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Everyday Tourism Encounters in Bocas del Toro — Understanding Afro-Antillean Experiences with Global North Tourism in Panama

GEO 511 Master's Thesis

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Abstract

Tourism development in Bocas del Toro (short: Bocas), Panama, driven by Global North investment and rooted in colonial histories, imperial policies and racial inequalities, has been producing tourism frontiers over the past three decades. Foreign land ownership, large-scale land privatization, and dispossession have left Afro-Antillean and Indigenous Ngäbe communities dependent on tourism economies, restricted from ancestral lands, and embedded in unequal labor relations shaped by neoliberal and colonial logics. This master's thesis centers the Afro-Antillean community of Old Bank on Bastimentos Island (Bocas) to examine their lived experiences with Global North tourism and the ongoing transformation of Bocas del Toro as a tourism frontier. Adopting a feminist political geography approach, I employ the framework of everyday tourism encounters to unpack how macro-structures of (de)coloniality in Global North tourism are embodied, negotiated, and contested at the micro-geographical scale of Afro-Antillean daily life and through Bocas' spatial landscapes. I situate this thesis within the intersecting fields of feminist political geography—focusing on the concepts of (de)coloniality, embodiment and the personal as political—and critical tourism studies. Drawing on five weeks of fieldwork in Bocas and a qualitative research approach, including 12 in-depth interviews with Afro-Antilleans and participant observations, my analysis reveals that everyday tourism encounters are shaped by both identity and spatial politics. The findings provide three key insights: First, a decolonial perspective highlights how tourism frontiers persist not only through land privatization and exclusionary spaces but also across racialized and gendered bodies. Secondly, I understand Afro-Antilleans as active agents who navigate, negotiate, and challenge these colonial hierarchies, thereby countering a narrative that portrays local communities as passive victims. Third, Afro-Antillean encounters with Global North tourism are deeply complex and cannot be reduced to binaries of exploitive versus meaningful; rather, they are embodied as ambiguous, contradictory, and continuously negotiated.

Keywords: everyday tourism encounters, feminist political geography, critical tourism studies, (de)coloniality, Afro-Antilleans, Bocas del Toro, Panama

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Abbreviations

Basti	Bastimentos Island
Bocas	Archipelago of Bocas del Toro
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PMTS	Plan Maestro de Turismo Sostenible de Panamá (Panama's sustainability master plan)
TDMP	Tourism Development Master Plan
UFC	United Fruit Company
UN	United Nations

1 Introduction

> "I love Basti a lot. I think what I love from here most is the environment of the island, like the view, sometimes you have a nice sunset, sometimes you have a nice ocean, you could have the rain. […] The island is really laid back. You don't have to rush. […] Basti for me is like my home, for me, nothing is like Basti. It's a warm island. The people receive you with your arms, no matter how long you go and you come back, people always like this stranger or local people. And tourism has good, and it has bad but it's always a nice place to live" (Lucia, 04.12.2024)

Old Bank is a small town on Bastimentos Island, known locally as Basti, and home to around 2,000 Afro-Antilleans, descendants of Afro-Caribbean migrants (Guerrón-Montero 2006; Pleasant and Spalding 2021). Bastimentos is one of the largest islands of the Bocas del Toro Archipelago[1], located in Panama's northwest on the Caribbean coast (*Fig. 1*). Today, Bocas del Toro—from now on referred to as the short version *Bocas*—is widely known as a 'tropical tourism paradise' and eco-tourism destination (Guerrón-Montero 2006).

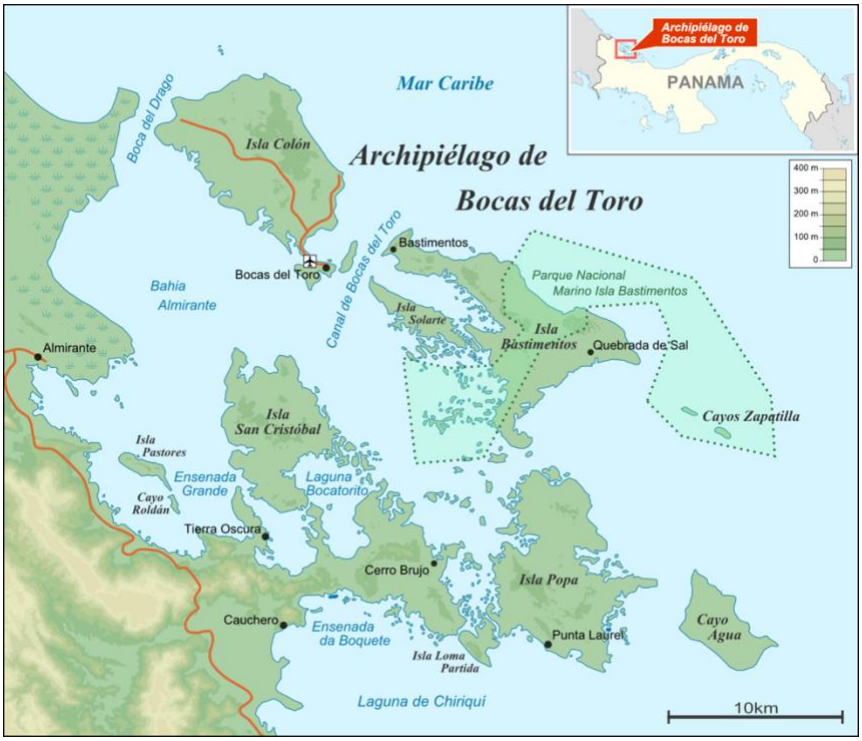

Fig. 1: Map of Bocas del Toro with Old Bank marked as 'Bastimentos' (Source: Wikipedia 2009)

I first experienced the fascination of this place when I visited the archipelago on a backpacking trip through Panama in 2022. Yet, returning to this context through critical scholarship revealed obscured realities: the seemingly idyllic tropical tourism landscapes of Bocas are interwoven with longer histories

[1] in Spanish called Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro

of colonialism and enduring inequalities in tourism development. Less visible through apolitical tourist lenses is that Bocas is a place deeply rooted in Panama's colonial and imperial history, marked by racial segregation and the marginalization of the Black Afro-Antillean communities. The Afro-Antillean population in Old Bank includes largely descendants from Afro-Diasporic workers who migrated from Caribbean islands to Panama between the 19th and 20th centuries to work on the railroad, in the construction and operation of the Panama Canal, or in the banana plantation industry (Benson and O'Reilly 2018; Corinealdi 2022; Guerrón-Montero 2006; Mollett 2023). Following the decline of the banana industry in the early 20th century, Bocas was largely neglected by the state, leaving Afro-Antillean and Indigenous Ngäbe communities socially and geographically isolated (Guerrón-Montero 2006). During this period, Afro-Antilleans actively claimed the 'unwanted' land as their home (Corinealdi 2022), sharing it with Indigenous Ngäbe communities for subsistence land use.

Things changed in the early 1990s, when rapid tourism development began to shape Bocas entirely. With support from the World Bank and the UN, the Panamanian government launched the Tourism Development Master Plan (TDMP 1996) that framed tourism as the central driver of sustainable development in Panama, with Bocas as one of its main targets. Through tax incentives and new laws to facilitate foreign direct investment (FDI) (Gaceta oficial 1994, 2020), the government created structures that privileged foreigners in acquiring land, attracting investors from the U.S. and Europe (Guerrón Montero 2011: 30; Mollett 2022: 332). What began small-scale, with a few visitors in the 1990s and community-based tourism rapidly developed into large-scale foreign investment, expanding tourism frontiers and transforming Bocas into one of Panama's most popular eco-tourism destinations (Guerrón-Montero 2006; Mollett 2022). This tourism development produced large-scale privatization of land, displacing Indigenous and Afro-Antillean inhabitants (Benson and O'Reilly 2018; Pleasant and Spalding 2021). Today, Afro-Antilleans describe up to ninety percent of island land as being under foreign ownership, creating 'tourism frontiers' where Afro-Antillean and Indigenous communities face restricted access to spaces once central to their livelihoods and increasingly tied to working in foreign-owned businesses (Claudia Fioretti Bongianino 2017; Guerrón-Montero 2006; Guerrón Montero 2011; Mollett 2021, 2022, 2023; Pleasant and Spalding 2021).

Critical tourism scholars have drawn critical attention to how tourism development, shaped by Global North tourism, reproduces colonial hierarchies, commodifies land and labor and reinforces inequalities between Global North settlers and impacted communities in the Global South—such as the Afro-Antillean community in Old Bank. The transformation of Bocas' tourism landscapes is therefore linked to broader neoliberal and colonial logics of enclosure and spatial colonization (Benson and O'Reilly 2018; Büscher and Fletcher 2017; Devine 2017; Devine and Ojeda 2017; Fletcher 2018; Gibson 2008, 2021; Mostafanezhad 2014; Walter 2023). For Afro-Antilleans in Old Bank, the consequences include growing land insecurities, precarious livelihoods, and continued racialized and gendered positioning within service roles (Mollett 2022).

1.1 Research Questions

It is within this context that I locate my research. After traveling to Bocas as a Global North tourist myself and engaging with critical scholarship later, I am interested in how Afro-Antilleans experience Global North tourism and the ongoing transformation of Bocas del Toro as a tourism frontier.

This thesis applies a feminist political geography approach, centering Afro-Antillean perspectives and lived experiences with the aim to critically engage with Global North tourism's impact on this local community. Through the framework of everyday tourism encounters, I analyze how coloniality in Global North tourism is embodied, negotiated, and contested at the micro-geographical scale of Afro-Antillean's daily life, and how this manifests spatially in Bocas' landscapes.

This focus leads to the following guiding research questions:

- Q1: How do Afro-Antilleans experience Global North tourism and the ongoing development of Bocas as a tourism frontier?
- Q1.1: How do Afro-Antilleans in Old Bank, Bastimentos Island, experience and negotiate everyday encounters with Global North tourism?
- Q1.2: What is the role of space in facilitating or restricting these encounters?

I use the term *Global North tourism* as a political category that captures individuals, groups, and institutions defined by colonial and capitalist class privileges. That includes not only Westerners traveling from Europe or North America but also class elites from the Global South. Following Becklake and Wynne-Hughes (2023), Global North tourism encompasses a spectrum of privileged and voluntary mobilities, including but not limited to backpacking, vacationing, party tourism, volunteering, and studying abroad. In the specific context of Bocas, the term further extends to long-term tourists, foreign residents such as expats, national elites and investors who own businesses or land. This definition is significant because it frames tourism not as an apolitical industry but as a practice embedded the ongoing colonial power relations that shape encounters, identities, and space. I also critically reflect on my own positionality as a Swiss researcher studying Global North tourism in a Global South context (see Section 3.2.3).

The decision to focus on Afro-Antilleans is grounded in both theory and practice. As a historically marginalized community in Panama, Afro-Antillean perspectives remain underrepresented in tourism scholarship and policy debates. Drawing on feminist and decolonial approaches, this thesis centers Afro-Antillean experiences and marginalized knowledges as valid sources of critical insight, aiming to expand on Eurocentric frameworks that continue to dominate discussions of tourism development (Maldonado-Torres 2017; Radcliffe and Radhuber 2020). On a practical level, my access to the field was facilitated through personal introductions to Afro-Antillean residents in Old Bank. While participants[2] referred to

[2] in particular my interview participants

themselves as *Afro-Antillean, Afroantillano*, *Afro-Panamanian*, or *Afro-Caribbean*, I use the term *Afro-Antillean* throughout this thesis for consistency, while respecting individual understandings of identity[3].

I use the framework of *everyday tourism encounters* to center the personal, lived experiences and micro-geographical scale of tourism in Bocas. The analytical framework builds on feminist political geographies of encounters, which approach the body and the personal as inherently political (Fluri 2015; Gillen and Mostafanezhad 2019; Hyndman 2004; The Combahee River Collective Statement 1977 2017; Zaragocin 2019). In this thesis, everyday encounters between Afro-Antilleans and Global North tourists are understood as the ordinary personal interactions that structure daily life—moments of contact such as greetings on the street, labor and service exchanges, or the shared use of public spaces (Gibson 2010; Gillen and Mostafanezhad 2019; Valentine 2008; Wilson 2017). By foregrounding the everyday and the intimate spaces in which tourism is enacted shifts, the approach shifts the focus from abstract macro-structures of coloniality (Section 2.1) and critical debates on tourism development (Section 2.2) to the micro-geographical scale of daily life. Afro-Antillean experiences in Bocas demonstrated that within these encounters, colonial power is not only imposed but also embodied, negotiated, resisted, and unsettled at the personal and bodily scale.

By placing Afro-Antillean voices, embodiment, and lived experiences at the center, this thesis contributes to the intersecting fields of feminist political geography and critical tourism studies. On the one hand, it grounds the analysis in political geography and engages profoundly with the concept of (de)coloniality (Escobar 2007; Fanon 2008; Maldonado-Torres 2017; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Quijano 2000) (Section 2.1). On the other, it extends critical tourism scholarship (Section 2.2) by drawing on feminist approaches and the framework of encounters, moving from postcolonial critique towards a decolonial lens (Section 2.3).

To engage these questions, I conducted five weeks of fieldwork in Bocas del Toro, employing a qualitative approach that provided invaluable insights into how Afro-Antilleans experience Global North tourism, and how these experiences are simultaneously shaped by identity politics and spatial politics. In a critical analysis of empirical data, I discuss how colonial structures persist through privatization of land, racialized and gendered service relations and exclusionary spatial politics. At the same time, I foreground Afro-Antillean agency through which tourism and its power structures are navigate and contested, rather than positioning Afro-Antilleans as passive victims. Ultimately, the data reveals the complexity of the experienced encounters, demonstrating that Afro-Antillean experiences with tourism cannot be reduced

[3] For many residents, identity is tied not only to ancestral roots in the Afro-Diaspora but also to share language, traditions, and cultural practices. Most speak English, Spanish and Guari-Guari, a local language blending in Creole English and Spanish. Cultural life is expressed through local cuisine such as journey cakes, bon bread, fried fish and plantains; vibrant music and dances like as the Congo dance; customs of sharing and caring; and religious traditions of the Methodist and Seventh-day Adventist churches in Old Bank.

to simple binaries of exploitation versus meaningful encounter, but rather that they are felt ambiguous, contradictory, and continuously negotiated in the moment.

1.2 Outline

The thesis is structured as follows. **Section 2** develops the theoretical grounding and scholarly embedding, engaging with coloniality, critical tourism studies, and feminist geographies of encounters as the central analytical framework. **Section 3** outlines the methodological approach, detailing how I apply feminist and decolonial research design, introducing fieldwork in Bocas and its analysis and limitations. Next, I discuss empirical data, whereby **Section 4** examines Afro-Antillean narratives of everyday encounters with Global North tourism, by focusing on forms and rhythms of encounters, while **Section 5** analyzes how the spatial politics of tourism development shape encounters and how encounters themselves manifest spatially. **Section 6** brings these strands together in a broader discussion of intersectionality, agency, and ambiguity. Finally, **Section 7** concludes with the key findings, suggestions for further research and implications for both practice and the field of studies this thesis aims to contribute to.

1.3 Field Site: Old Bank, Bastimentos Island

Before turning to the theoretical discussion, this section introduces the place-based context of Old Bank—the site of my field research—to ground this thesis in the situated context of Afro-Antillean everyday life.

Fig. 2: Main path through the town of Old Bank, Bastimentos Island (Author, 2024)

The town of Old Bank on Bastimentos Island stretches along the shoreline and up the hillside, surrounded by dense jungle, and accessible only by boat. Water taxis (Fig. *3*) connect it to the rest of the archipelago, including the mainland and Bocas Town, the more commercial center of the region. One main path runs through the town, which can be crossed on foot in ten minutes (Fig. *2*). The town feels joyful and lively,

filled with music and cheerful “Morning!” greetings exchanged on the street. At its center lies a square with a boat dock and space for gatherings. The town includes a primary school, a newly built hospital, police station, two churches, and a handful of shops, restaurants, and accommodations, some Afro-Antillean-owned and others foreign-owned. A twenty-minute walk connects the town with the next beach (Fig. *4*). Alongside the predominant population of Afro-Antillean and Indigenous Ngäbe, the population of Bocas today also included Panamanian-mestizos, Chinese-Panamanians and expatriates or residential tourists (referred to in this thesis as long-term tourists or foreigners). These are primarily from Europe and North America (Guerrón-Montero 2006; Pleasant and Spalding 2021), though also South American, such as Argentina. Most of these expats, however, do not reside in Old Bank itself (*Fig. 5)* but in separate areas (see Section 5.2.1).

