

## Setting the Tourism Landscape:

### Economic Development and Ethnic Tensions on a small island in Mexico

Brandon Fischer, MA, Todd G. Pierce, Ph.D.

Across the globe, transnational economic influences significantly affect the working conditions of those living in tourism-based settings, no matter how sustainable the economic design. Economic tensions can quickly lead to disputes within communities living and working in tourism sites that are rooted in conflicting visions for the future. These conflicting visions generate concerns around aesthetic representations of the local that can give way to racist differentiations of who is able to participate and belong within tourism economies. This chapter discusses how these tensions and their effects were made manifest on the small island of Isla Mujeres in southern Mexico in early 2014, spurred by a performative move on the part of local officials that had repercussions both in the front and backstage of the island's landscape. During this time, the municipal government and police force removed an entire segment of the workforce during an opportune moment to purportedly improve the island's brand as a premier tourism destination. By tracing the events that unfolded during this active and controversial moment in time, it becomes clear how performative acts serve to call certain modes of power into being at the expense of already vulnerable communities.

To begin speaking about tourism in Mexico, it is important to first consider the role that tourism plays in the country's agenda for economic growth. Mexico is among the most visited countries in the world and has a tourism industry that is a driving force in its economy, accounting for an estimated 12.6% of the country's GDP,<sup>1</sup> placing it in the ranks of the most

1According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, travel & tourism generated 12.6% of Mexico's GDP in 2013 as a total of

lucrative and sought after tourist destinations in the world alongside Spain, France and the United States. In effect, tourism is an industry of national interest, one that the country is committed to strengthening through a robust administrative framework for infrastructural development.

For decades, Isla Mujeres has been a permanent fixture in the booming Mexican tourism economy. Situated eight miles off the coast of Cancun, Isla Mujeres is a sleepy island roughly five miles long and a half mile wide at its widest point. Although small in size, Isla Mujeres is among the top tourist destinations in the world, designed to provide an experience distinct from its shore-side neighbor, Cancún, by offering a less manicured though no less idyllic alternative to the Mexican beach vacation. In March 2014, Playa Norte, a more popular beach on the northern shore of Isla Mujeres, was listed as one of the top ten beaches on the planet by Tripadvisor. The designation not only drew the attention of international tourists, but also set into motion a series of initiatives by the municipal government.

That same month, the local government of Isla Mujeres began to advance a series of policies that included a local ordinance that, when implemented, effectively banned mobile beach and street vendors, or *vendedores ambulantes*, from engaging in commerce. The ordinance was expected to produce a safer beach environment during a time in which the local government sought two internationally recognized eco-tourism accreditations, Blue Flag and White Flag, that would catapult Playa Norte and, consequently, the island into the ranks of Cancún and various other premier tourist destinations along the southern Mexican coast, further imprinting Isla Mujeres as a permanent fixture on the global eco-tourism map. Over the

course of the implementation of the ordinance, an estimated 150 migrant vendors were forced to close shop, many of whom identified as or were considered local *isleños*, residents of the island, and had worked as vendors for over twenty years along Isla's beaches.

Shortly after its implementation, the decision by the local government caused heated and emotional discussions within the non-Mexican immigrant population, tourist, Mexican national, and local *isleño* communities. Tourists who regularly visit the island felt that local officials went too far in their decision to clear the beaches of *vendedores ambulantes* and in the forceful implementation of the ordinance. The debate that followed the government decision across these four groups came to a boiling point, centering around topics of community ownership, local versus non-local identity formation, and highly charged racial discourse that was rooted in already existent ethnic divisions. This singular event, the forceful and at times aggressive removal of vendors from the beaches of Isla Mujeres, demonstrates how performance in tourism can serve as public pedagogy in which the aesthetic foregrounds the intersection of politics, tourist sites, and embodied experience (Alexander, 2005).

