

## YouTube logics and the extraction of musical space in San Juan's La Perla and Kingston's Fleet Street

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Over the last decade, YouTube has brought unprecedented visibility to Caribbean music, with reggaeton and reggae attracting mainstream attention in US and European media.<sup>2</sup> Two music videos in particular became emblematic of a trend to imbue YouTube videos with the potential to bring about positive economic and social change: Puerto Rican Luis Fonsi's 'Despacito' ft. Daddy Yankee (dir. Carlos Perez, 2017) and Jamaican Koffee's 'Toast' (dir. Xavier Damase, 2018).<sup>3</sup> When it was released, 'Despacito' broke several viewing records and was purported to have played a part in boosting Puerto Rican tourism, while positive representations of reggae singer Koffee within the context of downtown Kingston have been regarded as important not only for cultivating a safe and welcoming image for the

<sup>1</sup> Ofer Gazit conducted the interviews with Pablo Rodriguez, conducted fieldwork in Puerto Rico, conducted the analysis of 'Despacito' and wrote the full and final draft of the chapter. Elisa Bruttomesso conducted and translated the interview with Rafael Ruiz. Both authors conducted the research on Fleet Street and Life Yard together. The authors would like to thank Pablo and Rafael for their time during the uncertainty of the Covid-19 pandemic.

<sup>2</sup> Wayne Marshall, 'Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About "Despacito"', *Vulture*, 22 August 2017, <https://www.vulture.com/2017/08/everything-you-ever-wanted-to-know-about-despacito.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Javier Hernández-Acosta, 'A Bottom-up Strategy for Music Cities: The Case of San Juan, Puerto Rico', in *Music Cities: Evaluating a Global Cultural Policy Concept*, ed. Christina Ballico and Allan Watson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 138; Kim-Marie Spence, 'Caribbean Creatives and the Intelligent Economy', in *Intelligent Economies Developments in the Caribbean*, ed. Stacie Ann Wilson (Santa Rosa, CA: Informing Science Press, 2021), 165. Luis Fonsi, 'Luis Fonsi - Despacito ft. Daddy Yankee', *YouTube video*, 00:04:41, 13 January 2017, <https://youtu.be/kJQP7kiw5Fk>; Original Koffee, 'Koffee - Toast (Official Video)', *YouTube video*, 00:03:05, 16 November 2018, <https://youtu.be/p8HoEvDh70Y>.

neighbourhood but also for challenging the misogynistic reputation of Dancehall reggae. While some research exists on the impact of YouTube music videos on tourism, such as Sehwan Oh et al.'s work on K-pop and the Korean travel industry, the impact of high-visibility YouTube videos on Caribbean music scenes remains underexplored.<sup>4</sup> Considering the mass circulation of Caribbean music videos in the United States and Europe, we investigate the online and algorithmically intensified manifestations of what Jocelyne Guilbault and Timothy Rommen have called the 'touristic imperial gaze and imperial audition.'<sup>5</sup> Through this theoretical framework we examine the case of La Perla neighbourhood in San Juan Puerto Rico, where 'Despacito' was shot, and Fleet Street in Kingston, Jamaica, where 'Toast' was filmed. Through analysis of the videos in relation to these locales, we ask: how do local residents participate in the political economies of YouTube videos?<sup>6</sup> What is the effect of high-visibility videos on the neighbourhoods in which they were shot? What is the potential of YouTube visibility to bring about positive economic and social change to these locales? In other words, what does it mean to be 'seen' according to the musical economies of YouTube? We argue that, despite optimistic claims for the potential of mass-viewed YouTube music videos to bring about positive economic and social change to local music scenes, visibility alone does little to bring about such transformation. Instead, it often implicates local scenes in the economic logic of YouTube, where 'freely' circulating cultural 'content' is used as backdrop for advertisements intended primarily for North American and European tourists.

### Caribbean music videos and the 'touristic imperial gaze'

Caribbean popular music videos have increasingly been implicated in the commodification of place and local identity. In their work on the cultural production of Caribbean music videos, Murali Balaji and Thomas Sigler argue that

<sup>4</sup> Sehwan Oh, Joong Ho Ahn and Hyunmi Baek, 'The Effects of Social Media on Music-Induced Tourism: A Case of Korean Pop Music and Inbound Tourism to Korea', in *Asia Pacific Journal of Information Systems* 25, no. 1 (2015): 119–41.

