing panorama of life and colour."<sup>68</sup> With the arrival of a transatlantic steamer being "the great excitement of colonial life,"<sup>69</sup> there must be some human energy behind it. But one of the first people Marion sees is a "small black boy," sleeping "curled up."<sup>70</sup> Marion's new environs is in fact populated by sleepers. Despite the "morning sun bearing down upon them," these "loungers" lie "sleeping in all imaginable attitudes"; the carter must be roused from a nap to "leisurely" load the girl's baggage; even the horse is "fast asleep."<sup>71</sup> Where Kingsley's first day in a tropical harbour "might be taken at moments for a dream,"<sup>72</sup> Marion's arrival is filled with actual dreamers.

While Black labourers are depicted as resting while actually working, the white elite enact work while in fact resting. As with leprosy, sleepiness becomes

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65. Evelyn O'Callaghan, "'The Unholy Moment': Frieda Cassin's Nineteenth-Century Antigua Novel and the Construction of the White Creole," *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism*, vol. 13, no. 2, Duke University Press, 2009, p. 102. See also: Sarah Kent, "A Haunting (Dis)ease: Leprosy and the White Creole in Frieda Cassin's *With Silent Tread*," *Women's Writing: the Elizabethan to Victorian Period*, vol. 26, no. 2, Routledge, 2019, p. 184–198; Sue Thomas, "Frieda Cassin's *With Silent Tread* and the Specter of Leprosy in Antigua and Britain 1889–91," *Antburium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* vol. 4, no. 1, Article 6, 2006.

66. Cassin, [nd] 2002, p. 37.

67. *Ibid.*

68. Cassin, [nd] 2002, p. 37.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

72. Kingsley, 1878, p. 14.

inextricable from race, but Cassin repeatedly contrasts the lethargy of all Antiguan with the energy of the British visitor. Upon arrival, Marion is introduced to the inefficiency (softened to “farce”)<sup>73</sup> of the local white bureaucracy. Despite ample resources, the governing class appears unable to get anything done. At the same time, the school inspectors, barristers, and parsons (everyone comically tasked with “a dozen offices to fill” with the “government and public all pulling him every way at once”)<sup>74</sup> present themselves as overworked, “scarlet and perspiring.”<sup>75</sup> One man complains of being stuck at his desk “five or six hours” with only “a break for lunch,” apparently demonstrating his “indefatigable energy.” The English girl’s “much impressed” response can be read as either her polite visitor’s naiveté, the narrator’s sarcasm, or some combination thereof.<sup>76</sup>

Marion then arrives at the “picturesque”<sup>77</sup> colonial home of her cousins, the Latrobes. In a flurry of excitement, she meets the vivacious Morea—“a dash and flash of colour in the sunshine”—partakes in a late breakfast of local cuisine (“at this hour of the day!”), and then, to her shock, the household shuts the blinds and heads back to bed. “Everyone,” Morea explains, “enjoys a siesta after lunch in the West Indies.”<sup>78</sup> Like the visitor, the reader may be taken aback; this story has just begun: it was mere pages ago that our bright-eyed protagonist entered this generous sensory buffet. It seems quite early, in the day and in the novel, for sleep. And it is not an eventful sleep, either; there are no spectral visions or prophetic dreams, no clues planted, no plot advanced. To the newly-arrived Marion, this darkened, quiet house feels uneasy and “as still as at night time.” But any apprehension passes as the gentle “lullaby” of the venetians in the breeze gives way to “a long and pleasant nap.”<sup>79</sup>

Marion wakes to a new chapter—in her life and in the book—“refreshed” for an evening excursion. But moving through the “white, glaring, town [...] where tall coconut palms threw a scanty shade on the long, gleaming length of sand,”<sup>80</sup> the light and colour—the very *too-much-ness* of it all—nearly overwhelms her, offering

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73. Cassin, [nd] 2002, p. 49.