This chapter examines discourse across five groups, non-Mexican immigrants, tourists, local *isleños*, Mexican nationals and local government and police officials who either were present during or engaged with these activities. We deploy a multi-methods approach, including participant observation, informal interviews, and virtual exchanges as well as surveys of local online and print media. Across these various platforms and medium, ideas of a more sustainable tourism industry are negotiated, as are the consequences of striving for a particular economic model that thrives at the expense of peripheral economies and the ethnic minorities they employ. Through an analysis of the events that unfolded on Isla Mujeres in 2014, this

chapter will demonstrate the intersection of performance and performativity in the deployment and marking of the racialized *chiapaneco* subject on the island, the worker from Chiapas who works in the informal economy, during a moment of performative intervention by the local administration on the island that, in Langellier's words, "situates performance narrative within the forces of discourse" (Langellier 1999: 129) By approaching the forces of discourse through performativity in this way, we trace how the dramaturgical staging of identity, race, community, belonging, and aesthetics stoked the refusal of particular communities already marginalized throughout Mexico who did not quite accommodate the cosmopolitan aesthetic and ideal.

In focusing on performance in tourism space and practice, this chapter draws upon various scholars who have analyzed the ways that tourism is staged. Following Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, we hold that tourism is made up of encapsulated contingent events that are cotidian in nature (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). Though, as this chapter shows, the events that produce tourist stages can also be directed and performative, at times conflicting with other stagings. As Edensor reveals, tourism is a constant practice of re(production), a process that "involves the ongoing (re)construction of praxis and space in shared contexts" (Edensor 2001). This very (re)construction may very well be interrupted by other staged events, ideologies and spaces.

**Figure 1**  
**Photo of Isla Mujeres by Philip Edge**

SETTING THE STAGE

Isla Mujeres (the island of women) is a small Caribbean island located off the coast of Cancun in the southern Mexican state of Quintana Roo. It is roughly five miles long and a half mile wide at its widest point, and home to an estimated 13,000 residents, many of whom travel to and from the island on a regular basis given its proximity to other tourist destinations and urban centers in Mexico and states along the border of the United States. Over the past 10 years, Isla Mujeres has been called the 17th most colorful city, best island to escape to, 6th best island on the planet, and 10th best beach on the planet by sources such as TripAdvisor and the Telegraph, and Playa Norte has been ranked the best beach in all of Mexico. What was once a sleepy, lightly populated fisherman island has become a premier tourist destination. In particular, Isla Mujeres attracts eco-tourists looking to enjoy the clear turquoise waters and the silky beaches, to swim with whale sharks and large manta rays, to dive and snorkel the reefs and underwater museum, and to experience the release of baby sea turtles. It also attracts cultural tourists who enjoy the slow pace of life on the island, the musical and food traditions, and the history and cultural diversity the island offers.

Throughout the course of the past several decades, the island's economy has been supported primarily by the tourism industry. An integral part of the cultural landscape that gives shape to this tourism industry has been mobile vendors, or *vendedores ambulantes*, who sell their artisan crafts, hammocks, clothing, and food items along the beach, many of whom bring their business directly to beach dwellers who rest casually along the island's sandy beaches. For the tourist, these interactions were not a nuisance, rather they allowed them to

feel more integrated into the fullness of island life, a participant in local economies. For a few pesos and a moment of their time, they got a souvenir and a conversation, a reciprocal exchange, a seat at the the front of stage of tourism activity on the island. In this staging, the tourist was both audience and participant in an immersive dramaturgical experience in which the *vendedores ambulantes* are those performing island culture and an integral part of the tourism landscape.

However, in the summer of 2014, the municipal government of Isla Mujeres enacted a range of measures to comply with standards set by two eco-tourism accreditations, White Flag and Blue Flag, the former, an accreditation that paved the way for the second, a global accreditation. The effort to become accredited in both certifications immediately followed the listing of Isla Mujeres' Playa Norte as one of the top 10 beaches in the world by Tripadvisor user polls, and was to further galvanize and expose the image of the island. Of the image of the island, the mayor at the time stated, "*Isla Mujeres is a world class destination. One of the compromises of this administration is that visitors leave with a positive vision of the island. As a society and government, we should work together so that tourists leave with an image of a municipality that is safe and secure.*" <sup>2</sup>

**Figure 2**  
**Women vendors from Chiapas on Playa Norte, Isla Mujeres, just before sunset. Photo by Jennifer Miner Pierce**

2 Translated from the original Spanish: "*Isla Mujeres es un destino de clase mundial y uno de los compromisos de esta administración es que los visitantes se lleven una buena imagen. Como sociedad y gobierno debemos trabajar unidos para que los turistas se lleven la imagen de un municipio limpio y seguro.*" <http://islamujeres.gob.mx/2017/09/02/mantiene-gobierno-municipal-y-zofemat-playas-limpias-y-seguras/>