<sup>5</sup> Jocelyne Guilbault and Timothy Rommen (eds.), *Sounds of Vacation: Political Economies of Caribbean Tourism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 3.

<sup>6</sup> 'Despacito's' video was circulated through the hosting platform Vevo, a partnership between the Big Three record labels (Universal, Sony and Warner) and Alphabet, YouTube's parent corporation. In addition to YouTube, Vevo makes its videos available on a variety of other platforms. Significantly, during the first year after its release, 'Despacito' did not appear on MTV's main channel or participate in any of MTV's awards. It was aired on the Spanish-speaking MTV Tres. Associated Press, 'Why "Despacito" Wasn't Nominated for a VMA', *Billboard*, 14 August 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/despacito-video-not-nominated-for-vma-reason-7898328/>.

the content of contemporary work is largely defined by a transnational exchange of production and consumption and the commodification of local signifiers of culture, language and place.<sup>7</sup> In the Caribbean, where music is a crucial part of the tourism industry, music videos circulating through online platforms become digital tourist destinations, where representations of local culture, scenery and identity are consumed through what John Urry has described as the viewer's 'tourist gaze'.<sup>8</sup> Low-income neighbourhoods that maintain community-based mural art, for instance, have become crucially important sites of Caribbean tourism: prized by visitors as being 'authentic' and 'uncommercial' destinations, such neighbourhoods have become significant backdrops for popular music videos.<sup>9</sup> Because both live and recorded music are performed in public spaces in many Caribbean cities, this kind of physical and virtual visibility places DJs, performing musicians and local dancers within sites of the 'touristic imperial gaze and imperial audition' becomes integral to local economics. For Jerome Camal, these two key terms – 'gaze' and 'audition' – express the tropes, desires, fears and imaginations 'through which North American and European visitors construct and consume the soundscapes of Caribbean destinations'.<sup>10</sup> If low-income urban environments, public arts projects and the visual and sonic dimensions of Caribbean musicking are crucial sites of Caribbean tourism, the neocolonial political economies they reproduce are never more present than in their online manifestations as highly visible, transglobal YouTube videos. The relationship between YouTube videos as loci of the 'touristic imperial gaze' and the lasting impact this algorithmically multiplied gaze has on the locales in which they were shot, positions audiovisual songs like 'Despacito' and 'Toast' as significant networked representations of local and global representations of particular cultural moments.

## 'Despacito'

'Despacito' (2017) is a song written by Puerto Rican pop star Luis Fonsi, reggaeton artist Daddy Yankee and lyricist Erika Ender. The music video, shot in

<sup>7</sup> Murali Balaji and Thomas Sigler, 'Glocal Riddems: Cultural Production and Territorial Identity in Caribbean Music Videos', *Visual Communication* 17, no. 1 (2018): 91–111.

<sup>8</sup> John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: Sage, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> See Jonathan Skinner and Lee Jolliffe, *Murals and Tourism, Heritage, Politics and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2017); and Malte Steinbrink, "'We Did the Slum!' – Urban Poverty Tourism in Historical Perspective', *Tourism Geographies* 14, no. 2 (2012): 213–34.

<sup>10</sup> Jerome Camal, 'Touristic Rhythms: The Club Remix', in *Sounds of Vacation*, 88.

one day in the La Perla neighbourhood on the outskirts of San Juan, and at the nearby bar La Factoria, was directed by Carlos Perez. Speaking about the video's concept, Perez explains that they wanted the video to 'be like a day in a life inside the culture of Puerto Rico'.<sup>11</sup> In order to capture the nuanced collaboration between Fonsi, a Puerto Rican-born, Miami-based star of Latin pop, and Daddy Yankee, the reggaeton pioneer still living on the island, Perez wanted a place that was both romantic and urban. He settled an area of social housing that contrasts sharply with the rest of Old San Juan's hotel-studded coastline: 'We knew the textures of the barrio that we wanted would be there', he explains; 'Also, the Malecon in La Perla is very unique. It's the only place where public housing is literally on the water.'<sup>12</sup> The video highlights the juxtapositions between San Juan's poorly maintained but vibrantly coloured public housing and the beauty of the Caribbean Sea throughout, with shots moving from the neighbourhood's coastal path to its urban interior, before finally coming to rest in a bar where the track succumbs to the (apparently) diegetic sounds of the singers and percussion (Figure 4.1).