Fig. 3: Water taxis in Old Bank (Author, 2024)

Fig. 4: First Beach, Bastimentos Island (Author, 2024)

Fig. 5: Aerial view of Old Bank (Author, 2024)

During my field work in Old Bank, I experienced the town as a place of deep belonging and pride, an impression shaped by the expression of “I love Basti” that often surfaced in Afro-Antillean stories of growing up on the island, feeling at home, and recalling favorite places such as First Beach[4], alongside senses of tranquility and freedom. It also resonates with Lucia’s words at the beginning of this introduction. Yet, this strong place-based attachment coexists with concerns about land insecurity, rising costs of living, dependence on tourism and worries about tourism pressure and future changes.

Afro-Antillean livelihoods are increasingly tied to the tourism economy, with men often working as boat operators or fishermen, while women are mostly employed in service jobs and care roles, both within tourism and at the household level. Some Afro-Antilleans run small-scale businesses, while many others work for foreign-owned businesses. The daily rhythms and lived experiences of Afro-Antilleans in Old Bank tell layered and complex stories which will be outlined in detail in Section 4 and 5. From this grounded place-based context, I now turn to Section 2, which outlines the conceptual framework for studying Afro-Antillean experiences of Global North tourism.

[4] The local expression First Beach refers to what tourists know as Wizard Beach.

2 Research Context & Scholarly Embedding

In this section, I situate my research within a broader academic discourse in human geography, focusing particularly on *conceptual approaches in political geography* (Section 2.1) and the intersecting fields of *critical tourism studies* (Section 2.2) and *feminist geographies of encounters (Section 2.3)*. The following sections outline an in-depth discussion of these bodies of literature and concepts. These discussions serve as theoretical framework for critically examining the empirical study on tourism encounters experienced by Afro-Antilleans in Old Bank and for understanding the entanglements of space, power, and identity in Bocas' tourism context.

2.1 Situating Tourism in Political Geographies of Panama

Political geography offers a valuable lens to focus on the spatial organization of power, sovereignty and identity to understand in what ways Global North tourism in Bocas reflect, (re)produce or challenge uneven geographies. This thesis draws on conceptual approaches from political geography, particularly those engaging with coloniality. This framework informs the analysis of how Global North tourism encounters, and the spatial and political landscapes of Bocas are shaped by enduring colonial power relations. Critical geographers, informed by these approaches share a critical view of colonialism as not confined as a historical condition, but as an ongoing influence of colonial legacies in the present that still shape social structures, politics and knowledge across time and space (Gregory 2004; Sidaway 2023).

In the following two subsections, I will first provide a theoretical overview of *coloniality of power and knowledge* (Section 2.1.1), before turning to the situated context of coloniality in Panama (Section 2.1.2). Together, these sections establish a theoretical foundation for understanding the situated colonial power relations and how tourism development in Bocas is embedded in wider political and historical geographies of coloniality.

2.1.1 Coloniality of Power and Knowledge

Before turning to the specific context of tourism in Bocas (Section 2.1.2), I first discuss both postcolonial and decolonial theoretical perspectives, placing the concept of coloniality at the center of the analytical lens. While also building on foundational postcolonial scholars (Fanon 2008; Said 1979), this work is particularly grounded in Latin American decolonial thought and modernity/ coloniality scholars (Escobar 2007; Maldonado-Torres 2017; Mignolo 2000, 2007; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Quijano 2000, 2007).

A core concept within this body of literature is **coloniality of power**, a term coined by the Peruvian sociologist and decoloniality researcher Anibal Quijano (2000, 2007) that explains the social order that has been established by European colonization of what is now Latin America in the 15th century and continues to shape global power structures today. Central to this concept is the link between labor,

capitalism and the invention of race. To serve the Eurocentric colonial and imperial capitalist economy, social categories such as race, ethnicity and nationality were constructed to justify social hierarchies and territorial control. Coloniality of power, a form of colonial present (Gregory 2004), can thus be understood as a system and power structure that has been established based on racial classification and constructed hierarchies that position European colonizers superior and colonized inferior (Quijano 2007). This structure profoundly shapes today's political geographies as the ruling class of the Global North, descendants of Western European colonizers, continue to be the main beneficiaries and at the center of modernity and capitalist power, while Latin America land and Indigenous and African descendant peoples have been systemically oppressed, dominated and exploited (Quijano 2007) reproducing the narrative of Eurocentric superiority (Quijano 2000). In line with this, I understand Global North tourism in the Global South rooted in this socio-political construct that is deeply intertwined with coloniality.

Coloniality's dehumanization logic that positions some people as less human than others, demonstrates how hierarchies of colonial power are not confined to race alone. They also encompass class, sex and gender hierarchies, which were similarly constructed to serve the interest of capitalist exploitation and institutionalized within European social structures (Fanon 2008; Maldonado-Torres 2017). As a result, the colonial-capitalist system in place continues to reproduce a global power structure in which whiteness, masculinity, and wealth are considered superior, while Indigenous, Black, poor, and non-male identities are systematically oppressed and marginalized. To fully grasp coloniality of power, it must be examined through an intersectional lens (see Sections 3.1 and 6.1), that recognizes how hierarchies of race, class and gender work together to sustain colonial power structures and inequalities (Crenshaw 1991; Lugones 2007; Maldonado-Torres 2017; Quijano 2007; Radcliffe 2017).

In Fanon's (2008) understanding of coloniality he reveals the psychological effects on internalized oppression among the colonized, such as the phenomenon of racism that lead Black people to pursuit of the white-dominated ideal and thus detest their own Blackness while white people are privileged with their unearned superior status of humanity. Building on Fanon's notion on the complexity and contradictions of colonized subjectivities (Maldonado-Torres 2017), this thesis engages with and expands on the nuanced perspectives and lived experiences of Afro-Antilleans in Bocas. My engagement with this notion of complexity and ambivalence is further elaborated through the decolonial approach outlined in Section 2.3.2 and revisited in the results in Section 4 and the discussion (Section 6.3), where I discuss how Afro-Antillean experiences with tourism are marked by ambiguity, contradictions and complexity.

A second core element of decolonial theory is the **coloniality of knowledge** (Quijano 2000), which critiques how Eurocentric, Western ways of knowing—shaped through colonial and imperial perspectives—have been framed as a universal and objective truth and embedded as dominant discourses in institutions and academia. Decoloniality scholars argue that colonialism remains *the* fundamental problem as today's world continues to be based on Eurocentric ideals of identity, modernity, knowledge and institutional structures like the nation-state, capitalism and sovereignty (Maldonado-Torres 2017).

They thus call to acknowledge plural, marginalized and place-based ways of knowing such as Indigenous or Black epistemologies that have been systematically excluded (Maldonado-Torres 2017; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Peake and Sharp 2024; Quijano 2000; Radcliffe and Radhuber 2020; L. T. Smith 2012). Moreover, modernity/coloniality scholars (Escobar 2007; Mignolo 2007; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Quijano 2000) challenge Eurocentric notions of modernity, revealing that modernity and rationality narratives (Quijano 2000) legitimize and feed capitalist and colonial power structures and hierarchies.

2.1.2 Colonial Histories and Spatial Inequalities in Panama and Bocas del Toro

Placing the concept of coloniality (see Section 2.1.1) in Panama's specific historical and geographical context is key to understanding Bocas' tourism landscape today, and how it is tied to territorial control, representation of people and place, and racial, class, and gender hierarchies. This literature review draws on scholarship that examine Panama as a space shaped by Spanish colonial legacies and U.S. imperial influence, underpinned by Eurocentric ideals of modernity and development (Benson and O'Reilly 2018; Corinealdi 2022; Duer and Vegliò 2019; Guerrón-Montero 2006; Pleasant and Spalding 2021). The review emphasizes the importance to acknowledge the complexity of Panama's political geographies and the plurality of discourses and epistemologies that shape the understandings of place and identity in Panama today (Duer and Vegliò 2019).

Today's nation-state known as Panama is deeply rooted in colonial history: Spanish colonialization, beginning with the establishment of Spanish settlements in the 1510s, deeply shaped the territory and societal structures for three centuries (Benson and O'Reilly 2018). Of less impact for the entire nation-state, but crucial for the local context of Bocas del Toro, colonial presence was further marked by Christopher Columbus who crossed Bocas on his 4th 'voyage' in 1502 (Guerrón-Montero 2006) and named the Island *Bastimentos* ('bastante alimentos' or in English, 'plenty of food') (Lucia, 28.11.2024; Marisol, 16.12.2024). Although Spanish colonial rule formally ended in 1821 (Benson and O'Reilly 2018), colonial power structures have continued to shape Panama's political geographies (Duer and Vegliò 2019; Radcliffe and Radhuber 2020). Nation-building was shaped by a racialized and class-based order enforced by the Spanish colonizers, legitimized through Eurocentric ideals of identity, sovereignty, modernity and development, while also being reinforced by U.S. imperial interests (Benson and O'Reilly 2018; Pleasant and Spalding 2021; Radcliffe and Radhuber 2020). Panama's 1903 independence from the Republic of Colombia was strongly supported by the U.S., driven by capitalist interest in constructing and governing the Panama Canal, and at the same time marked its economic and political dependency (Benson and O'Reilly 2018; Pleasant and Spalding 2021).

Closely linked to colonial labor relations (see Section 2.1.1 on the entanglement of coloniality of power and racialized labor), the Panamanian isthmus became a major hub for Afro-Antillean migration during the 19th and early 20th centuries. By the mid-nineteenth century, around 5,000 Afro-descendants from the Caribbean, primarily Afro-Antilleans from the West Indies, migrated, partly as enslaved workers, to work

on the railroad. By the early 20th century, over 50,000 migrants, mostly from Jamaica, came to Panama for the construction of the Canal or to work on banana plantations for the U.S. owned United Fruit Company (UFC) (Benson and O'Reilly 2018; Corinealdi 2022; Guerrón-Montero 2006; Pleasant and Spalding 2021). The 1903 treaty transferred control of the Panama Canal Zone to the United States, which lasted until 1999. At the same time, the U.S. imperialist government established a Gold versus Silver Roll system[5] that enabled the exploitation of Black labor (Benson and O'Reilly 2018; Pleasant and Spalding 2021).

A substantial body of literature focuses on the specific geographical area of Bocas del Toro and discusses its historical context and development from a banana dependent to a tourism dependent economy (Guerrón-Montero 2006; Guerrón Montero 2011; Mollett 2021, 2022, 2023; Pleasant and Spalding 2021). Bocas' history is deeply intertwined with its native population of Indigenous Ngäbe peoples and the Afro-Antillean population who migrated in the 19th and 20th century to find work on the UFC banana plantations (Guerrón-Montero 2006; Pleasant and Spalding 2021). The region of Bocas del Toro was marked by racial segregation/ racialization of space[6] (Duer and Vegliò 2019; Pleasant and Spalding 2021). Like the Canal Zone, Black workers in Bocas faced anti-Black policies (Corinealdi 2022; Mollett 2022) with men assigned the toughest jobs, while women and families were marginalized with limited access to jobs and living in poor conditions near the railway or port towns (Mollett 2022). When the UFC banana industry declined between the 1920s and 1930s due to a fungal disease, Bocas del Toro was neglected by the state and became geographically and socially isolated, leading to increased spatial segregation of the Black population (Guerrón-Montero 2006) until Bocas was transformed into a site for extensive tourism development starting in the early 1990s (see Section 2.2.1).

The relation of Panama, Bocas and the U.S. has been analyzed through the core–to-periphery model (Duer and Vegliò 2019; Wallerstein 2004), reflecting an exploitation-dependency relationship in which the canal and plantation economics served the capitalist interests of the U.S. (core) while Panama (periphery) remained economically dependent. Bocas, with its UFC banana industry, can be seen as Panama's internal periphery, characterized by both labor and land extraction that benefits the core while racialized groups were spatially segregated to the periphery (Pleasant and Spalding 2021).

I understand Panama's modern development and imperialist nation-building process, similar to other Latin American countries, as rooted in coloniality (Mignolo 2000; Quijano 2000; Radcliffe 2017) (Section 2.1.1). The construction of Panama's national identity as an Iberian American space is based on the racial

[5] White and U.S. citizens placed on the Gold Roll, receiving higher wages and better living conditions, while Black workers were placed on the Silver Roll, subjected to lower wages and dehumanized through social and spatial segregation and discrimination in housing, education, and public spaces (Corinealdi 2022).

[6] Racialization of space refers to how space is organized based on colonial order (Duer and Vegliò 2019).

and class-based hierarchies whereby racialized labor structures and spatial segregation reflect how global coloniality of power operates and manifests in the local socio-spatial relations in Bocas del Toro (Duer and Vegliò 2019; Quijano 2000; Radcliffe 2017). Coloniality of power has legitimized European immigration policies and the Gold vs. Silver roll system[5], which favored white immigrants[7], political and European-descent elites and mestizo Panamanian—those with a mixed ancestry, socially aligned with European norms and values. These groups gained and consolidated socio-economic power, controlled territory and were seen as fully Panamanian (Corinealdi 2022). In contrast, Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities and their voices, knowledge and rights were rendered invisible through exclusion, dispossession and marginalization (Benson and O'Reilly 2018; Radcliffe and Radhuber 2020).

While it is essential to critically examine how colonial and imperial systems have shaped Panama's nation-building (Section 2.1.1)—particularly through the exploitation, discrimination and marginalization of Black communities—I also draw on the notable contribution of 'Panama in Black' (Corinealdi 2022) which offers an alternative narrative emphasizing the impactful role and agency of Afro-Antillean Panamanians by connecting the Afro-diasporic world. This perspective positions Panama as a center of the Black diaspora, representing a place of hope, opportunities and connection across the Caribbean. While the Iberian American influence on nation-building shaped Panama through anti-Black policies, this counter-narrative highlights the active role of Black communities in shaping the national identity, positioning Afro-descendant migrants as agents rather than passive victims through resisting exclusion and claiming their right to belong (Corinealdi 2022).

Thousands of Afro-Antillean migrants chose to remain and settle in the Panama after initially migrating or being forced to migrate for work in the Canal Zone or at banana plantations. Many Afro-Antilleans settled in Panamá City, Colón or Bocas where they formed local Black communities, built churches and schools and started their own businesses (Corinealdi 2022). An example of Afro-Antillean agency can be seen in the case of Bocas del Toro, where, during the economic decline tied to the UFC banana industry, Afro-Antilleans decided to remain in the region and craved out a sense of belonging. In the absence of state investment and little economic interest in the region that suffered from geographical and social isolation, Afro-Antilleans were able to acquire plots of land. Alongside the native population of the Indigenous Ngäbe peoples, the archipelago became home to the Afro-Antillean community who developed a livelihood in the 20th century based on subsistence farming, fishing and small businesses (Guerrón Montero 2011).

2.2 Critical Tourism Studies: Tourism as Colonial and Political Practice

In the 1990, Bocas del Toro began to attract international attention for its picturesque tropical island landscape, due to an earthquake that hit Bocas in 1991 and brought the region into the media spotlight

[7] also discussed as white settlers or colonizers

(Guerrón-Montero 2006; Pleasant and Spalding 2021). In the years that followed, the region became focus of Panama's large-scale tourism development project (Guerrón-Montero 2006). As part the tourism investment strategy, the Panamanian government adopted a national tourism development master plan (TDMP) (TDMP 1996) that was framed as a key driver for sustainable development and supported by the Word Bank, the UN, and the World Tourism Organization, (Guerrón-Montero 2006; Mollett 2022). While the Panamanian government framed the TDMP as a pathway to economic development, this strategy is paradoxically based on the colonial structures and class divide between Global North and South and tourism as an industry that relies on labor hierarchies (see Section 2.1.1 on coloniality of power).

What is quickly introduced as the start of tourism development shows the key role for Bocas' tourism context and to understand Afro-Antillean experiences with tourism today. This section engages with the field of critical tourism studies and complements the discussion of coloniality (Section 2.1), by discussing tourism as a deeply colonial and political practice that reproduces—and at times contests—colonial hierarchies.