In principle, Blue Flag would contribute to the preservation of Isla's prized marine wildlife and ecology, the safety and cleanliness of its beaches, and the established eco-tourism economy. As an international mark of distinction in the eco-tourism industry, Blue Flag would further impress Isla's beaches and marinas upon the map of the world's premier eco-tourism destinations. In their interpretation of standards set by Blue Flag and White Flag, the municipality took a performative and pedagogical approach, enlisting the Department of Control and Fiscalization to police all beaches for trash and pollution, and to attend to concerns around health and sanitation compliance. According to the local municipality's interpretation of eco-tourism standards vis-a-vis health and sanitation regulation, informal vending and income-related activities fell outside of the scope of legal compliance. By expanding the interpretation of health and sanitation concerns to all informal commerce, the beach "clean up" ordered by municipal government and implemented by the local police extended to all informal economies including those employing *vendedores ambulantes* regardless of whether such a risk was present.

On March 23, 2014, this regimen went into effect. Municipal police of Isla Mujeres took to the island's tourist-laden port entry, beaches, and other public thoroughways demanding that vendors evacuate the premises. Wielding arms and a mandate from the local government to effectively "clean the beaches" (*limpiar las playas*), police forcefully removed and confiscated vendors' products and carts throughout the months that followed. One by one, local authorities escorted vendors to the Palacio Municipal, the island's center of municipal offices, where they were later charged fines of \$900 to \$1500 pesos and ordered not to return to their vending sites again. Local officials urged that the island's high-trafficked areas were to remain clear of all

informal commerce, trash, and other “nuisances” in order to uphold standards of cleanliness and safety that fell in line with the administration’s tourism development agenda.

This government intervention set the tone for the strategic removal of the island’s beach and street vendors from main thoroughways for months to come. From March 23 onward, police and sanitation officials conducted routine inspections in targeted locales around the island. During and prior to these interventions, representatives from various departments within the municipal government were in conversation around strategy and response. Likewise, the local population erupted into conversation. The effects variably impacted multiple constituencies, both the “true residents” of the island, or *isleños*, and migrant labor communities.

This paper contextualizes the complex terms of belonging and citizenship being negotiated during these interventions by the municipality of Isla Mujeres with an emphasis on the role of performance. By performance, we draw upon Burke, focusing on the actors, purposes, scripts, stories, stages, and interactions present during this time (Burke 1969). The argument is elaborated in three parts. First, we situate practices of “beach cleaning” within the broader sets of administrative discourse on tourism in which they are embedded. This discourse actively produces standards for Mexican citizenship that include expectations for how the citizen is to contribute to the economy and the labor force that supports tourism industry. Second, ethnographic material shows just how this discourse traveled through the regulatory force of municipal practice governing labor in performative events. This ethnographic material will be placed in conversation with existing scholarship on tourism in Isla Mujeres and the state of Quintana Roo more broadly, which describes how the terms of citizenship in the region are



being marked ethnically through administrative discourse and practice. The chapter will conclude with a reflection on how performative interventions by the local administration produced certain modes of belonging and citizenship that drew upon existing stratifications rooted in economic and ethnic differences.

As the chief administrative body overseeing tourism in Mexico, the Ministry of Tourism, or SECTUR, is responsible for strengthening the country's tourism industry by setting into motion strategic policy directives that produce priorities in the services that are offered through tourism. SECTUR communicates their vision for tourism culture as follows:

*When we speak of the touristic culture we are making a reference to the participation of people looking for possible ways to generate more tourist activity; this implies the commitment to learn about tourism in order to contribute to its growth and in order to benefit from its amenities, dedicating the necessary attention to develop tourism into the sustainable activity that it should become.*<sup>3</sup>

This quote articulates specific expectations for those who participate in Mexico's tourism industry, expectations expressly rooted in terms of economic profit and growth. As part of a broader framework of economic citizenship in Mexico, this discourse puts in place standards for economic activity that are designed to support the tourism development agenda set forth by the municipal government.