The success of 'Despacito' was instant, reaching 5.4 million YouTube views within twenty-four hours.<sup>13</sup> By July 2017, it had become the most watched YouTube video ever and La Perla the world's most-viewed neighbourhood. This quickly drew the attention of business leaders and politicians; just eight months after the release of the video, in August 2017, the then governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Rosselló, declared Luis Fonsi a tourism ambassador. Jose Izquierdo, the director of the Puerto Rican tourism company, said in a press statement, 'We will unveil the land of "Despacito"'.<sup>14</sup> Online news outlets reported an increase of 45 per cent in Google searches for 'Puerto Rico', while others report an actual 45 per cent rise in tourism itself (see Figure 4.2).<sup>15</sup> However, these headlines remain unconfirmed and appear to have been boosted by a misleading but arguably understandable campaign by the Puerto Rico Tourism Company (PRTC).

<sup>11</sup> Ronny Courtens 'Cut With FCP X: "Despacito" Gets Over 4 Billion Views on YouTube', *Fcp.co*, 23 October 2017, <https://fcp.co/final-cut-pro/articles/2008-cut-with-fcp-x-despacito-gets-over-4-billion-views-on-youtube-and-is-nominated-for-best-music-video-in-the-2017-latin-grammy-awards>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Griselda Flores, 'Luis Fonsi Talks Anatomy of "Despacito"', *Billboard*, 18 January 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/music/latin/luis-fonsi-despacito-daddy-yankee-interview-7661716/>.

<sup>14</sup> Suzette Fernandez, 'Luis Fonsi Named Puerto Rico's Tourism Ambassador', *Billboard*, 15 August 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/latin/7905040/luis-fonsi-puerto-rico-tourism-ambassador-despacito>.

<sup>15</sup> James Draper, 'Despacito boosts Puerto Rico tourism by 45 per cent', *Daily Mail Online*, 29 August 2017, [https://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/travel\\_news/article-4833254/Despacito-boosts-Puerto-Rico-tourism-45-cent.html](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/travel_news/article-4833254/Despacito-boosts-Puerto-Rico-tourism-45-cent.html).

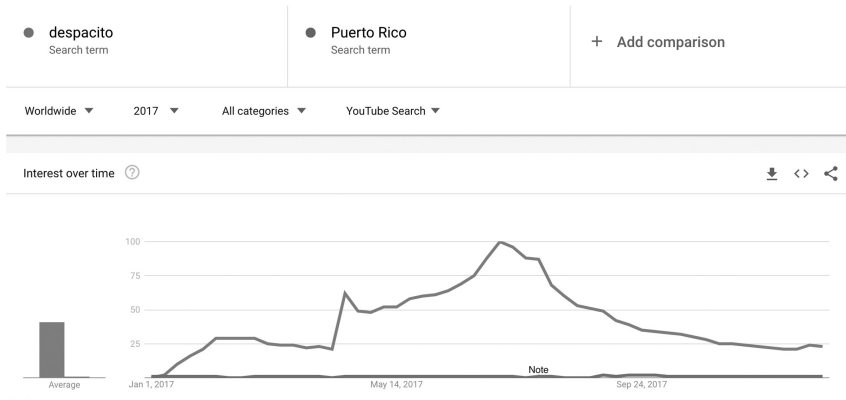


**Figure 4.1** La Perla's Malecon.

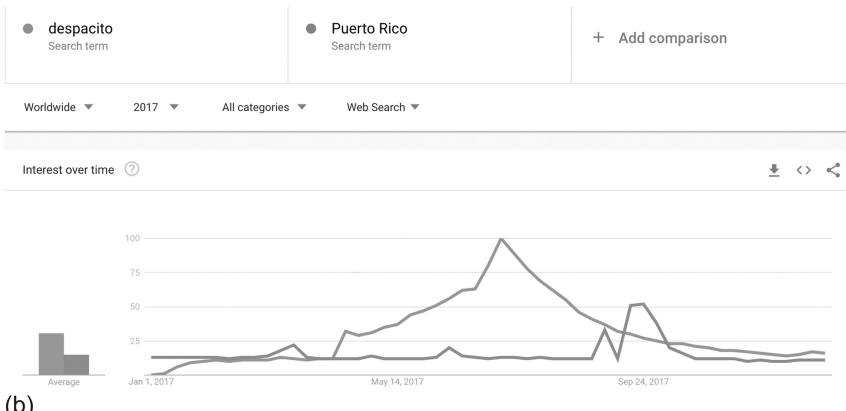
Despite the unprecedented success of 'Despacito', tourism in Puerto Rico did not increase dramatically between January and August 2017. In fact, a report by the *Washington Post* shows that hotel occupancy and income from tourist taxes actually decreased slightly compared to previous years, while traffic to online travel sites also remained constant. There does not appear to have been a clear 'Despacito' effect.<sup>16</sup>