74. *Ibid.*

75. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*

“an intoxicating beauty to an English eye.”<sup>81</sup> A century later, Kincaid describes the tourist’s capacity to collapse the human and environmental fatigue of Antigua into interminable beauty. “No real sand on any shore is that fine or that white ... no real flowers could be these shades of red, purple, yellow [...] no real lily would bloom only at night and perfume the air with a sweetness so thick it makes you slightly sick.”<sup>82</sup> Fantasy effaces the “dilapidated, run down green” of the dry grass or the “pauperdness” of a village with “a dog asleep in the shade.”<sup>83</sup> Setting Marion against a “picturesque and leafy background,”<sup>84</sup> Cassin, too, attempts to gloss over the drought-ridden fields, the poverty, and the plantation refuse.

Her novel, however, contains some shadow of the work behind the leisure, even if mollified by language and obfuscated by distance. Early on, Marion rides past a “low black building, with a huge and heavy chimney towering and smoking above it.” The boiling house emits a “heavy, sweet and sticky aroma” that “pervaded the atmosphere.”<sup>85</sup> The repetition of “heavy” exemplifies Cassin’s clunky prose, but it also emphasizes how even the strenuous labour behind harvesting and processing sugar cane becomes yoked to languid lethargy—literally sugar coated by “sweet” perfume.<sup>86</sup> When Marion does hear workers in the fields, the sounds are “occasional” and “lumbering,” their voices comfortably “mellowed by distance.”<sup>87</sup> Active enough, indeed. She is surprised to glimpse men working, as “they always seem to be lying on their backs in the sun.”<sup>88</sup> Domestic labour undergoes a similar transformation. Morea describes her nurse Mammy Doodle as a source of indefatigable strength, yet she maintains the household with a “leisurely grace.”<sup>89</sup> Briefly granted voice, Mammy Doodle admits that she, like Pete, is “tired all de time,” and fears she will go on “sweepin” when she dies.<sup>90</sup> What the novel presents as natural ease, she experiences as overwork and exhaustion. As Kincaid explains with characteristic candour, “every native would like a rest, every native would like a tour. But some natives—most

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81. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

82. Kincaid, 2000, p. 78.

83. *Ibid.*, p. 79. Lightfoot also names a “haunting connection” between Antigua’s beauty and history of exploitation. (2015, p. 21).

84. Froude, 1888, p. 109.

85. Cassin, [nd] 2002, p. 50.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

natives in the world [...] are too poor to go anywhere [...] and they are too poor to live properly in the place where they live, which is the very place you, the tourist, want to go."<sup>91</sup> Marion notes how "the very servants seemed to take advantage of the interval of rest";<sup>92</sup> the crucial word is "seemed." Not everyone, in fact, enjoys an afternoon siesta.

**"... FALLS ASLEEP BEFORE REACHING THE END OF A SENTENCE": TROPICAL FORM**

Cassin references Victorian literature to further mock the idle ignorance of the white Creoles. When the "moon-faced," "lazy" local Terpy struggles to converse, "Marion tried books." But Terpy has only read some back numbers of the *Young Ladies Journal* and even then, "none of the stories finished."<sup>93</sup> Later, after yet another nap, Terpy mutters "what the dickens" while searching for a lost buttonhook. Encouraged by this inroad for discussion, Marion asks if she enjoys the author. But this only befuddles the girl. "It's an expression," Terpy answers, for whom Dickens "doesn't mean anything."<sup>94</sup> She cannot manage to finish simple romances, let alone stay awake through a triple decker, multi plot, Dickensian novel. The world Dickens depicts, and the way he depicts it, simply does not fit the sleepy rhythms of Terpy's island life, where time refracts through the exoticized West Indian sun.