In conversations with representatives from the office of the President, the Federal Maritime Land Zone (ZOFEMAT), and the Departments of Control of Sanitation, Economic Development, and Social Development on Isla Mujeres, these standards for economic activity grounded each of their expressed concerns and priorities around internal migrants who come

<sup>3</sup>SECTUR. [http://www.sectur.gob.mx/wb2/sectur/sect\\_9070\\_breviario\\_de\\_cultura](http://www.sectur.gob.mx/wb2/sectur/sect_9070_breviario_de_cultura); Accessed on 08/09/2014. Accessed 17 July 2014. Translation by Ilda Jimenez y West, 2007.

to the island for work in informal markets. In particular, their concerns were directed towards those beach and street vendors who come from Quintana Roo and the Yucatán, especially migrants from the state of Chiapas (the “*chiapanecos*”) who have been working off the grid from formal tourism economy and thus, in their view, do not contribute to the formal development economy. Although this group of internal migrants is employed in irregular labor markets, they do indeed contribute to the tourism economy and landscape.

Based on interviews with local officials, Isla’s vendors did not adequately contribute to the tourism economy that they aspire to develop. For these officials, vendors reportedly came to the island from Chiapas with a low level of education, poor English language ability, and no technical skills, so they did not provide the abilities required for Isla’s economic growth. Instead, they reportedly took advantage of government spending and present a host of problems for Isla’s society such as substance abuse, domestic abuse, uncleanliness, manipulation, and, as revealed in the events of summer 2014, failure to comply with safety and sanitation regulations. By purportedly demonstrating these and other unfavorable behaviors, the community of migrant vendors and, more specifically, the *chiapanecos* employed in the sector, created obstacles for the municipality’s future development agenda. During these exchanges around *vendedores ambulantes* and the characteristics this group purportedly espouses, the use of the *chiapaneco* category often carried a specific connotation with reference to an ethnic minority, namely, that of indigenous descent.

A rather different perspective of these events was communicated by beach and street vendors that migrated to Isla Mujeres for work from elsewhere in southern Mexico. From their standpoint, the restrictions of belonging and citizenship imposed upon them during the

performative and pedagogical moment in which the police cleared the beaches were exclusionary and marked by ethnic exclusions, which drastically changed their position and experience at the front stage of as part of the tourism landscape. Their living conditions, that at the back stage, remained the same, though were still out of the view of view in Isla's tourism landscape.

### **THE BACKSTAGE: Living Conditions**

The high degree of mobility that characterizes Isla's resident and tourist population makes it difficult to find clear boundaries of the *isleño* category. Many *vendedores ambulantes* who sell paletas, or popsicles made of fresh fruit, are considered *isleños* who have been vending on the island for decades. Many other *vendedores ambulantes* came to the island from other parts of the country, primarily from the state of Chiapas. While a portion of these migrant vendors live on the island, a still larger portion live on the mainland, either within the Cancun city limits or the mainland area of the Isla Mujeres municipality, often referred to as the "Continental Zone."

The following ethnographic reflection, recorded during the summer of 2014, describes an afternoon spent exploring the residential sites that are home to many of the migrant vendors. These informal settlements, which are situated on the outskirts of Cancún and along the Continental Zone, provide an important gaze into the backstage of Isla's tourism economy:

After passing the city limits of Cancún, the bus winds up on a single stretch of road extending before me into the horizon. We can see a handful of structures scattered along our route—a labor syndicate, a gas station, a school bus stop. We exit the *taxi colectivo* and step

onto the dry and barren earth of Rancho Viejo, an informal settlement just outside of Cancún. Ambling past a Catholic church, my guide, Josue, points us towards the residential area of La Invasión, a squatter settlement that is nearly entirely off the municipal grid. We approach a neighborhood of encampments—a patchwork of salvaged planks of wood, rusted aluminum sheets, and blue polyethylene tarps. Passing the first row of houses, we notice a makeshift shop with an adjoining residence and enter. The shopkeeper, Rosa, is cautious, but welcomes our questions. She has little to say of her neighbors, despite her holding shop there for some three years. She knows no one, she tells us. For Rosa, all that has been consistent in La Invasión is movement of material and of identity within the community.

Rosa lives beside some two thousand other migrants in an informal settlement bordering Cancún. These are internal migrants who have traveled to the region to work in tourism. They have been deterritorialized, unable to reside within tourism centers due to their extreme poverty and policies that make permanent their irregular labor status, particularly in the case of *vendedores ambulantes*. They are left with no option but to work with an irregular status if they wish to remain in the sector. Day in and day out, Rosa and her neighbors live the permanence of transience.