However, what did create a clear and significant rise in interest in Puerto Rico was not 'Despacito' but a catastrophe of historic proportions, one which decimated the country's tourism industry. Just three weeks after Fonsi was appointed tourism ambassador by the PRTC, the island was hit by Hurricanes Irma and Maria, leaving La Perla and countless other neighbourhoods in ruins and without electricity and running water for months. A comparison between the Google search numbers for 'Despacito' and 'Puerto Rico' reveals that, for a brief moment in the weeks following the hurricanes, the term 'Despacito' was surpassed by searches for 'Puerto Rico'. When these search

<sup>16</sup> Madline Friedman, 'No, "Despacito" is Not Actually Driving a Boom in Tourism to Puerto Rico', *Washington Post*, 17 July 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/07/18/no-despacito-is-not-actually-driving-a-boom-in-tourism-to-puerto-rico/>.



(a)



(b)

**Figure 4.2** a and b YouTube and Google searches for ‘Despacito’ versus Puerto Rico in 2017.

numbers began to decrease by early October, it became clear that neither the international success of ‘Despacito’ nor the heightened news visibility in the wake of Hurricane Maria had done much to help the island’s ailing economy, the dire humanitarian crisis or the devastated infrastructure in any tangible way. Rather, these increased hits appeared only to enrich the marketing strategies of various media companies who used the island’s theatre of poverty and distraction as a backdrop for advertisements. Mass global visibility, in other words, did not translate into tangible benefits for the local population.

Part of this translation issue was due to the economic logic of YouTube, which operates not only at the macro or industry level but also via everyday

economic interactions such as the ‘touristic imperial gaze’.<sup>17</sup> The second scene of ‘Despacito’, for instance, was shot at La Factoria, a bar and live music venue above La Perla on Calle San Sebastian. It depicts a crowd dancing to live music at the packed nightclub. The scene’s gendered, sexualized and racialized representations of dancers (what Perez referred to as ‘dirty dancing, Latin style’) are transferred onto the lived reality of La Factoria’s weekly live salsa dance floor, which is now advertised as the ‘Despacito bar’ in travel guides and websites.<sup>18</sup> Pablo Rodriguez, one of the co-owners of the bar, explained that having live music and local dancers is crucial to the bar’s success: ‘The Factoria always has locals *and* tourists [. . .] I like to keep it accessible for people that want to see good salsa, but can’t afford to pay for expensive drinks, so we do it for free’; ‘The [locals] come in and for me, honestly the assistance, just to have them there . . . the tourists that like to see the locals, and maybe learn how to dance’.<sup>19</sup> In La Factoria, local dancers perform ‘a day in the life of Puerto Rican culture’ as presented in ‘Despacito’, in exchange for the free ‘service’ of live music. They are neither the customer nor the product but rather ‘content providers’ whose knowledge of dance and sexualized and racialized bodies help sell the locale as a product. Rodriguez laments the neighbourhood’s growing dependency on tourists, noting that, as a result of the famous music video, music scenes that are not tagged as a ‘free’ service struggle to sustain themselves: ‘If you pay or even if it’s free sometimes, it’s complicated to bring people to see live music. For the tourists, it’s easier . . . they can go to La Factoria, we always have music, but it’s not the best for the local music scene in PR; people [here] don’t want to pay.’<sup>20</sup>

From the lyrics ‘Despacito, Vamos a hacerlo en una playa en Puerto Rico’,<sup>21</sup> through the video’s colourful scenes of urban poverty and hypersexualized dance club routines, ‘Despacito’ capitalizes on YouTube viewers’ ‘imperial gaze and audition’, attaching, to again quote Guilbault and Rommen, ‘local sounds and rhythms to black bodies, loudness, and exuberant sexuality’.<sup>22</sup> The video uses the expectations and imaginaries of ‘potential’ tourists online to generate billions of clicks and views. And yet, in so doing, it also raises the hopes of local residents for financial relief at a time of severe debt crisis and climate disaster.