It becomes difficult for both visitor and reader to tell how long we have been here and where we are going. Cassin describes rooms that emit both "colour and mustiness,"<sup>95</sup> homes "stuffy, not from darkness, but from the radiation of the tropical sun through the curtainless window," with "padded chairs upholstered in faded crimson, through which dingy covers some subtle sense seemed to perceive the dust which had permeated through in the course of years, and now lay in tranquil layers underneath." Marion's hosts, introduced and forgotten, are as dusty as their furniture: faded English roses waiting "wearily" for guests to "open the conversation." Conversations, though, which go nowhere, "veering into spasmodic jerks from one subject to another."<sup>96</sup> When Marion, on one such visit, "looked at the clock," she means to keep herself from infection: not by leprosy but by a laziness she worries will

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91. Kincaid, 2000, p. 18–19.  
92. Froude, 1888, p. 62.  
93. Cassin, [nd] 2002, p. 86.  
94. *Ibid.*, p. 88.  
95. *Ibid.*, p. 66.  
96. *Ibid.*

become habitual, leaving her like the “elephantine” Terpy, whose “let’s go to bed” is her only “monosyllabic” utterance.<sup>97</sup>

The once “fresh and cheery”<sup>98</sup> Marion does soon become a “sleepy head”<sup>99</sup> unperturbed by midday breakfasts. This drowsiness even affects Marion’s engagement with what could potentially be the novel’s most beguiling plotline: Morea’s secret sister Thekla, excised from the family for her marriage to a Black man who—to underscore the stigma—also suffers from leprosy. While she enjoys her siestas, Morea also relishes in early morning adventures while her now “lazy coz” (as if even the full “cousin” implies undue effort) remains “too sleepy when the morning comes.”<sup>100</sup> On one such morning, however, Marion is determined to follow Morea; still, she falls asleep again and again, before finally emerging from her “soft nest.”<sup>101</sup> Stumbling through the brush, Marion encounters a “strangely altered” version of Morea looking “terribly careworn.”<sup>102</sup> The mysterious woman, we eventually learn, is Thekla. Although Marion may still be only “half awake”—tripping over rotten palms in an escapade that was entirely a “sleepy decision”<sup>103</sup>—the encounter finally picks up the initial thread of leprosy and miscegenation sown by Pete in the opening picture. Shortly after this dramatic scene, the narrator drops in with an unusual first-person aside. Rather than using the opportunity to expand on the intrigue, however, it is simply to casually remind readers of an extraneous detail that they had “omitted to chronicle”: of all things, a description of Terpy “dozing placidly” on the sofa while her mother stared “in a trance of complacent attention.”<sup>104</sup> It is not surprising, perhaps, that a review of the novel’s most recent edition bemoans the “languid unfolding of the plot line.”<sup>105</sup> Mystery and action have been usurped by the nap.

Like the progressless motion of Trollope’s sails, it isn’t that nothing happens on the island, just that nothing changes. Marion “soon slipped into the round of everyday West Indian life, and found it pleasant enough, if,” (echoing Kingsley)

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97. *Ibid.*, p. 86–87.

98. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

99. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

100. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

101. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

102. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

103. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

104. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

105. S. Brown, “With Silent Tread,” *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5189, 2002, p. 30; while quite short, the novel moves slowly. O’Callaghan also calls it “verbose and overwritten” (2002, p. 21).

"a little monotonous."<sup>106</sup> While she is not exactly bored, the days begin to blend with one "more or less the same as another's".<sup>107</sup> The novel starts to read the same way: dreamy pauses interrupted by directionless, episodic action. *With Silent Tread* captures the affective experience of a dream that takes place in the interval of a midday sleep: relaxing, but leaving one lazy and disoriented. Asked if she enjoys the West Indies, Marion replies with qualified approval. "I like it very well as a change," but "whether I should like to live here is a different matter. I should be afraid of all my life and interests in life narrowing down, growing closer and closer till I couldn't see over the walls",<sup>108</sup> or, as the narrator puts it, "West Indian Society is a spongy bog," luxuriant but dangerous, "over which the unacquainted need to walk very warily."<sup>109</sup> Yet the exact threat remains unspoken or unspeakable: explanation cut off like Terpy's laconic utterances.