This experience with Rosa in Rancho Viejo makes clear the physical and economic conditions at the backstage of Isla's tourism economy, and adds context to the events described. The vendor who enters the island as an internal migrant does so with precarious social and economic standing from the onset. Lacking the privileged "true local" or *isleño* status, the vendor who works as an internal migrant is discouraged, through institutionalized forms of exclusion and discrimination—at times linguistic, ethnic, and socioeconomic—from

accessing educational opportunities and entry into the formal economy. Likewise, the *chiapaneco* who works as a migrant vendor, a Mexican citizen, is accused of not paying municipal taxes and of stealing the isleños' job opportunities that are "rightfully theirs," mirroring the discourse around undocumented Mexican immigrants in the United States. The migrant vendor feels like a blemish to Isla's aesthetic of cleanliness and safety, evident in the government-led program to "clean the beaches." When all is said and done, the vendor is still expected to fully contribute to the demands of Isla's eco-tourism economy as well as its aspirational model for development despite all of these obstacles. This view of the *chiapaneco* worker existed well before the events of summer 2014, but was further present and consequential in and around the time of the municipality's performative move to clean the beaches.

### **Labor and Identity: A Flash Point**

One of the most characteristic of vendors on Isla Mujeres are the "paleta" or popsicle vendors, which are typically local businesses run by families who have been on the island for several generations. The family produces several flavors of popsicles by hand at night. Each morning, the older men of the families cart their bulky carts of popsicles, mini refrigerators with no electricity, from the middle to the most northern end of the Island. These carts are able to stay cold for many hours, though their cargo must be sold by the end of the day.

Often, the men push their carts over three kilometers to reach their target customers, the tourists on Playa Norte and other beach areas and sidewalks along the main beach road. Once they arrive to the beach, the vendors push their bulky carts through the soft sand,

traveling between beach umbrella and beach blanket, selling their popsicles for 20 pesos each. Although the objective is to sell the entire supply, selling out is difficult given work conditions. Vending is a demanding physical labor that is practiced under high heat and humidity. Once the day ends, the vendor make a 2.5 mile trek back home to one the residential neighborhood where they live located near the center of the island as cars and golf carts pass them by. That same evening, the process to prepare stock for the next day's sale begins.

### **Figure 3**

**A local isleño popsicle vendor's cart is confiscated for vending on the beach.  
Photo posted on a popular public facebook group.**

The popular image of the paleta vendors, as conceptualized in the front stage of tourism on the island, is an idyllic "true isleño," a resident and local who is dedicated to their labor and to the wellbeing of the island. Through the romantic gaze of a participant at the front stage, the paleta vendor is an honest, hard worker who takes much pride in his trade, much like fishermen or carpenters. Paleta vending, like other manual trades, is often passed along generationally; children learn the trade of their parents or relatives very early, master it throughout their lives, and pass the knowledge on to their children. At a particularly critical moment during the clearing of the beaches, a paleta cart was confiscated by the city for vending on the beach. Once word spread that the paleta vendors were also implicated in the policing of the beaches, the intervention became further politicized. For many living on the island, the right to access employment was based on how long one lived on the island which, once contradicted, led to public reproach.

The confiscation of the first paleta cart catalyzed an especially contentious debate around who has the right to participate in the tourist economy, based in large part on the owner being isleño, or resident of the island. Seizing the cart made the tensions between isleños and their local government more immediate, and added to strains already present with the affected community members from other parts of the country. Many of the local isleños' reactions posted in online public forums expressed outrage at the government for confiscating the popsicle cart. They were upset that the new policy affected vendors who had been selling their wares on the beaches for many years, and for some, decades. Those vendors have become part of the social landscape of the island, actors that were expected on the front stage. Some reactions were of pure outrage:

*"This is justice??? These people are the living, [expletive] working to earn a bite .. not like you, you are just sitting in your chair scratching your [expletive] ... they walk from sunrise to sunset ... while you're getting fat. God will not forgive you ... but for them, punishment ... What do you say? ... How can you punish men that work from sunrise to sunset and earn very little money".*

There were calls for public protests "so that we can protect our physical and moral integrity." Protests occurred. Those who protested were declined official vending licenses. This is not to say that all "locals" (isleño and Mexican nationals) were opposed to the government's actions. One resident expressed, "a congratulations to our president [mayor] for being the first president to clear our city street vendors and informal trade efficiently and effectively by removing the bad image of the streets which are mostly not even islanders." As responses to

the events became more heated, many fixated not only on difference in terms of the point of origin in geographic terms, but also of ethnicity, by focusing on certain types of vendors who were not from the island, but from the state of Chiapas. Those vendors look and dress differently, and generally come with a different socioeconomic standing. Now thought of as causing problems of health and sanitation for the island, they are furthermore seen as uneducated and dirty, a blemish to the island.