<sup>17</sup> Guilbault and Rommen, *Sounds of Vacation*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Leila Cobo, *Decoding Despacito* (New York: Vintage Book, 2020), chap. 18, Kindle.

<sup>19</sup> Pablo Rodriguez, personal communication with Gazit, 14 April 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> According to Erika Ender, when Fonsi approached her with the idea for the song (which they later co-wrote), this was the only line he had completed. It can be translated as ‘Slowly, Let’s Do It On The Beach in Puerto Rico’; Cobo, *Decoding Despacito*, chap. 18.

<sup>22</sup> Guilbault and Rommen, *Sounds of Vacation*, 25

When such imperial fantasies are transferred into the lived reality of La Perla and La Factoria, local residents retain their ‘music video’ position as a backdrop to an economic exchange that capitalizes on their presence, knowledge and looks, while excluding them from financial benefits. However, while claims for ‘Despacito’s’ economic impact on Puerto Rican residents may have been overblown, its impact on the Latin music industry was nonetheless profound. As we show in our next case study, optimistic assessments regarding the power of music videos to bring about economic relief to local residents may have more to do with the agency of residents themselves than with the number of YouTube visualizations.

### ‘Toast’

While ‘Despacito’ holds a problematic relationship with the location of its shoot, ‘Toast’ has had a more favourable impact. Several recent studies have pointed to the relationship between the Jamaican music industry, what Kim-Marie Spence calls ‘the platform economy’, and tourism development in downtown Jamaica.<sup>23</sup> Grammy Award-winning reggae singer Koffee has been particularly celebrated for the ways in which she challenges gender norms and the representation of women in the reggae industry. Significantly, her challenges are presented through the positive representation of downtown Kingston’s low-income neighbourhoods.<sup>24</sup> ‘Toast’, the video responsible for Koffee’s fame and downtown Kingston’s sudden global visibility, was produced by Izy Beats and Walshy Fire and filmed by London-based director Xavier Damase. It was uploaded to Vevo and YouTube on 16 November 2018. Since its release, the song has been viewed approximately 195 million times on YouTube alone. The video was shot on Fleet and Orange streets, often celebrated for their importance in Jamaican music history.<sup>25</sup> Like ‘Despacito’, ‘Toast’ represents a fictional ‘day in a life’ of the locale, but rather than feature a catalogue of ‘Jamaicanisms’, it focuses on a series of youth activities, including playing football on a flooded concrete field, doing wheelies on a motorbike, bleaching dreadlocks and boxing. Most prominently,

<sup>23</sup> Kim-Marie Spence, ‘Caribbean Creatives and the Intelligent Economy’, 148.

<sup>24</sup> Chevy R. J. Eugene, ‘Towards a Framework for Caribbean reparations’, in *Journal of Eastern Caribbean Studies* 44, no. 3 (2019): 54–77.

<sup>25</sup> Ramona Samuels, ‘Downtown Kingston to Become Music and Tourism Mecca in Jamaica’, *Caribbean National Weekly*, 3 January 2022, <https://www.caribbeannationalweekly.com/entertainment/downtown-kingston-to-become-music-and-tourism-mecca-in-jamaica/>.



it features Koffee herself, singing about the importance of gratitude and riding her bicycle in red work overalls around Paint Jamaica, a community street art initiative featuring elaborate colourful murals. This focus on the local urban community and simple youth past times positions 'Toast' against the sexualized constructions of women in many Caribbean YouTube videos geared towards the 'touristic imperial gaze'. Instead, it seeks to represent (and commodify nonetheless) a positive image of women and a safe and welcoming image of downtown Kingston.