Unlike conventional tourism studies, which approach tourism development through the lens of economic growth, profit or marketing approaches, the field of critical tourism studies challenges these conventional perspectives by applying critical theory and addressing tourism's social, cultural and political dimensions with the aim to contribute to more equality and social and environmental justice (Morgan and Pritchard 2015). While this field of critical tourism studies encompasses a wide range of themes, for the purpose of this thesis, I discuss the following subfields: tourism development (Section 2.2.1) which is central to understand the political geographies of Global North tourism in Bocas del Toro, tourism imaginaries (Section 2.2.2) and performances (Section 2.2.3). Literature on encounters forms the broader framework of this thesis and is introduced in detail in Section2.3.

2.2.1 Tourism Development in Bocas del Toro

This subsection discusses the body of literature on tourism development and consults empirical literature on Bocas del Toro to build an understanding of the situated context of tourism in Bocas. A growing body of critical scholarship brings tourism development into conversation with neoliberal and (neo)colonial critique and understands tourism beyond a form of leisure but linked to the body of literature in Section 2.1, as a spatial and political process rooted in coloniality and with the potential to reinforce racial and socio-economic inequalities (Büscher and Fletcher 2017; Devine 2017; Devine and Ojeda 2017; Gibson 2009, 2021; Nepal, Saarinen, and McLean-Purdon 2016; Walter 2023). Like in the case of Panama, international agencies like the World Bank, the UN and national governments promote tourism as a driver for sustainable development in the Global South (Nepal, Saarinen, and McLean-Purdon 2016). Critical approaches on tourism development have been debating this dominant narrative that is framed as a benefit for all but often overshadows modern colonial power relations (Devine and Ojeda 2017; Duer and Vegliò 2019; Gibson 2021; Nepal, Saarinen, and McLean-Purdon 2016). A central critique of Global North

tourism in the Global South targets the commodification of land and labor whereby capitalist and extractive processes such as the privatization of space and maximizing profits lead to structural violence and spaces of exception (Büscher and Fletcher 2017). Other critical tourism scholars thus argue that tourism often operates as a mechanism of settler colonialism, relying on terra nullius logics that legitimizes land enclosures and the expansion of frontiers through legal reforms and normalized privatization (Devine and Ojeda 2017; Walter 2023).

This critical lens is echoed in the empirical literature on tourism development in Bocas, where processes of dispossession and displacement of native communities reflect the colonial structures discussed on Section 2.1. With rapid tourism expansion driven by the TDMP (1996) and sustained international investment as part of Panama's sustainable development strategy supported by the state and the World Bank, the once neglected and racially segregated region of Bocas del Toro has been transformed into one of the most popular eco-tourism destinations in Panama (Guerrón-Montero 2006; Mollett 2022). To boost this tourism industry, the Panamanian government introduced tax incentives and exemptions for foreign direct investments (FDI). Laws such Law 8 (Gaceta oficial 1994) and Law 122 (Gaceta oficial 2020) facilitate foreigners to acquire land and attract foreign investment (Guerrón Montero 2011: 30; Mollett 2022: 332). Up to today, the government continues to strategically advance tourism development (PMTS 2020). However, these legal pathways enabling foreign land ownership (Mollett 2023) have been functioning at the expense of local's subsistence land use. While tourism made up 15.3 percent of Panama's GDP, with Bocas' tourism industry as a significantly contributor (Pleasant and Spalding 2021; statista.com 2025), these development efforts have been discussed as reinforcing inequalities rooted in coloniality: Tourism development in Bocas has led to large-scale privatization of island land, causing dispossessions of Indigenous and Afro-Antillean inhabitants.

In this thesis, I approach tourism development in Bocas through the framework of coloniality. In the following paragraphs I analyze how Global North tourism and foreign investments manifest in practices of land control and the expansion of eco-tourism. Over the past decades, FDI policies have attracted mostly European and North American expats, to purchase land for residential tourism (Benson and O'Reilly 2018), investments and businesses. While foreigners benefit from Panama's tax incentives, these operate as legal pathways for foreign land control, turning Bocas' islands into privatized, elite and foreigners' enclaves (Benson and O'Reilly 2018) and gated communities (Pleasant and Spalding 2021). In such cases of legal land dispossessions (Mollett 2022), violence may occur in absence of physical conflict. Yet, legal reforms like FDI are used as a tools to dominate and control (Devine and Ojeda 2017), privileging predominantly white and higher-class Global North tourists over Black and Indigenous peoples, their bodies, and their land. Although Bocas is recognized as Ngäbe people's ancestral territory, whose land rights have been more formally protected, Afro-Antilleans have been facing repeated land insecurities and struggles to access their lands (Mollett 2022).

Building on the earlier discussion of the core-to-periphery model in Bocas during the UFC banana industry in 20th-century, Pleasant and Spalding (2021) show how similar patterns and exploitative structures continue today through tourism development. The racial and class-based hierarchies that once placed Afro-Antillean and Indigenous communities at the bottom are being reproduced in today's tourism landscape. Now, state-supported legal frameworks operate in similar racial logics, favoring mostly white settlers who own the majority of land and businesses, while the local Black population remains marginalized (Guerrón-Montero 2006; Mollett 2022, 2023).

As such, critical tourism scholarship has also turned to eco-tourism (Büscher and Fletcher 2017; Devine 2017; Devine and Ojeda 2017; Fletcher 2018; Gibson 2021) and volunteer tourism (Mostafanezhad 2014) which are critically examined for replicating neoliberal processes. In these contexts, green and cultural spaces in the Global South are advertised in the name of sustainable development. I build on scholar's call, cautioning against romanticizing sustainable tourism development and raise critical attention of Global North tourism's expansion in the name of sustainable development to its potential to reinforce exploitation and structural inequalities. Additionally, I pay attention to digital platforms such as Instagram, Airbnb, and TripAdvisor in their role of contributing to rapid tourism growth and spatial expansion of tourism into remote regions (Gibson 2021). Especially eco-tourism's spatial expansion to remote "off-the beaten-track" (Guerrón-Montero 2006: 73) areas is critically discussed as extended enclosures and capitalist accumulation through tourism's land control that result in the dispossession and displacement of local communities that are restricted to access ancestral lands (Harvey 2003; Nepal, Saarinen, and McLean-Purdon 2016; Wolford 2021). Paradoxically, while tourism often relies on natural resources and an intact environment, its practices frequently cause a broad range of environment degrading problems, causing harm to land, water, air and biodiversity (Gibson 2021). On Bastimentos, environmental conservation projects supported by the TDMP led to the fencing off large parts of the island. These projects driven by the state, national elites, long-term tourists and international NGOs, excluded native Ngäbe and Afro-Antillean communities from decision making. As a result, natives were dispossessed of hundreds of hectares of land, handed over to foreign investors and Western settlers. Feminist research highlights that these land dispossessions are interwoven with native populations loss of access to and their spiritual and intimate relationship with their land and nature and the threatening effects on their subsistence land use (Mollett 2022, 2023).

When applying the lens of coloniality/modernity to the Panamanian context, tourism development in Bocas mirrors Eurocentric ideals of modernity: promoting economic growth, territorial control through privatization and settler presence as markers of modernity and development (Mignolo 2000; Quijano 2007). Devine and Ojeda (2017) argue that these processes reinforce territorialization projects that exclude and erase Indigenous and Black geographies. Walter's (2023) adds to this conversation by highlighting how structures of racialized violence and white supremacy are deeply embedded in settler colonial dynamics of tourism development. I build on his call to recognize the complex and co-existing histories,

socio-natural relations, and contested identities that define a place, an approach particularly relevant for unpacking layered realities and power dynamics of tourism in Bocas.

2.2.2 The Tourist Gaze and Tourism Imaginaries

Another field of critical tourism studies examines how tourism experiences are shaped through tourism imaginaries, offering a critical perspective on how Global North tourism is shaped by visual and discursive expectations that are often rooted in coloniality. Central is the concept of the *tourist gaze* (Urry 1990), which argues that tourists are not passive consumers of place, but rather that their visual imaginaries are socially constructed Western narratives, rooted in colonial, imperial, and orientalist ideologies. These imaginaries reflect tourists' desires and ways of seeing the world, shaping how they perceive the places they visit and the people they encounter (Gibson 2010; N. Salazar 2012). Critical geographers have shown how dominant tourism narratives often overshadow and erase complex histories and socio-political realities, including past and present forms of oppression (Gibson 2010) and rely on exoticized representations to attract visitors (Becklake and Wynne-Hughes 2023).

Postcolonial theory offers a strong critique how colonial ideologies have shaped spatial imaginaries and cultural representation. Edward Said's (1979/ 2003) concept of Orientalism critically explores how in the nineteenth century Western Europe constructed the idea of the Orient as the inferior and mysterious opposite or so-called 'Other', which legitimized Western domination, superiority and authority. I consider Said's Othering theory as key to understand how colonial discourses are not tied to the past but continue to shape today's ideas and narratives about places and people. While Said (1979) focused on Orientalist representations of the Middle east, other postcolonial and critical geographers have expanded this concept to the broader binaries of West/non-West and Global North/Global South (Sidaway 2023).

Fig. 6: Polo Beach framed as a tropical paradise through Western imaginaries (Author, 2024)

Such Othering discourses manifest in Global North imaginaries that construct the non-Western world, such as places like the Archipelago of Bocas del Toro, as the inferior, exotic and backward: the Other, that is available to be consumed and controlled (Oh 2022; Said 1979). Fig. 6 illustrates a typical image of Bocas, visually reproducing the imagined tropical paradise. In the Caribbean context, the Western gaze and imagined geographies of the tropical or exotic paradise have long shaped regional perceptions (Sheller 2003), perpetuating colonial ideas of the exotic 'Other' and

producing a homogenous and depoliticized representations of the Caribbean (Devine and Ojeda 2017).

Scholars have critically examined how Global North tourists actively reproduce such imaginaries through guidebooks (Bergmeister 2015), postcards and maps (Devine 2017), travel blogs (Henry 2021) and social media platforms like Instagram (Oh 2022; S. Smith 2018), whereby the latter is emphasized as a key driver that amplifies the tourist gaze (Bergmeister 2015; Gibson 2021; Oh 2022; S. Smith 2018).

Said's postcolonial lens allows to critically discuss Global North tourism in Bocas not just as a neutral practice but as shaped by colonial thought and Orientalist/ Othering discourses[8] (Salazar 2012). It also allows to challenge how Global North tourists and Western scholars (re)produce colonial discourses that construct Bocas del Toro as a Latin American and Caribbean space as exotic and consumable and thus also as inferior and imagined Other. Hence, I consider this scholarship as valuable to.

I argue that a focus on tourism imaginaries is insufficient for the purpose of this thesis. While this perspective helps to contextualize how tourists' visual and discursive expectations shape the conditions under which encounters between Afro-Antilleans and tourists unfold, it cannot adequately capture the structural dimensions of colonial processes in tourism development—particularly those manifested in foreign land ownership and exclusionary spaces (Section 2.2.1). Because imaginary scholarship largely centers the tourist gaze—mostly from a Global North perspective—it leaves little space for Afro-Antillean perspectives. Yet, this thesis precisely seeks to center how Afro-Antilleans experience tourism in Bocas. Postcolonial critique, while powerful and foundational, often remains anchored in Global North lenses and risks reinforcing coloniality of knowledge by reproducing dominant Western discussions instead of engaging with perspectives that have historically been silenced but are most affected by colonial legacies (see Section 2.1.1). Therefore, as I outline further in Section 2.3.2, I draw on decolonial approaches that shift the focus toward Afro-Antillean perspectives, aiming to understand their complex and nuanced experiences of tourism in Bocas.

2.2.3 Tourism as Performance

Moving beyond the visual gaze, scholars have extended Urry's (1990) concept by engaging more deeply how tourism is enacted. Salazar (2012) offers a compelling synthesis of how tourism is both produced and consumed, bridging the visual dimension of the tourist gaze with embodied practices and the metaphor of tourism performance. He emphasizes that tourism is not only about seeing, but also about doing which can be staged, negotiated, and experienced through embodied interactions.

The metaphor of performance in tourism draws on MacCannell's (1976) concept of staged authenticity which highlights the tourist's urge to encounter 'authentic' cultural experiences such as handicraft demonstrations or dances performances. These experiences, however, are often rather constructed and performed on the 'frontstage' to align with tourist's imaginaries, while the lived realities of local life

[8] Aligning with Foucault's (1979) concept of discourse as a system of knowledge and power, Western narratives, such as Global North tourism imaginaries, often reflect Eurocentric colonial power structures.

remains in the 'backstage'. Edensor (2001) extended on this thought by conceptualizing tourism as both staged by hosts and performed by tourists through visual, spatial, and embodied practices. Some examples are guided tours (Salazar 2010), cultural performances, and the maintenance of cleanliness work to construct specific narratives for tourist consumption. Simultaneously, tourists themselves perform through embodied practices, shaped by cultural norms and habitus, identity performances (e.g. those of backpackers[9]), and predetermined experiences found in travel guidebooks and collective imaginaries that are dictating tourist performances. The notion of performed tourism (Edensor 2001; MacCannell 1976) is especially useful for understanding tourism encounters not as spontaneous and neutral interactions, but as shaped by spatial configurations, (re)produced discourses, and embodied practices and expectations.

Drawing on literature on tourism performance would conceptualize Global North tourism in Bocas as actively produced through these performative and staged dimensions. In my research I shift the focus to the role of local key workers—such as Afro-Antillean hosts—whose labor in maintaining, managing, and guiding space is central to shaping the conditions under which tourism encounters between Global North tourists and local communities unfold. I aim to understand how dynamics of Global North tourism and Afro-Antilleans works along these lines or contests authentic[10], staged, and/ or performed tourism. In contrast to authors arguing for tourism's performative nature, I keep critical and attentive to the personal experience in the field, which indicate more nuanced narratives than these generalizable and simplified categories of authentic versus performed tourism practices (see Section 4.2.3).

2.3 Feminist Political Geographies of Encounters

Building on the understanding that colonial power relations outlined in Section 2.1 persist in contemporary tourism practices (see Section 2.2), this section turns to feminist political geographies as an essential lens for analyzing how these power structures are embodied, lived, and contested in everyday life. While earlier sections have considered the macro-level frameworks of coloniality and tourism, here the focus shifts to the micro-geographies of colonial power—how tourism is experienced and negotiated at the level of the body and everyday lives.

Drawing on feminist scholarship, I engage with the idea that the body and the personal are inherently political (Hyndman 2004; Zaragocin and Caretta 2021), a reasoning that illustrates the importance of studying political geographies on a micro-geographical level of lived and embodied experiences. Feminist geographers argue that experiences of power, violence, and resistance are lived through bodies—that is, they are not only socially or structurally produced but also embodied. The concept of embodiment bridges feminist theory with political geography by revealing how geopolitical structures are inscribed onto and

[9] An example of an identity performance of a backpacker would be travelling rather light weight, being interested in culture and nature, informing themselves by and mingle with other backpackers, usually in hostels and on a low budget (Edensor 2001).
[10] A critical lens also draws attention to how what is perceived 'authentic' can, in fact, also be stage-managed and commodified for tourist consumption.

felt through bodies (Hyndman 2004). This emphasis informed my research design and the formulation of my research questions: I place Afro-Antillean personal and bodily experiences at the center of my research as a way to study the broader structures of coloniality (Section 2.1) and critical debates on tourism development (Section 2.2.1). By grounding my analysis in lived and embodied experiences, this thesis reveals how colonial power structures are felt, negotiated or unsettled in the everyday encounters and spatial realities of Afro-Antilleans in Bocas.

An inspirational source to my research interest is Mollett's (2021; 2022; 2023) feminist political geography research on tourism in Bocas. Mollett (2022) has analyzed the racialized and gendered hierarchies in Bocas' tourism and showed that struggles linked to tourism development—such as land control and dispossessions—are also embodied struggles. Her work draws on the concept of *cuerpo-territorio*, a decolonial methodology that invites research participants to draw 'their' bodies on a piece of paper and indicate emotions, pains or memories. This body mapping exercise centers the felt experiences in the body through visualizing the connection between body and territory. This approach allows to include alternative ways of knowing and marginalized voices while dismantling dominant Eurocentric frameworks (Zaragocin 2019; Zaragocin and Caretta 2021). Although I do not apply the cuerpo-territorio method in my own research (see Section 3.5), I share its underlying logic by paying attention to the body as a site of knowledge production and struggle (Zaragocin 2019; Zaragocin and Caretta 2021). In particular, I draw on Mollett's critical attention to intersecting social identities and forms of oppression (see Section 3.1). For instance, she finds that Afro-Antillean women in Bocas are often employed by foreigners and naturalized as domestic worker such as maids or cooks—despite having higher education—embodying the effects of tourism's settler dynamic and capital accumulations (Mollett 2022). Afro-Antillean women's jobs often go beyond formal agreements, as shared narratives indicate how some jobs start in cooking but extend to care work at employers' homes, fishing at night, and in some cases sexual labor (Mollett 2022). These blurred and exploitative labor relationships between Black female workers and white foreign employers are intimately structured in colonial hierarchies of racial and gendered labor and ownership structures (see Section 2.1.1) and as insights from my field work show, entangled with economic dependency and practices rooted in care (see Section 4.2.2).