The local vs migrant worker distinction in discourse is reflected in economies around the world. In the United States of America, we can see trace the tensions over time easily, from the Irish immigrants of the early 1900's to the Latin Americans of the 21st century. "Locals" often feel that "outsiders" are taking away from the economy, as opposed to becoming an essential part of it. In the case of Isla Mujeres, we see how these distinctions are reinforced by a directed staging of tourism by the municipal government at a moment when economic incentives were especially present. This directed staging was made possible by the boundedness of tourism spaces.

As Edensor writes, "[tourist] settings are distinguished by boundedness, whether physical or symbolic, and are often organized – or stage-managed – to provide and sustain common-sense understandings about what activities should take place" (Edensor 2001, 63) However, this directed staging reaches its limit, which was manifest in the form of a backlash from tourist and resident populations, revealing a paradox inherent in tourism design. Edensor explains this paradox as "the production of tourist space concerns the intensification of attempts to design and theme space, and the increasingly promiscuous nature of tourism, whereby tourist stages proliferate." (Edensor 2001, 64) In the case of Isla Mujeres, boundaries



upon existing local and resident communities drew upon and produced such boundaries based on who is and who is not able to participate in tourism economy.

### **THE FRONT OF STAGE: Tourist Reactions**

Tourist responses came as quickly as local responses, but for very different reasons. The removal of vendors was quickly noticed by tourists, and was reflected in a flurry of social media exchanges that inquired into why. The tourists that the government was trying to please by attempting to improve the image of the island were unconvinced and, at times, upset with the direction that the local administration and police force had taken. There are many tourists who think of Isla as their own little secret island, or at least one of the best least known islands. They love its quaintness and non-commercialized aspects (e.g. there are no chain businesses on Isla). There were hundreds of responses on various social media platforms (like Tripadvisor and Facebook) opposing the government decision. One public post by a Tripadvisor user gives the general impression felt by most: "Please let ISLA be ISLA. We don't care about the top 10 of anything. We love the locals and admire their perseverance and hard work. Let them continue to sell on the beaches. This is their island and home, just leave them alone."

### **Economic Security**

As the tourism economy grows, so too does the demand for the labor. Migrant laborers from many different states in Mexico, like Chiapas, travel to Isla Mujeres, seeking to participate in the booming economy, even though their labor rights and protections do not equal those of the local workforce. As Torres and Momsen 2005 indicate, "in Quintana Roo, rapid growth of

the tourism industry has reinforced existing unequal relations of domination and subordination, while also producing new social, political and economic hierarchies manifest in patterns of uneven development” (279). The government creates programs to educate and train the workforce needed to fill the jobs needed to sustain this economic growth, but has its own economic constraints. Many migrant workers experience various barriers to social services currently offered, either from not knowing about them, feeling like they do not qualify, or experiencing linguistic and social barriers. The government is struggling to create a system that can assist isleños, while also facing a “brain drain” loss of those who are educated, as they leave the island for better economic prospects elsewhere.

Residency and locality have taken on deep political significance as the island’s diverse population vies for access to work and a sustainable livelihood for themselves and their families. Unstable claims to true residency cast the isleño, or the “true islander,” as a model citizen that carries entitlements to the island’s growth through eco-tourism and related opportunities. In this way, the performance of island residency and, ultimately, of belonging, become central themes throughout the course of events that took place during the beach “clean up.” Meanwhile, the municipality’s migrant labor populations compete for what few minimum wage jobs there are available and are blamed for taking these jobs from their rightful recipients, the isleños who most deserve to have the option should they so choose. This nebulous category of local identity is an important factor in who is allowed at the “front of the stage” in this tourist economy. The issue of who should be assisted most and who should be included in the economic future of Isla Mujeres leans more to those residents who claim true

isleño status. Leaving those who do not come from families who have been on the island for generations feeling lost.