Whereas the cadence of island life begins to worry the visiting Marion, Morea would be quite happy to laze indefinitely in a sunlit sleep. "Must there be clouds and dark days?" she implores, "is it quite impossible to live on in the sunshine?"<sup>110</sup> The novel she inhabits, however, cannot sustain the dreamy light beyond about hundred pages. Cassin quite suddenly changes course and sends both girls back to England. But with the book nearly finished, the pace must pick up. Before Morea's arrival, the English Selwyn lays out the stereotype. He imagines his Creole cousin lounging with "eyes half closed," and "six or seven black maids lolling about in the bedrooms."<sup>111</sup> The real Morea first "refuses to fit the niche."<sup>112</sup> Instead, she embodies the other side of that sleepy indolence, bringing with her a tropical vibrancy. "West Indian Girls are more energetic than you seem to think,"<sup>113</sup> Morea teases Selwyn. Their flirtation rapidly progresses to an engagement—Cassin certainly makes up for lost time—and for a few short chapters, it seems sunny Morea will cut through "horrid, foggy"<sup>114</sup> England. Again, however, Cassin reminds readers of the perceived

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106. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

107. *Ibid.*

108. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

109. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

110. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

111. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

112. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

113. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

114. *Ibid.*, p. 138.



peril of too much light and too much pleasure. Morea's vitality soon reaches its limit, and she slips into degeneration and decay.

Three days before her wedding, Morea meets a discomfiting reflection in the mirror: "inflamed nostril and swollen lips and a generally bloated and dissipated appearance."<sup>115</sup> It does not take much deep reading to connect the description of her emerging leprosy, which manifests upon arriving in England, to tacit fears attached to Morea's slippery, Creole identity. A half century after Cassin, Jean Rhys (another white, female writer born in the Leeward Islands), like her inspiration Charlotte Brontë, employs similar language in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. As the Creole Antoinette's mental state deteriorates, "her skin was darker, her lips thicker."<sup>116</sup> Sarah Kent puts it simply: "by racializing the symptoms of leprosy, [or for Rhys, insanity] *With Silent Tread* aligns the racial precarity of the white Creole with (dis)ease."<sup>117</sup> If Morea embodies the picturesque, she also represents the "anxieties about merging with others" embedded in ekphrasis.<sup>118</sup> While Marion first dismisses Morea's physiological changes, she does notice a sleepy affectual shift as "a general heaviness and lassitude" descends upon her spritely cousin.<sup>119</sup> Not only does leprosy racialize Morea but the disease also slows her down, pulling her back into the opening picture and removing her from the novel's future tense.

Reduced to a "veiled, hooded figure" (and not in the bridal sense), a silenced Morea is ushered away, cleaving her from the novel of which she had suddenly become a romantic lead.<sup>120</sup> We again skip ahead—chapters and scenes, like the heartbroken Selwyn's visits to Marion, become "fewer and shorter"<sup>121</sup>—to some "three years later."<sup>122</sup> O'Callaghan notes that as in Rhys and Brontë "the contaminated Creole wife must die before the English hero is able to make the more sensible marriage to one of his own kind."<sup>123</sup> The young country doctor Selwyn, absent through most of the novel and encountered only at the bookends, makes for a somewhat atypical hero. But

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115. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

116. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Penguin, 1997, p. 89. Antoinette begins to "sleep too much, too long" (*Ibid.*, p. 100).

117. Kent, 2019, p. 194.

118. Mitchell, 1994, p. 163.

119. Cassin, [nd] 2002, p. 155.

120. *Ibid.*, p. 162.

121. *Ibid.*, p. 168.

122. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

123. O'Callaghan, 2009, p. 28.

his final proposal to Marion, realized upon receiving news of Morea's death (unlike Pete she is at least granted this rest), reinstates a forward-facing sense of order. Even before Morea's erasure, the narrator connects England to the variation of seasons, the postman's predictable knock, and newspapers less than a "fortnight old."<sup>124</sup> In other words, England replaces the secrets, hauntings, and siestas with linear, progressive, novelistic time, where Dickens—both the world he represents and how he presents it—means more than an expression. Selwyn first imagines Morea as someone who "occasionally falls asleep before reaching the end of a sentence";<sup>125</sup> he ends up right. The English Marion's promise of marriage beneath the "dying sun" provides the "assurance of a dawn tomorrow."<sup>126</sup> Like the place from which she comes, Morea is relegated to a fleeting fantasy, denied even the potential of futurity.