In sum, the feminist approach I employ (see Section 3.1) centers on how Global North tourism in Bocas and the broader colonial structures underpinning it are lived and felt by Afro-Antilleans in deeply personal ways and shaped by their intersecting identities. I foreground these personal dimensions through the analytical vignette of everyday tourism encounters, which I outline in the following section (2.3.1)

2.3.1 Everyday Tourism Encounters

To examine how colonial power relations between Global North tourists and Afro-Antilleans unfold, I turn to literature on geographies of encounters. This perspective is aligned with the feminist lens and concern for the personal and embodiment (outlined above in Section 2.3) and shifts the focus from abstract

structures (see Sections 2.1 and 2.2) to the everyday, immediate, situated interactions—so-called micro-geographies—through which tourism is enacted, and colonial power is reproduced, negotiated or unsettled.

Tourism encounters can be described as the "immediate, embodied and geographical" (Gibson 2010: 521) interactions between people, places, and identities. I understand tourism encounters as complex, relational and fluid moments that are both shaped by broader power structures, the context and the form of the encounter but also negotiated in the moment of the encounter. I use "everyday encounters" to refer to ordinary, often repetitive moments between Afro-Antilleans and tourists in Bocas—greetings on the street, exchanges in guesthouses, or the provision of services and care. Following Edensor's (2001) metaphor of tourism as performance, I understand the everyday as embedded in habitual, unreflexively, embodied practices—those taken-for-granted moments that structure daily life. Foregrounding the everyday also a offers a feminist lens as it means to focus on the intimate and relational dimensions of tourism. Everyday encounters can be unspectacular yet unfold as meaningful. They can occur in shared (public or semi-public) or intimate spaces and vary from singular, brief moments of shock to long-term, repeated interactions (Wilson 2017). I lay critical attention to long-term or repeated encounters (see Section 4.2.2) as these have the potential to reinforce prevailing socio-political relations, intersecting identities and inequalities, but also open space for negotiation, resistance, or contestation (Gillen and Mostafanezhad 2019; Wilson 2017). Feminist research draws attention to the spatial politics of these encounters, which often take place across borders—not only territorial but also social and bodily. Such encounters between bodies may reinforce these boundaries, but they also have the potential to blur or undo them. As Wilson (2017: 456) observes, "encounters do not simply take place at the border but are rather central to the making and unmaking of them".

Within the (post)colonial strand of encounter literature, tourism encounter is often discussed as a charged concept that is shaped by binary and colonial ways of thinking and meetings of opposites (Wilson 2017): tourists/hosts, advanced/backward, Europe/the Orient—reflecting the construction of the 'Other' (Said 1979). My research explores how these colonial ways of thinking remain embedded in Bocas' tourism encounters but I also challenge simplistic binaries such as tourist as oppressor versus host as the oppressed, and argue that such binaries are oversimplifying the complex interplay of lived realities and power relations (Gibson 2010). Centering the embodied and lived experiences of Afro-Antillean residents instead builds on critical scholarship on geographies of encounters as discussed in the following paragraphs.

Critical scholarship cautions against depoliticizing everyday embodied experiences between tourists and hosts and oversimplifying sensory and interpersonal encounters. As Gill Valentine (2008: 333) reminds us "encounters never take place in a space free from history, material conditions, and power". Scholars call for critical attention to structural inequalities of Global North-South relations that often remain in the dark when focusing on the personal and emotional dimension of the encounter (Gillen and Mostafanezhad 2019; Mostafanezhad 2014; Valentine 2008). In their study on the intersecting field of tourism, geopolitics

and encounters, Gillen and Mostafanezhad's (2019) stresses that encounters are also deeply intertwined with geopolitics: Personal interactions do not remain on the bodily scale but rather reflect and reproduce the broader socio-political structures and relations at national, regional and global scales. This means that tourism encounters are never apolitical. They are embedded in social hierarchies and shaped by individuals' intersectional identities (Gillen and Mostafanezhad 2019; Valentine 2008). Encounters between tourists and Afro-Antilleans, then, must be understood not just as interpersonal events, but as interactions situated within broader legacies of colonialism and power.

This critical reflection invites to think about what counts as a 'meaningful encounter'. While tourism encounters literature portrays such encounters as moments of joy and wonder, Valentine (2008) challenges the assumption that politeness in public interactions or proximity inherently foster social transformative change[11]. She calls for critical attention how power operates within meaningful encounters asking 'who holds the power to tolerate' and questioning the difference between tolerance and mutual respect (Valentine 2008). Likewise, Wilson (2017: 460-461) cautions that Western academic scholarship often privileges the perspective of powerful or majority—the ethnic majority, colonizer, tourist, citizens, or the human—thereby marginalizing other perspectives and shaping whose experiences are recognized as meaningful.

By centering the perspective of Afro-Antillean participants, my research responds to this gap in literature. I focus on the micro-geographical scale of Afro-Antilleans personal experiences of these everyday encounters and what they consider as meaningful, while remaining attentive how positive felt encounters can obscure underlying power imbalances and inequalities. Inspired by a feminist lens and a politicized notion of the everyday, my fieldwork brings the seemingly apolitical, banal, bodily, and intimate experiences into conversation with a critical analysis of how these encounters are shaped by, and, or contest, the coloniality of power.

2.3.2 Towards a Decolonial Approach to Encounters

By studying the lived experience of Afro-Antilleans through a framework of everyday tourism encounters (Section 2.3.1), this thesis adopts a decolonial approach that expands postcolonial critique in two ways. First, I engage with the concept of (de)coloniality that draws on Latin American decolonial thought (Escobar 2007; Fanon 2008; Maldonado-Torres 2017; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Quijano 2000) to understand how political geographies of Global North tourism in Bocas is shaped by or contests coloniality (see Section 2.1). I argue that this analytical lens allows to analyze how tourism encounters are shaped by Global North colonial thought and practices as well how encounters are structured through coloniality that organizes people, relationships and space.

[11] Social transformative change could include but is not limited to overcoming prejudice through meaningful contact (Valentine 2008).

Second, I center non-academic Afro-Antillean knowledge and lived experience as the core of this thesis. I draw on decolonial critique of coloniality of knowledge (see Section 2.1.1): A decolonial perspective challenges the epistemic dominance of Eurocentric ways of knowing and being. Critical geographers argue for a rethinking of political geography through a decolonial lens, emphasizing the need to dismantle the structures that continue to reproduce colonial hierarchies and call for alternative ways of knowing and being that prioritize the perspectives and experiences of marginalized communities, centering lived experience as a source of critical knowledge (Radcliffe and Radhuber 2020). Rather than reproducing Global North perspectives and engaging with Eurocentric tourism narratives[12], I seek to extend or partially disrupt these academic narratives by engaging with and centering Afro-Antilleans, whose perspectives have historically been marginalized and underrepresented in the Panamanian context. This thesis thus prioritizes the personal lived experiences as valid sources of knowledge over one universal truth (Maldonado-Torres 2017; Radcliffe and Radhuber 2020). This focus offers a way to step back from dominant Western epistemologies and allows me to engage with plural and historically marginalized place-based knowledge (Mignolo 2007) that enables complex understandings and experiences of relationships between Global North tourists and Afro-Antillean locals and the spaces they share.

This framework not only informs the analytical lens of the thesis but also the methodological approach (see Section 3.2.2) of setting the stage for an ethical research commitment that includes a feminist research ethics (Peake and Sharp 2024). Decolonizing research, I am drawing on, is part of the ongoing process of unlearning and undoing of coloniality and imperial power relations and rethinking how we perceive the world through (de)colonial filters (Fanon 2008; Maldonado-Torres 2017; Tamale 2020). I thus follow a reflexive research practice that acknowledges my own Global North positionality and seek to avoid reproducing the very structures it aims to critique (see Section 3.2.3).

Finally, acknowledge that my thesis does not claim to be fully decolonial. Tuck and Yang (2012) have rightly cautioned against using decolonization as a metaphor, emphasizing that true decolonization involves profound social and political change, such as the decolonization of land from settler colonialism, which cannot be achieved through academic work alone. Nevertheless, this thesis aims to contribute to and build upon the continuous and unfinished process of decoloniality scholarship in political geography (Radcliffe and Radhuber 2020) by amplifying Afro-Antillean narratives, embracing the discomfort of unlearning Western epistemologies, following feminist and decolonial research ethics and trying to understand complexities and multiple narratives (Fujii 2017) (see Section 3).

In short, this section outlined the feminist and decolonial framework—and the vignette of everyday tourism encounters—through which I study Afro-Antillean experiences of Global North tourism in Bocas del Toro. I argue that the analytical lens of everyday encounters (Section 2.3.1) places the personal and intimate dimensions of Afro-Antillean lives at the center of analysis. This approach makes it possible to

[12] this includes critical literature about Western tourism imaginaries and tourist gaze of places like Bocas del Toro as an exotic tourist destination (add literature)

trace how broader structures of coloniality (Section 2.1) and Global North tourism (Section 2.2) shape encounters, while also attending to how these encounters are negotiated, embodied, and contested at the personal and bodily scale. This framework underpins the empirical discussion that follows after Section 3 on methodology: Section 4 examines the rhythms and forms of everyday encounters through Afro-Antillean narratives; Section 5 explores how the spatial politics of tourism development shape encounters and how encounters themselves manifest spatially; and Section 6 provides an overarching discussion of how intersectionality and Afro-Antillean agency structure, navigate, and contest encounters, and why these experiences must ultimately be understood through their ambiguity and complexity.

3 Methodology

In this chapter, I outline the methodological approach of this thesis. I begin by providing an overview of the research design, focusing on how I situate the study within a feminist and decolonial conceptual framework (Section 3.1). After I present an overview of my field research including how accessed the field, ethical considerations and reflections on my positionality (Section 3.2). Next, I introduce my data production using qualitative methods, primarily semi-structured interviews and participant observation (Section 3.3). Finally, I discuss the process of data analysis and reflect on the methodological limitations of the thesis (Section 3.5).

3.1 Research Design

Throughout this thesis, I adopt both a feminist and decolonial conceptual and methodological approach. These approaches shape the questions I ask, how I conduct research, and how I position myself within this research process. This framework guides me through the research process and my central aim of the thesis: to understand how Global North tourism shapes the everyday lives of Afro-Antilleans in Bocas del Toro, Panama. Focusing on the lived experiences and perspectives of Afro-Antillean residents in Old Bank, Bastimentos Island, I explore how encounters with Global North tourism are experienced, negotiated, and embodied, and how spatial dynamics shape these encounters. Before outlining how I approached these research aims through field research, I carefully unpack how my overall relational and reflexive research design follows a feminist research design.

I understand feminist research not only as a conceptual orientation but also as an ethical, emotional, and political stance taken by me as a researcher (Sharp 2005). Drawing on feminist political geography (Fluri 2015; Johnson and Madge 2021; Sharp 2005), I identify three core dimensions, that shape this work from a feminist perspective.

First, I center personal and situated knowledges. Feminist geographers have long emphasized the political significance of the personal and the everyday, including embodiment, emotion and the seemingly mundane (Fluri 2015; Haraway 1988; Hyndman 2004; Sharp 2005; Zaragocin and Caretta 2021). As discussed in Section 2.3, I build on this insight by foregrounding Afro-Antillean personal narratives and examining the micro-geographies of tourism as spaces where colonial structures and intersecting forms of oppression are reproduced, but also where they can be negotiated and contested. Rather than seeking objectivity and universal claims, I center a few subjective stories (Rubin and Rubin 2011). These lived experiences reflect the affective, embodied, and relational dimensions of how tourism unfolds in the everyday lives of Afro-Antilleans (Johnson and Madge 2021). In practice, I asked questions about personal and emotional experiences rather than finding general ‘opinions’ with the aim to embrace complexity and plurality in experiencing Global North tourism.

The second pillar of my feminist approach lies in an analytical and political commitment to anti-oppression. I understand feminism as a critical approach that goes beyond a narrow focus on gender or sexuality to critically address multiple, intersecting systems of power. Drawing on Black feminist thinkers and the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; The Combahee River Collective Statement 1977 2017), I consider race, class, and gender not as individual identities but as intersecting forms of inequalities[13]. A lens on intersectionality allows me to analyze how systems of power and oppression, rooted in coloniality, operate within encounters between tourists and Afro-Antilleans, and how identity politics are lived in everyday experiences and spatial politics in Bocas. For instance, an Afro-Antillean woman may face racialized, gendered, and class-based oppression that contrasts sharply with the experience of a white American tourist woman, who, while also subject to patriarchal oppression, embodies racial and economic privileges. This feminist framework thus guided my data production and analysis by centering the perspectives of those affected by overlapping forms of marginalization to uncover how structures of power and oppression operate in Afro-Antilleans everyday lives (see Section 6.1).

Aligned with this intersectional lens is a political commitment to research as a tool for transformation. Feminist and decolonial scholarship emphasize the potential of research to challenge dominant knowledge systems and work toward social justice. I aim to contribute to an empowering research practice that seeks to amplify voices often excluded from dominant tourism discourses (Johnson and Madge 2021). In practice, I engage with Afro-Antillean participants as knowledge holders and center these perspectives that have been historically marginalized in the context of Bocas del Toro, even if I am aware that my research represents only a minimal or negligible contribution. At this point, I should also mention that although I share political feminist interests and ideologies and participate in feminist activism in Switzerland, I have never been involved in activism or political statements in Panama nor during my fieldwork in Bocas.

Third, and importantly, my feminist approach informed how I conduct research. Central to this thesis is the notion of situated knowledge production (Haraway 1988) that emphasizes that all knowledge is produced within specific context. I reject the idea of objective or neutral research and acknowledge how my identity, presence and way of researching shapes the research process, encounters and outcomes (Rubin and Rubin 2011). Hence, I follow a feminist research ethics (Johnson and Madge 2021) that emphasizes reflexivity and positionality throughout the research process (Fluri 2015) (see Section 3.2.3) and is informed by a feminist research ethics of care (Peake and Sharp 2024). The latter includes a relational approach in which I do not seek to hide emotional experiences but rather to make them visible as integral elements of the knowledge-production process. An important part of my fieldwork included building personal relationships and friendships that were decisive in my research process. My emotional

[13] While other axes of identities such as age, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and ability are certainly important too, the scope of this thesis focuses on the intersection of race, class, and gender.

involvement strongly influenced how I behaved in different situations, what spaces I gravitated toward, and with whom I felt most comfortable (see Section 3.3.2). These factors influenced my network, and how I was perceived in the field.

3.2 Field Research

In integral part of my research was my fieldwork in Bocas del Toro. Supported by a research grant from the 'Geographie Alumni UZH Nachwuchsförderungsfonds' and the 'Political Geography Unit' of the University of Zurich, I travelled to Panama between November and December 2024 and spent five weeks living and researching in the town of Old Bank on Bastimentos Island. I conducted five weeks of fieldwork in Bocas del Toro, engaging directly with the people and place center in this work. While I recognize this period as rather short to constitute full ethnographic immersion, which typically requires a longer period of field engagement (Marcus 1995), my research design is inspired by ethnographic principles, including participating in daily activities, building relationships of trust and following feminist research ethics (Fujii 2017; Peake and Sharp 2024).

Preparation started weeks before. On a practical level, this included regular exchange and coordination with my contacts in the field, arranging flights and accommodation. Research preparation involved developing an interview guide, engaging with literature and methodological approaches as well as engaged with ethical groundwork.

In the following sections, I provide a more detailed account of how I gained access to the field (Section 3.2.1), addressed ethical considerations (Section 3.2.2), and engaged with my own positionality throughout the research process (Section 3.2.3).

3.2.1 Access to the Field

My interest in Bocas del Toro began during a backpacking trip to Panama in 2022. While a couple years later writing a seminar paper, I came across academic work critically examining how tourism development in Bocas has produced social and spatial inequalities, contributing to the displacement and dispossession of Afro-Antilleans and Indigenous Ngäbe (Claudia Fioretti Bongianino 2017; Guerrón-Montero 2006; Guerrón Montero 2011; Mollett 2021, 2022, 2023; Pleasant and Spalding 2021). This sparked by research interest and led me to connect with an anthropologist who had conducted fieldwork in Bocas. She introduced me to two Afro-Antillean friends and research partners from Old Bank—contacts that proved crucial for gaining initial access and remained central throughout my research process.