By reflecting upon the perspectives of the migrant vendor community alongside administrative discourse on tourism, it becomes clear that the politics of locality has a direct impact on how or whether the Ministry of Tourism's standards are attainable. More specifically, where one comes from plays a major role in determining who may take part in economic activities that are perceived to contribute to the growth of tourism. However, there is an important check on the practice of governmentality at play here. As legal citizens of the country, the municipality of Isla Mujeres cannot readily deport the internal migrant vendor. Instead, Isla's municipal leadership must mobilize other normative parameters to justify revoking vending licenses and access to work for large segments of the migrant community.

Aesthetic preferences for cleanliness have given new meaning to the municipality's efforts to "clean the beaches," reducing the migrant vendor to a blemish that must be rubbed out. In her analysis of tourism on Isla Mujeres, Ilda Jimenez y West describes connections among ethnicity, citizenship, and notions of cleanliness. Through tourism, Jimenez y West argues that specific ideals of cleanliness have been etched into Isla's semiotic landscape. These ideals of cleanliness are shaped by assumptions around what is attractive to the cosmopolitan consumer. These are often values of Western import, and according to Jimenez y West, of whiteness. In effect, whiteness and cleanliness have become integral to the design process as tourism architects strive to create a more positive image of the island. "Isleños' perceptions of cleanliness in their island is grounded on their conscious ideology of race founded on a historical legacy of colonization."<sup>4</sup> In the process, enduring structures of racism produce

4Jimenez y West, Ilda. Good Hosts as Ideal Citizens: Crafting Identity on Isla Mujeres Jimenez y West, 18

economic and social stratification through a specific aesthetic of cleanliness supported by the tourism industry itself.

To put in context the clean up of beach vending orchestrated by the local government of Isla Mujeres, one only needs to look to Cancun to find a historical connection between social stratification and tourism development in Mexico more broadly. Following the completion of Cancún's hotel zone, Mexico became a global leader in state-directed Planned Tourism Development. From its inception, Cancún was anticipated to serve as an engine for regional development and equitable growth. However, the planned tourism has only increased social stratification. As geographers Rebecca Torres and Janet Momsen argue, "While Planned Tourism Development [in Cancun] has proved to be a highly profitable model of tourism development for transnational corporations, entrepreneurial elites and national governments, it does not necessarily translate into regional development, nor does it guarantee poverty alleviation for marginalised people."<sup>5</sup> Instead, Torres and Momsen argue that Cancun's tourism industry has only continued to produce uneven development that reinforces existing systems of social stratification while also producing new social, political, and economic hierarchies.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In tracing the activities during and after the "beach cleanup" of *vendedores ambulantes* on Isla Mujeres in the spring and summer of 2014, this chapter illustrates the intersection of performance and performativity in the deployment of the racialized chiapaneco subject in discourse across different groups, including local isleños, tourist communities, and the

<sup>5</sup>Torres, Rebecca, and Janet Momsen. "Planned Tourism Development in Quintana Roo, Mexico: Engine for Regional Development or Prescription for Inequitable Growth?" *Current Issues in Tourism* 8, no. 4 (July 15, 2005): 279.

municipal government and police force, each with different conceptions of the island's future . The discourse was situated within the staging of a premiere tourism economy on the island, and framed the local administration's performative and abrupt removal of the vendors from the beaches as a form of public pedagogy. In this chapter, we describe the ways this event brought into question the economic security of a few hundred people who were directly affected during the time of the beach "clean ups." We argue that the "beach cleanup" served as a performative move to shift the tourism landscape towards a cosmopolitan ideal at the expense of particular vulnerable communities, and ruptured both front and backstage of Isla's tourism industry.

## **References**

- Alexander, Bryant. *Performance Theories in Education: Power, Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity*. Erlbaum, 2005.
- Burke, Kenneth. *Rhetoric of Motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1969.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. *Destination Culture*. University of California Press. 2008.
- Langellier, K.M. 1999. Personal narrative, performance, performativity: Two or three things I know for sure, *Text and Performance Quarterly* 19: 125-144.
- Torres, Rebecca, and Janet Momsen. "Planned Tourism Development in Quintana Roo, Mexico: Engine for Regional Development or Prescription for Inequitable Growth?" *Current Issues in Tourism* 8, no. 4 (July 15, 2005): 279.