Created in 2014, Paint Jamaica – where 'Toast' was shot – has since become a popular site for shooting video clips in a city with a storied musical legacy but few suitable film-shoot locations. The growing popularity of 'Toast' and other videos filmed on Fleet Street gave Paint Jamaica increased visibility, and it began to attract tourists. As a result, travel guides and organized bus tours now invite tourists to visit the site as part of a growing flood of reggae tourism in downtown Kingston, citing Koffee, Chronixx and other artists who made videos there as major draws.<sup>26</sup> Rafael Ruiz, a videographer who works mainly in the reggae music industry, explains Fleet Street's attraction: 'In Fleet Street', he says, 'foreign production crews started to film local musicians. Local people realized that if they had a restaurant and all of this was well arranged, [. . .] people could come, have a juice, take some photos and then leave. And this [has] benefits.'<sup>27</sup> With the increased number of film crews coming to Paint Jamaica, local residents decided to open the Life Yard collective, a small co-op organization. They transformed an area just in front of the murals at Fleet Street 41-44 into a community vegetable garden and built a small restaurant that hosts tourists and supplies the community with affordable food. 'The restaurant charges a certain amount of money to those who live there, and twice as much to those who come from abroad', Ruiz explains, 'which I don't see as inappropriate as it keeps on being cheap for tourists.' Ruiz does not consider what is happening to Fleet Street to be touristification. 'What I see in Fleet Street is a worthy project, it ensures the attractiveness of the space, without changing it and its surroundings and basically with no capital investments. It makes it attractive for young reggae tourists.' For him, one of the crucial points is that the place grew organically, from the shared needs of the residents.

<sup>26</sup> Spence, 'Caribbean Creatives', 165.

<sup>27</sup> Rafael Ruiz, personal communication with Bruttomesso, 1 April 2020.

By focusing on positive representation, community art projects and social issues, 'Toast' offers a digital version of a fairly recent kind of niche tourism, one which caters specifically to politically and ideologically minded viewers.<sup>28</sup> Yard Life similarly seeks to attract a new kind of social and politically conscious tourists. To what extent, then, does Life Yard follow YouTube's economic logic? While the murals and street art made Fleet Street into a site of increased social media visibility, the murals themselves are not dependent on tourists for their existence, nor are they framed as a 'service' given for 'free'. Instead, local residents provide food to both citizens and tourists at a price that is proportional to their economic abilities and relationship to the place. In addition to the community garden and restaurant, Life Yard leads tours through the community and hosts the Paint Jamaica Open Air Gallery. It also provides afternoon day care and school tutoring for the children of the neighbourhood. In seeking to commodify representations of positive social actions, and to a degree actually promoting positive social change, both 'Toast' and Yard Life can be seen as related manifestations of a growing market-driven, (often) platform-based, social justice economy.<sup>29</sup> As our conversation with Ruiz makes clear, the mass circulation of YouTube videos filmed at Paint Jamaica does not benefit the local residents directly. Rather, the online touristification of social action that stands at the base of their mass visibility became its own source of income for local residents, who began selling a worthy 'cause' to politically minded tourists.

### The 'entrepreneurization' of everything

When we consider YouTube's Caribbean music videos as sites of the 'touristic imperial gaze', we cannot help but wonder about the centuries-old legacy of using emblems of racialized and gendered social inequality as sites of entertainment and leisure; about music videos as sites in which poverty itself is transformed into a tourist attraction and assigned advertisements further monetize neocolonial relations via a vastly unequal data and streaming 'platform' industry. What, then, is the obligation of YouTube to the places whose colourful scenery and depleted infrastructures generate hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue through the

<sup>28</sup> Luh Sin, Harn, Tim Oakes and Mary Mostafanezhad, 'Traveling for a Cause: Critical Examinations of Volunteer Tourism and Social Justice', *Tourist Studies* 15, no. 2 (August 2015): 119–31.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 119; Koffee's recent contract as 'Brand Ambassador' for Mastercard is part of this growing trend.

performance of online poverty tourism? What is its responsibility to a place whose scenes of destruction by rainfall and wind have grossed inordinate sums of money into YouTube's accounts?

Despite claims for the contributions of music tourism to the economic fabric of Caribbean cities, when such tourism takes place online, the direct economic benefits are not likely to reach local residents without a concerted effort and intervention on their part.<sup>30</sup> In La Perla, for instance, online visibility is not synonymous with political or economic agency for residents. And yet, an online presence can be translated into local economic agency, as we see in Kingston. The locales and communities that serve as background to hypervisible online products, like Life Yard, highlight the hazards embedded in dependency on contemporary social justice tourism and the spectacle of the 'Caribbean every day'. These recognitions must be historized in relation to centuries-long legacy economic logics of the 'imperial gaze' and the more recent 'entrepreneurization' of everything. YouTube did not invent this logic – it merely exploits it on a new, global scale.

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<sup>30</sup> Ballico and Watson, *Music Cities*, 6.

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