I reached out to these two contacts in July 2024 via WhatsApp, introducing myself and explaining my research interests. Both were open and welcoming, expressing an interest in talking about their experiences with tourism in Bocas. One of the two, whom I refer to as Lucia (pseudonym), offered even more assistance: she volunteered to guide me through the town, introduce me to potential interviewees, and a few weeks before my field stay even suggested and arranged that I can stay at her family's guesthouse

during my visit which I gratefully accepted. The Paradise Lodge (pseudonym)—as I refer to the fieldwork hotel in this thesis—became my base during the five weeks of fieldwork.

The Paradise Lodge was centrally located and directly accessible by water taxi. For most of my stay there were no other guests in the hotel as I learned that this year low season was stretching more into December. The hotel's welcoming and familial character made it a comfortable place for people to stop by. In agreement with the hotel owners, this place also became a key site for conducting interviews which provided a private setting for personal conversations. Yet, I was continuously reflecting how my close association with this guest family from my accommodation and particularly Lucia shaped my presence in the community. In my experience, this network I was embedded in, facilitated understanding for my research, building trust being accepted in the community as I was introduced by a local family. On the other hand, this affiliation also influenced how others perceived me and possibly affected who felt comfortable approaching me. Likewise, the family or Lucia tended to introduce me to people they got along well with, which gave me a limited or biased insight into the community in Old Bank.

Throughout my field stay, Lucia as a facilitator and her extended family as a caring network supported me a lot and were crucially facilitating my access and research. Early in my stay, Lucia took me on a walking tour through the town, which proved invaluable for gaining a sense of place, offering deep insights into local history, culture, and everyday life, as well as introducing me to a few residents and familiarizing me with local customs, such as the common practice of greeting everyone you pass. She also introduced me to the linguistic landscape in Old Bank: besides of Spanish, Panama's national language, the spoken languages locally in Old Bank are Guari-Guari, a local creole blending Jamaican English and Spanish. Especially elderly people speak English as their first language because of their Afro-Antillean background. Though initially unsure about language barriers, Lucia assured me I could conduct interviews in English. Although it took me some time to adjust my ear to local accents and expressions, I was able to communicate mostly in English combined with my basic Spanish knowledge.

The first days of fieldwork were marked by uncertainties and trying to navigate the field as an outsider (see Section 3.2.3). My appearance as a white Western woman called for the typical tourist perception. Initially, I was thus always approached as a tourist, which I do not deny at all to be. While it felt very easy to approach people in informal settings like chats on the streets or in a boat taxi, I found it more difficult to explain my academic role and research intentions. Initially, the term 'research' often created distance, as people claimed they were not 'experts' or did not have anything important to share. As I did not want to pressure anyone into interviewing, I decided to give the more formal data production some time. Therefore, in the first week of my field stay I spend a lot of time in the town of Old Bank, walked the streets greeting people, visited a few places by walking through the island and spent a lot of time with the family of Paradise Lodge, chats in the kitchen, cooking together and joining morning walks to the beach. After one week I arranged the first few interviews with some of the guesthouse family, starting in a familiar and trusted environment.

Throughout, my positionality strongly shaped both access and the research dynamic which I elaborate in more detail in Section 3.2.3. Overall, access to the field was an ongoing process of building trust, negotiating positionality, and becoming attuned to the social context in Old Bank. The facilitation of access through Lucia and her family both enabled rich data production and required continuous reflection on the situatedness of my position as a researcher.

3.2.2 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were a guiding principle from the preparation of the fieldwork on to the conclusion of the research process and included ongoing reflection. A few weeks prior to fieldwork, I worked through the human geography department ethics and safety guidelines for fieldwork and reviewed this process together with my supervision and an external academic advisor from the department. This process significantly contributed to raising my awareness of how my decisions and actions in the field aligned with ethical research practices.

My approach was informed by feminist research ethics (Peake and Sharp 2024) that prioritize the well-being of both participants and researchers. One of the key ethical principles I followed was ensuring voluntary participation and informed consent. As the interviews were scheduled in informal settings, I emphasized in a primary conversation before the interview that participation was voluntary and that the data would be used independently for my thesis, with no direct benefit for participants. At the beginning of each interview, I provided written informed consent forms (see Appendix) and either read each paragraph aloud or allowed time for the interviewees to read and reflect. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, their right to withdraw at any time, and were asked for permission to audio record the conversation. Consent was obtained either in writing or orally.

Another key principle was the prioritization of data confidentiality and anonymity. All primary data is stored securely on a password-protected laptop, accessible only to me. This raw data will not be published. During transcription and data analysis, I anonymized participants names, to protect their anonymity—especially given the small size of the community involved. In line with a narrative style, typical of ethnographic writing, I used pseudonyms (Fujii 2017: 82) for participants and certain specific places. To generate pseudonyms, I used ChatGPT (OpenAI 2025), requesting twelve Afro-Antillean names, eight women and four men, which inspired the pseudonyms used in my thesis (Table *1*).

I put the approach of ethics of care (Peake and Sharp 2024), which emphasizes the moral activity of caring and relational responsibility, into practice in everyday moments rather than abstract principles. One example included assisting Lucia in preparing her guesthouse for a long-term visitor. As I had time, I offered to help, which felt like a natural gesture of reciprocity rather than a formal ethical duty. We spent an entire Sunday together preparing the guesthouse, work she would normally do alone. This act felt meaningful to give back, as Lucia had supported me greatly during my stay (field journal, 15.12.2024).

Reciprocity was an ongoing consideration, yet informal aspect of my approach. While I did not provide monetary compensation for interview participation, I treated participants with gratitude, respect and reciprocity. Most interviews took place at my hotel, where I offered drinks or snacks, and in one case I invited a participant to coffee and cake as we met at a local bakery. For services such as my accommodation, boat transportation, or Lucia's walking tour I paid like any regular guest. I am currently working on ways to give back beyond academic writing. I intend to share my findings in accessible formats such as a poster, blog post, or audio reflection. During fieldwork, several participants expressed the desire for a digital platform to promote and connect local businesses in Old Bank. I hope to support this initiative by helping set up such a platform.

3.2.3 Positionality and Reflexivity

Positionality and reflexivity are integral to my feminist and decolonial research approach (Fujii 2017; Johnson and Madge 2021; Peake and Sharp 2024; Rose 1997). This section is thus crucial to understand how knowledge production as situated (Haraway 1988; Rose 1997) and in what ways research process and outcome in this thesis are deeply shaped by me as a researcher, my identity and relationality to my research context and participants (Holmes 2020). Acknowledging positionality means recognizing that a researcher's intersectional social identity—such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, age, (dis)ability, and geographical location—as well as their position in relation to the geographical, political, and social context of the research and to other participants shapes what is observed and heard, how it is valued, and how meaning is made from the data (Gergan and Smith 2021; Holmes 2020; Watson 2021).

During fieldwork particularly, I engaged reflectively with my own positionality and social identity kept these critical reflections in a field journal positionality (Catungal and Dowling 2021; Holmes 2020; Rose 1997). These notes included conscious reflections on the following questions: How do I relate to participants and to the context? To whom do I gain access to talk to and how? How am I perceived by participants? How do I influence how others see and speak to me? In what ways are my identity and relationships shaping my data?(Catungal and Dowling 2021; Fujii 2017; Johnson and Madge 2021; Peake and Sharp 2024; Watson 2021). I regularly shared these reflections with my supervisors and treated them with transparency and critical awareness (Rose 1997).

My positionality is shaped by my intersecting social identity and relationship to participants (Fujii 2017). I am a white, cis gender woman, born and raised in Switzerland, where I have lived my entire life. Conducting research in Bocas del Toro, Panama positioned me as a cultural outsider (Holmes 2020). I do not share racial, ethnic, or class background of the Afro-Antillean participants. I carry the privileges of being educated at a university level which enable me to conduct independent research for my Master's thesis. Additionally, holding a Swiss passport privileges me with the freedom of global mobility, allowing me to travel to Panama with ease. These privileges are rooted in broader structures of coloniality of power (Quijano 2000).

Throughout the research process, I have repeatedly questioned whether, as a non-Afro-Antillean person, I am entitled to engage with this topic. After careful reflections, I ground my work in the intention to critically interrogate Global North tourism and its entanglement with colonial legacies by centering the perspectives and voices of Afro-Antilleans. While an an Afro-Antillean scholar would arguable be better positioned to bring in these perspectives from within in academic writing, I see my contribution as creating space for Afro-Antillean narratives within Global North scholarship, which continues to reproduce Western-centered perspectives on tourism development (see Section 2.2.1) and imaginaries (see Section 2.2.2). While being embedded in colonial structures myself, I critically engage with these systems of power and oppression, both personally and academically, and strive to challenge coloniality. I position myself as a critical human geographer and social justice advocate, committed to center place-based knowledge and historically marginalized voices in the context of Bocas del Toro rather than reproducing Western or Global North narratives.

My personal interest in travel and, more specifically, my previous visit to Bocas del Toro as a tourist adds complexity to my positionality and shaped how community members perceived me. Entering the field as a Global North visitor positioned me within the very tourism dynamics I sought to critically examine, potentially generating tension or mistrust. Yet, my experience as a tourist served as a catalyst for this thesis, while my positionality and outsider status as not fixed but rather developed relational during the field work (Chacko 2004; Fujii 2017; Rowe 2014). As I engaging in everyday life, informal conversations, and deeper relationships, my relationship to participants gradually shifted towards more trust.

After some weeks in the field, I also came to see that outsider status, while limiting in some respects— I could never fully understand the lived experience of Afro-Antilleans—, can offer distinct advantages. First, my position of having encountered Bocas del Toro through the lens of a Global North tourist, allow me to understand and critique how dominant imaginaries and narratives shape Global North perspectives on a place like Bocas. Second, many of my research participants are embedded in business relationships with foreign investors or tourist employers, making it difficult to openly critique these systems without risking personal or economic consequences. In this context, my position as an outsider may have facilitated critical discussion as I tried to create a space for reflection and critique on Global North tourism. Even as an outsider, my role as a researcher positioned me to amplify voices often excluded from Western academic discourse.

Being a student, allowed me to position myself, and being accepted, as a learner and listener (Gergan and Smith 2021). I approached participants as experts of their own experiences and knowledge, interested in understanding their lived realities. Adopting the role of a learner rather than a ‘knower’, as described by England (1994) helps counterbalance traditional research hierarchies and facilitate openness and access to individuals who were initially unfamiliar with me (Watson 2021).

My gender identity as a young woman significantly shaped both access and the dynamics of my fieldwork. Much of my informal engagement with the community unfolded in domestic, female-centered spaces and revolved around care work and traditionally gendered activities such as cooking, baking, and spending time in kitchens. These spaces felt natural for me to enter, shaped by my own socialization within a patriarchal system, and my presence was generally accepted or appreciated by the women I interacted with. By participating in their daily routines, I was able to build trust, foster mutual exchange, and gain rich insights into women's lives and concerns that often emerged organically through informal conversations. My gender identity became central to my research process, as it directed me to engage more with Afro-Antillean women than men. In contrast, I got limited access to male-dominated spaces such as fishing, waiting at dock with boat drivers, or socializing with older men playing dominoes in the streets. Unlike the invitations I received from women, I was rarely welcomed into these 'masculine' spaces. When passing by men, I often felt a slight discomfort and perhaps due to the absence of other women in these spaces I felt less welcomed either. While it was mostly men who approached me proactively in public, sometimes with tour offers or flirting remarks, these interactions rarely led to research conversations. This gendered dynamic significantly shaped my data production as it influenced who I spoke to and how I was able to access different narratives within the community. These circumstances led me to gravitate toward speaking with more women or people to whom I was personally introduced by my host family, as these interactions felt safer and more grounded in mutual understanding (field journal, 24.12.2024).

3.3 Data production

During my fieldwork in Bocas del Toro, I employed a qualitative approach (Dunn 2021; Fujii 2017; Rubin and Rubin 2011; Watson 2021), combining in-depth semi-structured interviews with participant observation. The latter included informal conversations, active participation in everyday life, and reflective field journaling. The following sections outline these research practices in more detail.

The qualitative research approach is particularly suited to capturing personal narratives and situated knowledge, allowing to understand the nuanced picture of everyday lived experiences by embracing subjectivity, contradictory truths and complexities rather than striving for breadth or generalizable results. In line with this, I adopt a naturalistic research orientation and a social constructionist perspective, which emphasizes multiply truths as I understand that people actively construct their realities through own experiences, perceptions, and interpretation (Fujii 2017; Rubin and Rubin 2011). To reflect the situated, relational, and interpretative nature of this process, I use the term *data production* rather than *data collection* (Watson 2021).

3.3.1 Participant Observations & Field Journal

Participant observation is an ethnographic method that combines observing and actively participating in the everyday lives of research participants. It involves seeing, sensing, and doing, as the researcher

becomes immersed in the field through shared routines, embodied participation, and informal conversations. Building relationships and trust, participating in the everyday, and allowing for emotional involvement are central to this approach (Rubin and Rubin 2011; Watson 2021).

During my fieldwork in Bocas, I conducted participant observation mainly in and around Old Bank but also spent time in other parts of Bastimentos Island, Isla Colón, and nearby locations. Rather than observing from a distance, I often actively engaged in daily life to become familiar with the community. Walking through Old Bank each day, greeting people and chatting with acquaintances and strangers alike, gradually opened doors and laid the groundwork for building relationships. A first encounter with Carlos on the street, for example, later led to a formal interview.

As pointed out in Section 3.2.3, many interactions unfolded in domestic and women dominated spaces: helping with cooking, hanging out in kitchens, or accompanying people for grocery shopping or on daily walks. Care-oriented, relational settings allowed for insights into everyday experiences, emotions, and critiques that arose more spontaneous than in formal interview settings. In these moments, I took on the role of both observer and co-participant, which required sensitivity and emotional labor. When conversations challenged my own beliefs such as topics like environmental conservation, plant-based diets, or sexual orientation, I tried to remain a non-judgmental listener, acknowledging different perspectives (Watson 2021).

Gloria and Oscar welcomed company in their kitchen, where our conversations moved between humorous stories about chicken fights, baseball, and cows damaging farmland, and more serious concerns about foreign investors trying to buy up land. Occasional morning runs with Oscar opened space for reflection on Rastafari culture, the importance of nature and free movement, and frustrations over land privatization. Lorena introduced me to more tourist-oriented spaces and invited me to join her for Bastimentos Day celebration, the day celebrating independence from Colombia where I learned about the significance of the Congo dance—a festive performance but also an African custom brought to Panama by enslaved ancestors—that blends joy with pain, carrying collective memories of oppression and resilience. Grocery shopping and cooking with Mirella sparked discussions about her work history with American employers and her joy in meeting tourists. Walking through Old Bank with Lucia offered insights into personal memories, Afro-Antillean culture, and spatial exclusion. For instance, while walking through town, Lucia showed me a part of town where only tourists live, referring to it as ‘gringo or white people village’. During these informal conversations, I learned about spatially segregated tourist areas and how many Black locals avoid them. But I also witnessed Lucia's emotional and embodied reaction as her voice and facial expression changed from cheerful to rather depressed and quiet. Overall, these informal interactions and conversations brought up themes of cultural change, economic dependency, land privatization, and shifting community dynamics that emerged organically.

Beyond participant observations in Old Bank, I also visited key tourist destinations across the archipelago that helped contextualize conversations about tourist enclaves, land access, environmental change, and the spatial dynamics of tourism. For example, by accompanying Oscar on boat rides I experienced first-hand how beach access was increasingly restricted by resort development and tourist infrastructure, mostly excluding residents while I as a tourist could afford access more easily.

With the intention of broadening the research lens to include Indigenous perspectives, I visited Salt Creek, an Indigenous Ngäbe village promoted on the websites for national tourism (tourismpanama.com) and the organization Redtucombo (redtucombo.bocasdeltoro.org). Entering in the role of a tourist, with limited language skills and without prior relationships, raised immediate ethical concerns. I realized that engaging as a researcher in this context would require much deeper preparation and trust-building than this short fieldwork period allowed. I ultimately decided to step back from this idea.