#### **"THEY WERE CALLED IDLE": REST AS RESISTANCE**

The aural resonance between rest and resistance suggests connection, even as the concepts logically contradict. But what if the association transcends the phonetic—what if the turn towards rest is read not only as a touristic projection but also as an act of willful defiance? Perhaps Morea is not just erased but, to borrow Mitchell's term, also "refuses visibility"?<sup>127</sup> In *Froudacity*, Thomas clearly wants to subvert the stereotype of "incorrigible laziness and want of ambition,"<sup>128</sup> and instead describes an active, progressive culture eager for self-governance. He reminds readers that enslaved populations, despite subjection to "dismal bondage," demonstrated "protracted exertion under climactic conditions most exhausting," a work ethic he sees continuing among their descendants.<sup>129</sup> This does not mean, though, that Thomas ignores the potential of refusal as a form of resistance. He quotes a lengthy passage of Froude describing a meeting with a Moravian minister in Jamaica. In ways Froude likely misread, the conversation suggests something deliberate in the rejection of post-abolition wage labour:

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124. Cassin, [nd] 2002, p. 128.  
125. *Ibid.*, p. 121.  
126. *Ibid.*, p. 169.  
127. Mitchell, 1994, p. 163.  
128. Thomas, 1889, p. 252.  
129. *Ibid.*, p. 237–238.

He was not the least enthusiastic about his poor black sheep, but he said that if they were not better than the average English labourer, he did not think them worse. *They were called idle; they would work well enough if they had fair wages and if the wages were paid regularly;* but what could be expected when women servants had but three shillings a week and found themselves, when the men had but a shilling a day and the pay was kept in arrear in order that if they came late to work, or if they came irregularly, it may be kept back or cut down to what the employer chose to give? *Under such conditions ANY man of ANY colour would prefer to work for himself if he had a garden, or would be idle if he had none.*<sup>130</sup>

While I have worked to trouble the Victorian fantasy of a sleepy Caribbean, I end with the powerful potential of rest. Lightfoot notes a history of feigning illness among enslaved Antiguan as form of “everyday resistance” and a way to avoid “what was mentally and physically sickening work,” a practice that continued post-abolition.<sup>131</sup> This echoes in Cassin, and not only in servants who “promptly curl themselves up and go to sleep” when it rains.<sup>132</sup> The racialization of Morea and subsequent prioritization of Marion’s white, English future affirms the novel’s bigotry. At the same time, Morea’s illness releases her from the expectations of a plot, and a nation, which the narrative abruptly forces upon her; until her hasty engagement in England, the happy young woman—enjoying the privilege granted by her relative whiteness on the island—expresses no interest in marriage. Morea, of course, exhibits more than sickness or lethargy. Morea dies. But maybe unconsciousness, even if permanent—even if death—need not only be read as defeat. Mbembe puts it simply and powerfully: death remains “the space where freedom and negation operate.”<sup>133</sup> Morea’s character is not

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130. Froude, 1888, p. 250; my emphasis. Any “free” time was often spent on personal work (gardening, handicrafts, etc.). Natasha Lightfoot, “Sunday Marketing, Contestations over Time, and Visions of Freedom among Enslaved Antiguan After 1800,” *The CLR James Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2007, p. 109–135, p. 36. Even this leisure masks labour.

131. Lightfoot, 2007, p. 113. See also: Faith Smith, “John Jacob Thomas and the Grammar of Freedom,” *Caribbean Literature in Transition, 1800–1920*, vol. 1, Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. 137–150. Post-abolition workers withheld labour and “cast as lazy, irresponsible, and unprepared for the responsibilities of freedom.” (*Ibid.*, p. 138).

132. Froude, 1888, p. 156.

133. Mbembe, 2019, p. 91–92.

equivalent to representations of illness or death in enslaved populations.<sup>134</sup> But when stripped of her power, her body reacts with refusal.