I documented participant observation through handwritten field journals, audio memos, and photographs (Watson 2021). The field journal served a central tool for recording observations, emotions, emerging themes, and reflections on positionality. I used photographs to remember places, scenes, or moments which were taken with verbal consent when needed. Most field notes were written at the end of each day, using narrative style and full sentences. Audio recordings were later incorporated into these entries, creating a comprehensive archive of the field experience. Public observations, such as watching street life or attending events like Bastimentos Day, did not require formal consent, similar to the way a non-researcher observes daily life. In contrast, for personal encounters or informal conversations, I always explained my research and received verbal consent.

Participant observation complemented semi-structured interviews with embodied, relational, and place based knowledge (Watson 2021). Informal interactions introduced me to people and topics that later became focal points in interviews. Socializing helped me attune to local English accents and slang and better understand place-based concerns and cultural references. This enabled me to revise interview guides and improve my ability to listen and ask questions (Rubin and Rubin 2011). I particularly noticed the value of prior engagement when comparing interviews. Conversations with participants like Anita, Marisol, and Erick whom I only met once for the interviews felt less relational and open than those with people, I had spent more time in advance. Observing what people do rather than limiting myself to what they say deepened my understanding of the ambiguities, contradictions and emotions that shape the life experiences of my interview partners.

3.3.2 In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews

For a deeper understanding of how Afro-Antillean residents of Old Bank experience and navigate tourism encounters, I conducted twelve semi-structured interviews (Longhurst 2016). This method provided thematic guidance while allowing flexibility: I used an interview guide (see Appendix) with predefined topics and open-ended questions but allowed interviewees steer the conversations (Dunn 2021; Rubin and

Rubin 2011). This format was particularly suited to my research aims, as it encouraged participants to share their personal stories and lived experiences, including embodied and emotional dimensions, placing their personal perspectives at the center.

My interviewing process was shaped by an inductive and iterative approach (Flick 2016). I prepared an interview guide (Dunn 2021), organized around six core themes drawn from the literature: (1) background and context, (2) tourism encounters, (3) spatial politics, (4) tourist perceptions and imaginaries, (5) embodiment and emotions, and (6) agency and resilience. For each theme I formulated open-ended primary and follow-up questions, starting with descriptive and storytelling prompts before moving to more sensitive or emotionally charged questions. Although the guide helped maintain a broad focus, I remained attentive and let participants' narratives shape the flow of the conversation (Dunn 2021). This way of *responsive interviewing* (Rubin and Rubin 2011), adjusting and responding in the moment of the interview, allowed new themes to emerge rather than stick closely to the ideas derived from literature. Each interview proceeded quite uniquely. I also drew on Fujii's (2017) approach of *relational interviewing*, which emphasizes co-producing data through dynamic interaction between researcher and participant. This required active listening, adapting to the interviewees' language and worldview. Throughout fieldwork, I continuously reflected and refined my interviewing practice. I documented thematic summaries from previous interviews and questions based on participant observations in my field journal. I revised the interview guide repeatedly, changing wording of questions, removing questions that felt irrelevant and incorporating themes that arose organically through informal conversations. For example, the category 'tourist perceptions and imaginaries' proved to be of little relevance to participants, as it stemmed more from Western academic frameworks than from local perspectives. This way interviewing became a collaborative process, shaped by different perspectives and experiences of both me and the participants.

Based on my access to the field, my interview participants were Afro-Antillean long-term residents from Old Bank. Following Rubin and Rubin's (2011) framework, I sought for people with direct experience or involvement in tourism encounters. Even though, most residents interact with tourists daily, I tried to focus on those more actively engaged in tourism, assuming they would be more motivated to talk about tourism or offer deeper and reflected insights. Initially I planned to find interview participants following a snowball sampling strategy, but in practice, most participants were introduced to me by my key informant Lucia, and her family. Only Mirella and Carlos were approached independently, whereby Carlos later introduced me to Amara, following the envisioned snowball method (Parker, C., Scott, S. and Geddes 2019). Scheduling interviews had informal character and aligned with local customs of oral agreements and fluid timing. This approach helped mitigate potential researcher-participant hierarchies but required patience, as appointments were often rescheduled or cancelled. Ultimately, my sampling evolved organically and can best be described as convenience sampling (Marshall 1996), shaped by access, participant motivation and availability, and my limited time in the field.

When scheduling an interview, I asked participants to choose the interview location. While I offered Paradise Lodge as a quiet and private space, I remained aware that this was not a neutral space. Meeting there could be perceived differently based on individual's relationship with its owners. I thus also welcomed opportunities to visit participants at their homes or meet in public spaces. Of the 12 interviews, 11 took place in sit-down settings: eight were held at the hotel, two at participants' homes, one at a (closed) restaurant. One of the interviews was a walking interview, conducted with Amara who proposed to accompany her on her morning walk instead of sitting down. This setting enabled a relaxed, relational conversation.

In total, I conducted 12 interviews (see Table *1*). Although each was intended to last around one hour, they ranged from thirty minutes to two hours. Normally, I did one interview with each participant, except for Mirella where we organized a follow-up due to time constraints in the first conversation. While interviews were held in English, I suggested participants to switch to Spanish when it felt more natural. Only a few interviews incorporated Spanish expressions.

Table 1: Overview of 12 Interview Participants

Interview Code	Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Profile / Connection to Tourism	Date of Interview
IP1	Gerald	74	male	Hotel owner	30.11.2024
IP2	Lucia	41	female	Restaurant and guesthouse owner	04.12.2024
IP3	Gloria	76	female	Hotel owner of hotel	05.12.2024
IP4	Oscar	37	male	Boat & tour operator	06.12.2024
IP5	Anita	72	female	Retired cook at foreign-owned restaurants and hotels	07.12.2024
IP6	Carlos	50-60	male	Hotel owner	08.12.2024
IP7	Mirella	68	female	Retried employee at foreign-owned hotels	11.12.2024 19.12.2024
IP8	Erick	72	male	Retired boat operator	16.12.2024
IP9	Marisol	68	female	Retired cook at local hotel	16.12.2024
IP10	Lorena	28	female	Employee in foreign-owned business	17.12.2024
IP11	Amara	34	female	Restaurant owner	18.12.2024
IP12	Angélica	31	female	Employee of local and foreign-owned hotels	22.12.2024

At the beginning of each interview, I explained or repeated the purpose of my research and introduced the informed consent (see Section 3.2.2). All participants agreed to be recorded. I used my smartphone for audio recordings and occasionally took notes, which I expanded after the interview to capture non-verbal gestures, emotional and embodied reactions, and other contextual observations. To conclude, I invited participants to ask questions, share any related thoughts and offered the opportunity to contact me anytime.

In addition to interviews with community members in Old Bank, I had further planned to interview organizations dedicated to tourism and community initiatives in Panama to build on their existing work

and knowledge. I had developed a separate interview guide for expert interviews and reached out to the *Cámara de Turismo de Bocas del Toro (camaraturismobocas.org)*, a non-profit organization aiming to integrate all tourism actors in the region. Despite my attempt of an introductory email outlining my research and proposing either a meeting or email-based exchange I received no response. I also asked community members whether they knew of similar organizations, but none were named. For this reason, I rejected this approach and did not include organizations or expert interviews.

3.4 Data Analysis

For data analysis, I followed a systematic and analytical, yet also iterative and fluid approach. Drawing on interpretivist and relational methodology (Fujii 2017) and practical guidance for qualitative analysis (Cope 2021; Dunn 2021; Rubin and Rubin 2011), my aim was not to extract a singular truth, as explained above, but to explore how Afro-Antillean participants understand and navigate their lived experiences with tourism and encounters with Global North tourists. I tried to identify recurring themes, underlying logics, but also contradictions in their narratives. Interviews were the main source of systematically coded data, while field notes from participant observation and informal conversations played a crucial role in deepening and contextualizing the analysis.

I began transcribing interviews during fieldwork, which allowed early familiarization with the material and helped refine the interview guide continuously. For transcription, I used the desktop-based *FreePodcast Transcription*[14] application, which ensured data privacy by processing files locally on my device. After generating these AI-supported transcripts, I manually edited each one by listening to the audio recordings to correct inaccuracies and remember participants' manner of speaking and voices. In line with ethnographic practice (Fujii 2017), I produced transcripts that were close to the spoken words, including the use of filler words (e.g. ‘umm’, ‘yeah’) and repetition to capture the ethnographic moment and conversational tone. I maintained participants’ original speech patterns and did not correct grammar or sentence structure. However, to improve clarity in my analysis, I corrected a few phonetic misrecognitions. For instance, I wrote ‘daughter’ instead of the Creole-influenced pronunciation ‘data’ to avoid confusion. In addition, I noted down contextual metadata for each interview such as date, location, duration, and participant background of the participant.

Once transcribed, I re-listened and re-read each interview multiple times to familiarize myself deeply with the content and to identify initial patterns (Fujii 2017). During this phase, I highlighted significant sentences and began marking repeated words, phrases, and themes. This inductive approach allowed themes to emerge from the data. At the same time these themes were also informed by my interview guide which is based on existing literature and thus includes a deductive dimension. I used a mix of tools such as handwritten notes, mind maps and tables to sketch out emerging themes and develop a preliminary

[14] freepodcasttranscription.com

coding structure. Early thematic categories included place-based context, types of tourists and encounters, and spatial politics (e.g. foreign land ownership).

In a second phase I started using MAXQDA for a more structured approach and computer-aided qualitative analysis (Rädiker and Kuckartz 2019), following an iterative coding process (Cope 2021; Dunn 2021; Rubin and Rubin 2011). I developed a hierarchical coding system with overarching themes and sub-categories and codes (Dunn 2021). While the broad themes were shaped by my research questions (deductive), the specific codes were primarily generated from the interview content (inductive). I maintained a code index in table format where each code label was defined, described, and grouped under broader thematic clusters (Boyatzis 1998; Rubin and Rubin 2011). Initially, I focused on more superficial analysis and descriptive codes which are directly stated or clearly visible in the data (Cope 2021). These included demographic information (e.g., gender, age), geographical or spatial descriptions (e.g., town, beaches, hotels), and descriptions of situations, circumstances or memories (e.g., tourism development, changes on the islands, occupations, good or bad experiences with tourists). Many of these codes were derived in vivo, meaning they used the language of participants (Rädiker and Kuckartz 2019). These descriptive codes helped structure the data in a first step and prepare for more interpretative analysis in next rounds of coding. I systematically coded all interview transcripts with a coding scheme that evolved and was adapted along the process and finally included the following overarching themes: *Place-based context, tourism profiles*, *forms of encounters*, *emotional and embodied experiences of encounters*, *conditions shaping encounters* and *agency*.

In further rounds of analysis, I adopted a more analytical and interpretative approach with more detail on less obvious themes. I examined how codes related to the key concepts in my theoretical framework (Cope 2021), restructured the coding system where needed, and explored interrelations between themes. An analytical lens supported a focus on intersectional differences in the data and understanding how data from women differentiates from men for instance (Fujii 2017). Also, I paid close attention to contradictions and emotional nuances, such as when participants expressed indifference toward tourists or ‘enjoying tourists’ but conveyed discomfort in their voice or hesitations. I marked such moments in transcripts and reflected on them through memo-writing. Engaging intensively with the data, listening deeply and consulting field notes was key in identifying more interpretative themes like *emotional response* and *coping strategies* (Cope 2021) such as acceptance, strategic avoidance or ambivalence and allowed to understand complexities and multiple narratives (Fujii 2017).

While interviews formed the core of the analysis, participant observations and field journal notes provided crucial contextual insight. I digitized and reviewed my handwritten notes for relevant themes context-specific details and emotional tones. These materials helped enrich findings from the interviews and provided background for understanding everyday dynamics, spatial arrangements, and informal conversations.

3.5 Limitations

In the following, I discuss several limitations of the research design and process that shaped this thesis. One of the main limitations is the time constraint associated with the scope of the master's thesis which is shaping the depth of the study. I consider the field visit of five weeks as a relatively short period for me as an outside researcher to immerse myself in the field and build relationships of trust, especially within the framework of my feminist and relational research approach. I realized that informal conversations and everyday interaction were key to gaining a sense of the place, its people, and their relationships whereby a longer stay would have helped me build more connections, gain a deeper understanding of the local context, and engage with a broader range of people. I consider more time for informal settings and ethnographic work essential for improvement.

Inspired by feminist and decolonial scholars (Mollett 2021; Salgado 2024; Zaragocin and Caretta 2021), I initially planned to include a body mapping exercise, called *cuerpo-territorio*. I considered this approach of expressing emotions and embodied experiences in a creative way to be valuable addition to verbal interviews. Given the intimate nature of the exercise and its potential to surface sensitive issues such as sexual abuse (see Mollett 2023), I realized that this method required a deeper level of trust and familiarity than my relatively short time in the field allowed, stepping back from this planned activity.

Also linked to the short duration of my stay is the relatively small sample size of interview participants. I spent a significant amount of time getting to know people, building trust, and explaining my research interests before conducting interviews. While this process aligned with my ethical approach, it resulted in a small number of interviews, mostly conducted toward the end of my stay. Moreover, the sample included participants with relatively similar backgrounds, which further limits the range of experiences reflected in the data. These limitations underline that this study is based on personal narratives and cannot be considered representative for Afro-Antillean experiences in Bocas del Toro in general, nor should it be used to draw comparisons with other local or Indigenous communities affected by tourism, either in Bocas or elsewhere. Instead, this research should be understood as situated knowledge.

A further limitation lies in the access to the field and the sampling strategy. My focus on Afro-Antillean residents living in Old Bank was shaped by both access, relationships and language. The local use of English as one of the languages spoken in Old Bank was a key enabling factor in communication, but it also excluded non-English speakers from participation in my study. Beyond language, the sample was also shaped by the contacts I was introduced to or felt comfortable approaching myself. Most of the participants had some link to tourism, and many were relatively privileged native residents from Old Bank with higher levels of education and many of the participants were self-employed in tourism or owning property. These backgrounds need to be considered as they shaped the perspectives included in the research.

This thesis also did not have the scope to include other ethnic groups such as the Indigenous Ngäbe perspectives. While they are also significantly affected by colonial logics of Global North tourism

development through displacement or legal land grabs in Bocas (Mollett 2022), I chose not to include these perspectives due to language barriers, limitations in preparation, and the absence of established relationships of trust. This decision is both a limitation of the sampling strategy and a conscious ethical choice in line with decolonial feminist principles. It reflects an understanding that I was not the right person to conduct this research and of respecting boundaries in research activities (Gergan and Smith 2021).

While my expectation was talking to a broad range of people following a snowballing system, the reality in the field looked different as my access and sampling was shaped by relational dynamics in the field. My access to the community was facilitated by Lucia, my contact person and her family, the host family with whom I stayed. This family provided my first entry point into the field and introduced me to many other people which I am very grateful for as this enabled my fieldwork. As an outsider it was rather difficult to get people to participate independently from the family network I was embedded in. Thus, it is important to reflect on how this relationship as limitation as it has influenced how I was perceived and approached by others. From my insights, this host family holds a relatively established position in Old Bank as several family members own and operate hotels and other small businesses like a small restaurant, own boat taxis to offer tours and transportation. Compared to other residents, some of whom may be in competition with them or work for them, this relationship may have influenced how people interacted with me or what they chose to share. While this relationship to my Lucia's family enabled access to the field, it likely also limited the diversity of perspectives I encountered. This relational positioning was difficult to control and avoid, and I acknowledge it as a limitation of the research process.

Finally, my positionality as an outsider shaped by my identity, language skills, and academic background inevitably influenced both the research process and the interpretation of the data (see Section 3.2.3). As part of a feminist and decolonial research ethics, I remained critically aware and sensitive that the very act of Western academic research, engaging as a Global North researcher in the Global South, as well as using primary Anglophone literature due to my language restrains, risks reproducing extractive dynamics and colonial structures I aim to challenge (Ferretti 2020). Rather than obscuring my embeddedness in colonial structures, I approach it reflexively and transparently. I recognize that my epistemic and analytical lens shaped how I made sense of the narratives. Also, as an outsider I would never have been capable to fully understand the complexities, histories, and power dynamics at play in this local context. Despite efforts to listen carefully and remain context-sensitive, parts of the local reality and knowledge may have remained invisible to me. This research, therefore, is therefore also limited by my situated knowledge.

4 Everyday Tourism Encounters

As mentioned previously, the core of this thesis centers the Afro-Antillean experiences of everyday encounters with Global North tourism. After discussing the theoretical framework (Section 2) and presenting the methodology (Section 3) of the study, these following sections present and discuss the results of my data analysis, gathered during the five weeks in Bocas. In line with the understanding of everyday encounters introduced in Section 2.3, in this section, I provide an overview of the tourist profiles, rhythms and spaces of encounters (Section 4.1) and the forms of encounters (Section 4.2) experienced by the Afro-Antilleans. I discuss them as complex and embodied interactions shaped by colonial power structures, emotion, and tension between identity and performance.

For this research, I got in touch with twelve Afro-Antillean residents who were taking their time for an interview and shared their personal experiences with Global North tourism. All the interviewees were directly involved in the tourism economy in Bocas, as they currently work or have previously worked in tourism. Seven of the interviewees are self-employed and own and/or operate their own hotel, hostel, boat/tour or restaurant (part of community-led tourism), and five of the interviewees are or were employed by Global North tourists or by other community-led tourism places. All of the interview participants were based in Old Bank, with one exception from a participant now living on Isla Colón. I refer to the research context more broadly as “Bocas” (short for the region of Bocas del Toro) or “Basti” (short for Bastimentos Island), as many insights shared speak to dynamics that extend beyond Old Bank to the wider archipelago.

4.1 Tourist Profiles, Rhythms and Spaces of Tourism Encounters

To situate the various forms of everyday encounters between Afro-Antilleans and tourists, I first give an overview of boarder tourism pattern in the data. This section thus outlines participants’ perspectives on the tourist profiles, the temporal rhythms of tourism flows and the spaces where everyday encounters unfold. Understanding these contextual dimensions provides the groundwork for analyzing the forms of encounters in the subsequent sections.

What I mean by tourist profiles refers to the different groups of Global North tourists present and identified in participant’s narratives, based on their duration of stay and their socio-economic presence on Bocas. In this thesis, when I use the term Global North tourist—or simply tourist—I follow the framing introduced in the Introduction (Section 1). To simplify and maintain anonymity, I use these two forms as a shorthand for the various tourist nationalities. Participants describe Bocas del Toro as a place that attracts visitors from all over the world. Most frequently mentioned were U.S. tourists, who are collectively referred to as ‘gringos’ or the female ‘gringas’, followed by Europeans, specifically from Western European countries such as Germany, France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, England, Spain, Belgium, and Italy. Participants also describe Global North tourists from Latin American countries, including Argentines, Costa Ricans,

Mexicans, Nicaraguans, Peruvians, and Venezuelans, as well as Panamanian nationals, often from Panama City. Less frequent but also present in participant's memories were Israeli tourists and Chinese[15].

For tourist profiles, I follow the categorization used by participants, defined both through the duration tourist's stay and their socio-economic presence on the island. As Oscar put it, "have tourists like people that come here and pass like a tourist for days. Even we have tourists living here" (Oscar, 06.12.2024). In this thesis, when referring to these two profiles, I specifically mean Global North tourist as defined earlier.

The two tourist profiles that are distinguished in participants' narratives, and that I will use in this thesis are:

- **Short-term visitors**: These include traveling or visiting tourists, usually on a holiday or backpacking trip, who typically stay in hotels, hostels or guesthouse for a few days or weeks. These visitors are more likely to be encountered in explicitly touristic context such as on boat tours, in hotels or restaurants.
- **Long-term tourists**: These include all types of tourists who spend longer periods of time in Bocas and are also referred to by locals as expats or residential tourists. Unlike short-term visitors, long-term tourists maintain an ongoing presence in Bocas del Toro, frequently through owning land, houses or business. A sub-category within this group are foreign-owned businesses or foreign employers, whose economic activities' structure land and labor relations in Bocas.

As the following sections will show, while long-term tourists tend to be more involved in repeated encounters with potentially longer-term impact on the local socio-economic context and short-term visitors tend to be involved more in brief moments of transactional contacts or consumption, encounters with both groups can unfold in relational and meaningful but also superficial or extractive encounters.

The daily rhythm of encounters with tourists forms an integral part of everyday life in Bocas. The everyday life is so entangled in Bocas that tourist's absence—such as during low season or the COVID-19 pandemic for instance— is felt not only socially but also economically. The most visible fluctuations follow seasonal rhythms. High season, typically from December to April, brings a high presence of short-term visitors, which is felt through full hotels, tourist streams on the streets and busy boat rides. During the the rest of the year, tourism slows down, resulting in fewer casual or work-related tourism encounters. Several participants noted that during my fieldwork in December 2024, tourist numbers were unusually low, although without an explanation as to why fewer visitors were arriving.

[15] In later conversations, some clarified that many Chinese 'tourists' were in fact Panamanian-Chinese and have been residents in Panama for centuries but with Chinese heritage. The "Chinese" as referred to by Afro-Antilleans, are actively engaging in businesses, in particular operating almost all supermarkets in the region of Bocas.

Shifting the temporal horizon to the broader tourism development in Bocas, participants' memories reached back to the early 1990s, when tourism in Bocas was just beginning. Gerlad remembers how the first tourists were looking for places to stay:

> "we had like seven rooms in our house and we used to rent. Every day we get up and see like […] three people want to come and get a room [..] This is from 1991." (Gerald, 30.11.2024)

Also, Gloria recalls these days, when she and her niece were among the first in Old Bank to rent out rooms:

> "At that time, I had one room at the house here. And I used to get tourists. My little niece, she had that place, […] and when she was full, she sent tourists to me. […] That was 1996. […] At that time no one else had started tourism […] In 1999 I started that [building the hotel] and I finished in five years time. But before I completed finishing it, the same time I sold the land[16], so when I get that money, was just to finish the hotel, to complete" (Gloria, 05.12.2024)

These memories reflect a broader pattern: Like Gloria, many residents saw the economic opportunities and started investing in the tourism economy, using money from selling hectares of land to foreign investors (see Section 5.1) to afford building their own guesthouses to accommodate tourists, buying boats to offer tours and opening restaurants. Afro-Antilleans in Old Bank started taking advantage of tourism's economic opportunities, as Angélica recalls:

> "First time the living never from tourism, was like from the Chiquita banana. But now, since we have tourists is like another option for living. So people start like to be captain from boat, people start to offer tours, people start to have info centro. They open like options for everyone to have your own business or to do something different on what you used to do. So you don't have to work for someone, you can work for yourself" (Angélica, 22.12.2024)

When reflecting about the overall tourism development in Bocas, participants across generations — Gerald in his 70s, Lucia in her 40s and Angélica in early 30s—all described an immense increase of tourist numbers and a growing frequency of tourism encounters over the past three decades. Lucia, for instance, remembers the changing tourism rhythms:

> "we used to see tourists from like in the let's say in the 1995,6,7. […] But now, we see tourists more often because you know we are tourist area, we are tourist island." (Lucia, 04.12.2024)

Over the past decade, however, residents described changing tourism patterns. While the number of long-term tourists on Bastimentos are still increasing and overall, the tourism economy in the archipelago is growing too, several interviewees noted fewer short-term visitors in Old Bank. The difference is shown

[16] as in Section 5.1 will be explained, she sold land to foreign investors who built a large-scale resort on her previous lands.

by Gerald referring to the times, when most tourists have been staying in Old Bank in the locally owned accommodations:

> "In first time, years ago in December, oh, Jesus. We may have like a 5,000 tourist on here on the island. We go back and forth with you." (Gerald, 30.11.2024)

As it is experienced today, Oscar explains that overall, there are still more tourists in the area, but less are coming to Old Bank, the town where most Afro-Antilleans live and have started their local businesses:

> "Yeah, more tourists are coming now. But they come more other places here. Like more beaches or resort like Red Frog beach[17]. They [long-term tourists] have a lot of places there, hostels, like this like that. They have Bocas, they have other places. […] They [long-term tourists] have separate, private business, resorts, taking away a lot of people. So, Basti has, Basti get some [visitors]. But Basti used to get a lot." (Oscar, 06.12.2024)

Others, like Amara or Lorena, both young women, link this to the rise of party tourism and hotels in Isla Colón, the main island:

> "Basti is never like so busy. […] When Bocas town full, the tourists then came to Basti. Because first time Basti was the island that have hotels, restaurants. Isla Colón wasn't built like that. So now, Isla Colón have a lot of Chinese, they have a lot of big hotels, a lot of rooms. And you know the parties are right in Bocas. So when young people come, they just stay in Isla Colón. In Basti is more for people who don't want to like party or... more calm" (Lorena, 17.12.2024)

Following up on these new trends, participants pointed to various reasons for the decline of short-term visitors in Old Bank: competition from other businesses and places of Bocas such as the perception that more short-term visitors are going to foreign-owned resorts (see Section 5.2.1), narratives of crime that keep tourists from Old Bank (see Section 4.2.5), global instability through crisis and conflicts, expensive travel costs and high prices for the water taxis. The decline in tourists coming to Old Bank can also be understood as a *fading tourism encounter* (see Section 5.2.1), a theme that emerged through conversations where participants mentioned that their livelihoods are deeply depending on tourism. In this context, visitors who keep away directly translate into economic precarity, in particular of those Afro-Antilleans who own a business and are self-employed. Lucia grew up in Old Bank, and together with her husband, has invested steadily in tourism over the years, building guesthouses in the hope of securing a future for their daughters. Despite eight months without a single guest and facing ongoing uncertainty, they continue to put in time, labor and money in their dream of living a good life from tourism. This determination is echoed by many other Afro-Antilleans who, when they have the privilege of owning land or rental properties, remain innovative and entrepreneurial, demonstrating resilience in this tourism dependency creating fragile livelihoods (see also in Section 6.2).

[17] A tourist resort area

The spaces where tourism encounter unfold in Bocas are shaped by the centrality of tourism in local livelihoods. As Lucia explained, with eighty percent of people in Bastimentos relying on tourism and only twenty percent working for the government, the dominance of the tourism economy strongly influences where and how Afro-Antilleans meet tourists. From participants' narratives, two main setting emerge: workplace encounters and encounters in shared public or semi-public spaces.

Given that most Afro-Antillean livelihoods depend on tourism, participants described most of their encounters with tourists as taking place in workplace settings. Workplace encounters unfold when Afro-Antilleans act as hosts in community-led businesses, or as employees in foreign-owned businesses. In these contexts, encounters are often framed as service interactions (see Section 4.2.3) with short-term visitor who pay for hospitality, or as labor relation where long-term tourists take on the role of employer (see Section 4.2.2).

Beyond paid work, participants also described encounters with tourists that unfold in shared public or semi-public spaces. They are more 'incidental' moments of contact. Shared public or semi-public spaces include the street and boat dock in Old Bank, on water taxis, in Bocas Town, on beaches, or in restaurants. Although most participants initially emphasized workplace encounters when asked about tourism, they also reflected on these more casual, unscripted meetings in public or semi-public spaces, where the ridged binary of 'tourist as guest' and 'Afro-Antilleans as host' softened, resembling ordinary interactions between people. Yet, even in these spaces where no paid labor is involved, most participants indicated how they maintained their roles as hosts. This dimension will be discussed further in Section 4.2.3.

4.2 Forms of Everyday Encounters

When speaking about interactions with tourists, participants often framed these moments as ordinary, unspectacular parts of their daily life. Some even expressed surprise at my interest in what to them felt like the normal everyday. Building on the feminist political geography framework outlined in Section 2.3—which highlights why I center the personal, lived and embodied experiences of the everyday life in this thesis—this section approaches the everyday as a crucial site where politics and power relations and hierarchies of class, race and gender, marked by coloniality, are enacted, negotiated or unsettled. As defined in Section 2.3.1, encounters include seemingly mundane and unspectacular moments, in which however, power relations, differences but also solidarities and are negotiated.

Through iterative coding and thematic analysis of interviews, fieldnotes and observation (see Section 3.4), I identified multiple recurring patterns in how Afro-Antilleans experience everyday encounters with Global North tourists. These forms of encounters will be discussed based directly on the experiences and narratives shared by Afro-Antillean participants. While they vary in the context, meaning and in the personal experience, they can be broadly organized into five interrelated categories:

1) **Superficial encounters**: These are brief moments, fleeting interactions in public spaces or workplaces, typically without sustained personal engagement.
2) **Long-term relational encounters**: Especially with long-term tourists, often recurring contact moments over longer periods that enable the formation of meaningful relationships or even friendships but also bear narratives of extraction, enclosure and soft violence.
3) **Service and care encounters**: These are shaped by labor relations in the tourism economy but also by the cultural practice of Afro-Antillean hospitality, encompassing both paid and unpaid forms of care.
4) **Digital encounters**: Encounters shaped by platform economy and reviews but also digital literacy.
5) **Encounters shaped by imaginaries and stereotypes**: Moments where tourism performances, racialized assumptions, or commodified expectations influence how Afro-Antilleans are perceived and engaged with.

4.2.1 Superficial Encounters

By superficial encounters I refer to brief, passing moments in which Afro-Antilleans and tourists' cross paths in workplaces settings or at public or semi-public spaces like boat rides or the streets of Old Bank. These moments usually occur daily and are fleeting, often without a conscious intention on either side, and stand in contrast to the more long-term, more relational encounters, discussed in Section 4.2.2 . Most participants shared these types of encounters as ordinary, 'boring' moments, part of daily life. Unlike recuring encounters with long-term residents or the same tourists, which may develop into more sustained relationships (Section 4.2.2), these momentary interactions stand out for their brevity and singularity between individuals, even if repeated across the constant flow of visitors. They often take the form of greetings, sometimes extending to conversation.

The briefest forms of everyday encounters are those that happen by seeing tourists pass by or exchanging short greetings. Amara put it, these moments feel entirely ordinary: "if they are passing by it's just normal" (Amara, 18.12.2024). For Anita, who has spent most of her retirement in Old Bank, her relationship with tourists has shifted. When she used to work as a cook in a foreign-owned restaurant, she had a lot of personal interaction with tourists, but now, outside her professional role, she mainly encounters tourists in passing:

> "Oh, well, I'm just like see them for where they show up. Some in Bocas, some […] in Old Bank" (Anita, 07.12.2024)

These encounters often involve brief greetings like the Basti-typical "good morning" or just a quick "hi" (Lorena, 17.12.2024). Marisol reflected on the cultural differences in the greeting practices, noting that not all tourists are used to these customs of greeting strangers on the street. Rather than taking the missing responses as an offense, she understands this as a matter of different culture:

> "Sometimes you pass some of them and you say, "Hi" and they don't look, […] But I understand them because where they're coming from, they don't do this. They are not used to do this." (Marisol, 16.12.2024)

While Marisol enjoys seeing and chatting with tourists, she also notes that tourist's way of moving through public space, for example by dressing in ways that show much skin, represent cultural change that are not always welcomed, particularly among older folks:

> "We are...conservative here. We never used to see people walking like you said, "naked" you have to say on the street. And when the older folks see how they're like, oh, you know what I say? We don't do it. But they [tourists] used to do it. And when they go to the beach, they just love it. […] And I would never criticize them or condemn them because of that. […] I know that doesn't bother me" (Marisol, 16.12.2024)

This comment, while articulated in a non-judgmental tone, emphasizes how fleeting encounters can still embody subtle cultural tension alongside the more openly expressed friendliness. However, most brief moments of simply seeing tourists were described in neutral or positive terms, like Mirella expressed:

> "I don't even matter. I like to see new faces. I like to see new people. So when I walk in a place, there are tourists they don't worry me. I don't have a problem with that." (Mirella, 19.12.2024)

On one hand, these reflections require to consider my own positionality. Since I visibly embody a tourist myself, I am aware that participants might have found it difficult to articulate negative feelings about 'seeing tourists', as this could have been interpreted as not liking my presence. While these statements can be read as indifference or acceptance, I acknowledge that my presence and identity inevitably influenced what was shared with me and what remained unspoken in our conversations. On the other hand, positive notions have been mentioned in the context of the economic dependency on tourists, an awareness voiced by younger participants like Lorena and Angélica, who work in waged tourism jobs, but also by elderly people like Gerald or Marisol. This could indicate that appreciating the presence of tourists is linked to an income opportunity.