Two written "Pictures," in fact, open *With Silent Tread*. After Leper Pete, there is "Another Picture." Rather than sun and sand, we have the "pebbly shore"<sup>135</sup> in Deal, where the North Sea meets the English Channel.<sup>136</sup> Young "Missy" (Morea) is replaced with "Min" (Marion), and the antagonist becomes Marion's cousin, and future husband, Selwyn. The older boy taunts the girl to leap from the seawall. "Jump at once, Min," he commands, glancing up from his book.<sup>137</sup> Although his tone signals trust, he does not catch her. Nobody does. Min lands in a "little white heap on the hard beach."<sup>138</sup> The chronology of the two opening pictures remains unclear—simultaneous snapshots, perhaps—but if Cassin intends this second image to frame the following narrative, establishing Marion and Selwyn as the novel's protagonists and foreshadowing (albeit troublingly) their final union, this erases Morea, Pete, and the Caribbean vacation that comprises most of the text. Whereas young Morea's introduction leaves her infected and destined for death, Marion opens her eyes after only a "few moments."<sup>139</sup> Like her future holiday, her sleep seems safely temporary.

But is it? *With Silent Tread's* ending appears a happy one for Marion and Selwyn. She accepts his proposal to the hopeful image of the garden gates "swung wide open."<sup>140</sup> Yet—at least per Cassin's portrayal of leprosy transmission—Morea may have already infected her English relatives; even posthumously, she could still determine the narrative, opening the gates to a less optimistic future than my initial reading suggests. Marion makes it back to England, but the tourist may be forced to feel the suffering that scaffolds her lounging. And, unlike during her West Indian sojourn, there will be nobody left to maintain the picture of leisure.

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134. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Brooklyn, Verso, 1993. Gilroy describes a history of death as agency in early African-American fiction, *Ibid.*, p. 63–233. See also: *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, Taylor and Francis, 2013. Here Gilroy finds a "critique of productivism" to be a motif in Black diasporic cultural expression from the time of slavery into the twentieth century, *Ibid.*, p. 268.

135. Cassin, [nd] 2002, p. 40.

136. Sue Thomas notes the allusion to Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, where Louisa, persuaded by Captain Wentworth, jumps from the seawall (2006, n.p.); another way Cassin contorts the nineteenth-century English novel.

137. Cassin, [nd] 2002, p. 40.

138. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

139. *Ibid.*

140. *Ibid.*, p 169.

# “Everyone Enjoys a Siesta After Lunch in the West Indies”: Fictions of Labour and Languor

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## RÉSUMÉ :

Cet article examine les représentations historiques du tourisme aux Antilles, en se concentrant sur *With Silent Tread* de Frieda Cassin, publié dans les années 1890 et considéré comme le premier roman antiguais. Tant dans la forme que dans le contenu, il illustre la marchandisation des Caraïbes comme un répit aux exigences de plus en plus fréquentes de 24 heures sur 24, 7 jours sur 7 de l'Angleterre industrialisée, tout en essayant d'éliminer les conditions de travail pénibles après l'émancipation, les maladies chroniques et l'épuisement environnemental. L'image fictive récurrente de la figure noire endormie normalise le repos auquel le touriste se livre temporairement avant de revenir, ravivé, à son état naturel de productivité imaginaire — en 1890 et aujourd'hui. En même temps, le repos devient un acte potentiel de résistance : rompre le paradis pittoresque.

## ABSTRACT:

This paper explores historical depictions of tourism in the West Indies, focusing on Frieda Cassin's *With Silent Tread*, published in the 1890s and considered the first Antiguan novel. In both form and content, it exemplifies the commodification of the Caribbean as reprieve from the increasingly 24/7 demands of industrialized England, while attempting to elide the strenuous post-emancipation working conditions, chronic illness, and environmental exhaustion. The recurrent fictionalized image of

the sleeping Black figure normalizes the rest in which the tourist temporarily indulges before returning, revived, to their imagined natural state of productivity—in 1890, and today. At the same time, rest becomes a potential act of resistance: rupturing the picturesque paradise.

**NOTE BIOGRAPHIQUE :**

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