Another common form of superficial encounters are interactions with tourists that have a specific purpose or intension, whether economic or social. For those people working self-employed in tourism, like Oscar who is a boat captain offering guided tours and boat rides, even quick interactions can be economically significant. Although not all encounters are about business, he explains that he often uses passing moments with short-term visitors on the street to approach potential clients:

> "I see tourists there a lot. I don't meet, I see them. I see them here in Bastimentos. And I meet some of them here in the hotel because I have to talk to them. […] I mean, it's good too. I have a tour, […] I'm a captain, guide. I do a guide tour with tourists. So I have to, you know, […] they bring money and leave money you know. It's good because you can survive with that. I get them in the street, I talk to them, say hi, bring them confidence […] it's my business, and sometimes I

> talked to them because they are humankind, and they come around and sometime they're looking for questions […] and they come here to learn and things like that." (Oscar, 06.12.2024)

While in Oscar's experience such interactions can lead to economic transactions, other participants like Carlos or Lucia share how they like conversations with tourists and the opportunities for small talk, answering questions or giving recommendations from a local:

> "When I see tourists in the boat I say 'hi what are you doing or are you going, if you're going to Basti, where are you going staying'. You know, like I try to guide them, I try to help them, I try to show them the place, telling them where they could go what is the best thing to do (Lucia, 04.12.2024)

Moreover, for Lucia, even in short exchanges, it is close to her heart to warmly welcoming visitors to the island, rooted in a strong sense of hospitality that she has learned from her studies in tourism and her family's upbringing:

> "I would say hello to everybody and welcome because since I since I know about tourism, I went to different places and I know that when you don't have people telling you welcome, you don't feel part of the community, you don't feel part like you are here and people care about you. But when you have people who say 'hi, welcome to Basti, how are you doing how are you', you feel welcome you feel like you're home you feel like wow these people" (Lucia, 04.12.2024)

While Lucia shows her joy in small talk and actively shaping friendly encounters like these, similarly like Marisol, she expresses a desire to go beyond such moments to more meaningful exchange and a vision to unite more with tourists, teaching them about Afro-Antillean history and local customs and culture of Bocas:

> "I think that people don't really realize that it's good to join local people to make those adventure[18], you know. But nowadays [with] the influence from the technology with the Instagram and all that, tourism is changed. Because most people know are related to what they see, what they see is what they want. And if you don't offer what they want, you have no business, you know". (Lucia, 04.12.2024)

This example not only shows how surface-level exchanges can be shaped by the role of Instagram, which is further discussed in Section 4.2.4 on digital encounters, but also points to Afro-Antillean agency in actively shaping tourism encounters (see Section 6.2).

In contrast to various positive experiences, in which participants described feelings of happiness and joy during superficial encounters, several narratives contain moments in which participants describe facing disrespect and ignorance toward them, often accompanied by racial discrimination and mistrust. Amara

[18] Lucia has mentioned in the conversation before, that she and her husband used to take tourists on trips and show them cultural practices like traditional fishing.

reflected that while some tourists are kind and respectful, others make her feel looked down upon, as if Afro-Antilleans were "black poor people, shitty people" (Amara, 18.12.2024), not worth listening or talking to. She recalled several moments in which she tried to warn tourist to be cautious at the beach, out of care, such as reminding them to protect their bags and belongings or advise them against swimming in rough waters. However, her advice was frequently disregarded. In one case, she recounted how an Italian tourist couple ignored her warning not to swim in the sea, because of the strong current that day, and finding the men a few minutes later who tragically drown. For Amara, this experience was deeply painful as she stressed that she doesn't feel trusted, not listened to nor taken seriously although her intension is to protect and care for visitors:

> "Was so sad, because someone no listen. They think we want to rub them or lie or something like that […] sometimes I feel discriminated. You coming to our island, I see a danger I will tell you the truth to protect you because you come and visit the island." (Amara, 18.12.2024)

Carlos shared similar frustrations about not being believed by tourists when giving directions or advice, coming from a genuine intention of care. The day I first chatted to Carlos on the street in Old Bank, a German tourist family passed by, looking for the path to Wizard Beach. Carlos offered directions, explaining where the trail began but the tourists barely acknowledged him. As they continued to be lost, I repeated Carlos words but in German. Only then they listened and thanked me before heading in the right direction. An uncomfortable feeling overcame me when realizing that they had trusted me, an outsider, over the local who had lived here his entire life. Later, in the interview, I asked Carlos how he experienced this moment:

> "I try to help. […] Sometimes you want to say, 'please don't take your camera and your stuff to the beach because they will steal it'. You will try to tell them, but you're scared to tell them because they're not going to pay you attention […] some of them might say they're racist. Okay, you can't come by a place a tropical place and say this is so. I try to make sure so I try, but they fight against you […] some of them is racial discrimination, some of them. That's still running a lot […] Who would know here more than me? I could say, I, I know the whole, whole Bastimentos." (Carlos, 08.12.2024)

From an analytical perspective, these experiences of being disregarded exemplify how everyday encounters are shaped by colonial hierarchies, in which tourist's mistrust is rooted in a racialized perspective of Black locals. Moments shared by Amara and Carlos reflect how Afro-Antillean knowledge is devalued and subordinated to tourists presumed white superiority, reproducing racial hierarchies that position Black communities as inferior to white tourists.

In Carlos' perception, moments when tourists present themselves as more knowledgeable or entitled than Afro-Antillean locals feel like racialized distrust of locals. The weight these racial hierarchies, even when not directly articulated, is also felt by Gerald. He recalled repeated situations where tourists initially

booked rooms at his hotel but, upon arrival, chose to not to stay there. While guests rarely gave concrete reasons to leave, Gerald sensed that their discomfort was linked to the presence of "too many black people" (Gerald, 30.11.2024). Lucia, who has witnessed similar experiences, adds that in many cases such short-term visitors would move to a foreign-owned hotel instead, a practice that makes her feel frustrated. Gloria further described how some tourists, due to their class privilege, give her the impression that "everything must just be perfect," because their wealth entitles them to higher standards (Gloria, 05.12.2024).

In work settings, especially in hospitality, quick interactions with tourists could still be experienced as warm and friendly. Marisol and Anita are both retired. When asked about encounters with tourism, they both refer to their times working as cooks and sharing their friendly interactions with tourists. Marisol remembers interactions with tourists that felt good, especially when tourists were friendly and showed interest in the place, came to talk to her and ask questions. Other encounters, she liked less due to tourist's lifestyle of smoking and drinking:

> "I used to work here. As a cook. And I meet a lot of tourists […] and some of them is really nice. Nice people. Nice to everyone. And they always have something good to say, some good idea. But some of them, no, they like their bad life. They like your drugs. They like drinking your rum. They curse their bad good. They don't care. They just live. But I would never say 'I don't like tourists', make a discrimination. I'm not the type" (Marisol, 16.12.2024)

For Lucia good experiences with tourists are those when guests are friendly and acknowledge her presence with simple greetings like saying 'hi'. Reflecting on her years of working in her parent's guesthouse, she emphasized that "most of the time is good experience" (Lucia, 04.12.2024). Similarly, Angélica associated positive encounters with satisfied customers:

> "The majority good experience […] when my customers or my guests like they are very happy with their stay and they are very like thankful and like everything was great for them." (Angélica, 22.12.2024)

However, many of these friendly felt encounters take place primarily within the workplace. As Lorena explained, although she engages in lively interactions at work, she feels little interest in extending such exchanges beyond her job. When encountering tourists in public, she usually sticks to a brief greeting:

> "At the hotel we see a lot, we talk a lot. On the street, just hi. I always say good evening, good night, that's it. […] You asking a question, yes, I answered you of course. But we don't have that kind of connection." (Lorena, 17.12.2024)

This selective engagement points to a performative dimension of service encounters, where friendliness is part of the job rather than personal interest. Lorena even expressed discomfort with the presence of tourists in Old Bank, her hometown. When I followed up to ask for the reason, she struggled to articulate it fully, simply saying:

> "[I]t feels so strange. Like when I see someone like not locals, I like why is Basti full of so much stranger. I don't know. I just think it's strange. You know when you go to Cancun, is a tourist area, you see a lot of tourist, is normal. But when I see a lot of tourists here is not so normal like, why is so much tourist here." (Lorena, 17.12.2024)

This sentiment stood out, as it was not tied to a clear explanation but rather an instinctive feeling of unease about tourists entering her home space.

While superficial encounters with tourists are experienced as ordinary and normal features of everyday life in Bocas, they also reveal much about structures and dynamics of the tourism economy but also show a deeply embodied hospitality and cordiality lived by Afro-Antilleans welcoming and hosting tourists on their home island. Hence, encounters can be polite and welcoming, economically strategic but also marked by social distance, mistrust and racial discrimination. Through an analytical lens, in many seemingly mundane moments of a "good morning and welcome" or a warning or advise, the Afro-Antillean participants seem to take on a performative role of the host, even when the encounter remains on a surface level. This service-oriented relationship will be analyzed in more detail in Section 4.2.3.

4.2.2 Long-term Relational Encounters

Long-term and relational encounters refer to forms of meetings that unfold through recurring contact over longer periods of time. They are often embedded in work and labor relationships and can carry both meaningful and extractive dimensions. As Wilson (2017) highlights, repetition is a key characteristic of this type of everyday encounters (see Section 2.3.1): they recur in patterned ways, whether through workplaces or neighborhood proximity with long-term tourists or with short-term visitors who return to Bocas regularly. These encounters are also relational in that way that they involve the formation of relationships, which may be caring or conflictual, ranging from friendships and mutual care to competition, frustration, or experiences of extraction. The following sections dismantle and analyze these layers to show how Afro-Antilleans experience long-term encounters in nuanced ways that go beyond good or bad (Gibson 2010).

Workplace and Labor Relations

Many long-term relational encounters between Afro-Antilleans and tourists are shaped by workplaces and labor relations, as outlined in Section 4.1. As Marisol explained, workplaces often create the spatial context where she would even come across tourists:

> "I don't go to places where a lot of tourists are. The most tourists I meet is when I work in here." (Marisol, 16.12.2024).

In labor relations, tourists often take in the role of employers or business owners, while Afro-Antilleans and especially women, occupy service roles such as cleaners or cooks, or caretakers. Among the frequently mentioned nationalities of foreign employers were America, England, Germany, Argentina, and Panama.

Referring to Mollett's (2022, 2023) research, these workplace encounters underlay racial, gendered, and class hierarchies embedded in Bocas' tourism economy as discussed in Section 2.1.2, 2.2.1 and 2.3. For some, these relationships of Afro-Antilleans working for tourists are framed in neutral terms and sometimes involve a pragmatic dimension. Erick, an elderly man, for example, stresses the importance of employment opportunities created by foreign-owned businesses:

> "We feel glad that these company come in here and they employ many people right even probably I know it benefit my son or my daughter or someone or other people they get benefit of it, right? So it's a source for the development of the community, […] investment and also work for the local." (Erick, 16.12.2024)

Similarly, Marisol explains that her son is working for a foreign-owned tourism resort. The labor relationship between her son and tourists doesn't bother her as she is glad that he has a job. Angélica describes her employment, working for a long-term tourist, as a normal relation too:

> "I see like it's something normal. Anywhere you go here in Bocas, you work for foreigners, restaurant, hotels, hostels, almost the majority. It's like normal" (Angélica, 22.12.2024)

Experiences of encounters with foreign employers are frequently described as positive, often emphasizing the good relations between foreign employers and Afro-Antillean workers. Anita, a retired cook who spent decades employed in foreign-owned places, recalled only good relationships:

> "Good time. Yes! Have no bad time. With my boss and then with the tourists. All I had good relation with them. […] Yeah, like none of them ever scream after me and all the time good good. So me and them have no problems." (Anita, 07.12.2024)

Although Anita's smile and bodily expression supported her words, her account must also be read considering the research context. Anita was one of the participants I did not know well before the interview, and I sensed that her answers were less. Reflective and detailed than those of others.

In the same conversation, Anita mentioned with pride that everyone liked her for her punctuality, discipline and good looks. What stands out in her narrative is how she (perhaps unconsciously) situates the positive memory of her work encounters in her own professionalism and good service efforts. This raises unanswered questions about the interplay between personal relations and underlying structural hierarchies: Were these relationships remembered as positive because Anita invested heavily in maintaining best performance and harmony, while the foreign employer remained in the position of power? Or were they genuinely shaped by friendly, relational encounters that might have unsettled such power hierarchies? While these questions remain open, building on Valentine (2008) and Wilson (2017), I suggest that Anita's experience reflects the blurry and overlapping forces of structural inequalities and personal connection that characterize long-term relational encounters.

Mirella's employment experience in an American owned hotel illustrates both joy but also ambiguities and complex relationships. Although she started working as a domestic helper in cleaning, she gradually took over more tasks and found herself responsible for cooking, picking up guests from the airport, administrating and even managing the hotel when owners were away. "Practically I was acting as the owner. And the owners didn't care because most of the time were out" (Mirella, 11.12.2024). Mirella's narrative underlies pride in her own performance, but also in the responsibility and the trust that came with it. At the same time, she reflected that despite being paid at the level of a domestic worker, she didn't care, since the importance she attached to her role of taking care of the guests and the friendship she developed with her American employers outweighed the monetary remuneration. When the hotel's management was taken over by a U.S. university program, Mirella was dismissed, which she interpreted as rooted in jealousy from a younger American manager. After the dismissal, she voluntary continued to take on tasks from her former American boss, sometimes unpaid work, or partially compensated. These repeated encounters illustrate how in Mirella's case, boundaries of labor and friendship softened, creating an enduring bond of service and trust. As she explained: "I would never leave him. So, as long he needs me and I can be on my feet, I'm going to help him." (Mirella, 11.12.2024).

These various narratives reveal how long-term relational encounters with foreign employers are often remembered as harmonious experiences and marked by positive personal relations. Yet, between the lines, these labor encounters expose the economic, racial and gendered hierarchies that shape them. White Global North tourists occupy positions of ownership and thus power, while Black Afro-Antilleans, particularly women are positioned in service roles. I emphasize the gendered hierarchy in particular, as these experiences of labor relations of working in low-paid jobs for foreigners have only been shared by female participants while male participants were more autonomous in self-employed roles. The fact that all these women emphasized their good relations with foreign employers demonstrated that encounters themselves do not have to feel bad on a personal level to remain rooted in structures of coloniality. Valentine (2008) has been cautioning about the limits of polite encounters which she argues to still be linked to colonial structures.

More structural imbalances beneath the normalization of labor relations are reflected by Lorena, pointing to the entanglement of labor hierarchies with land ownership. As she explains much of the land in Bocas has been sold to tourists, leaving Afro-Antillean locals with few options of independent livelihoods and force many into service roles for those foreigners now owning the land. These structures and spatial dynamics will be explored in detail in Section 5 on spatial politics.

In addition to employer-employee relations, there are also workplace encounters with short-term visitors that take on a more relational dimension than the ones discussed in Section 4.2.1. Oscar who makes a living selling boat tours, emphasized while he often has an economic transactional interest in brief moments of superficial tourism encounters (see Section 4.2.1), he also seeks to experience a personal connection when he takes tourists on tours and shares his knowledge with them:

> "Going to the boat, you know, making my barbecue. And showing them my farm, I make tour in the farm already, I've got good experience, yes. […] I think passing the wisdom about the island you know it's a good thing to do. And if it's by tourists by tours I show them because they really have to have a good service and learn something, you know. I show them something traditional from the island. So I think it's a good thing" (Oscar, 06.12.2024)

Some tourists, he explains, "like my friendship and I show them around" (Oscar, 06.12.2024). At the same time, he expresses frustration with long-term tourists who began offering tours for tourists themselves, often misrepresenting the island's history. For example, while the beach known to locals as 'Little Wave' carries a name rooted in place-based memory, foreign guides have invented stories about a stranded whale, spreading a false narrative that overwrites and erases Afro-Antillean place-based knowledge.

Meaningful Encounters

The data reveals that long-term relational encounters can move beyond fleeting exchanges evident in superficial encounters (Section 4.2.1) to become sites of genuine connection, where Afro-Antilleans and tourists build meaningful personal relationships, emotional bonds and friendships. For Mirella, such meaningful encounters with tourists, both with long-term tourists who lived in Bocas for decades but also with recurring short-term visitors, were of key importance:

> "[P]ersonally, I have made a lot of friends. I made a lot of friends that are very close to me. When they come, they always look for me and I make close close friends. I have some families that come like once a year and I am always with them, but through tourism, I get to know them. So that was an impact in a good way" (Mirella, 19.12.2024)

Mirella proudly shared how much she liked tourists coming and how long-term relational encounters are experienced as friendships that make her feel good. These encounters are characterized by mutual joy as she explained, "tourists enjoy me assisting them and I enjoy doing it" (Mirella, 19.12.2024). One particularly influential experience was her long-standing friendship with an American living in Bocas, which grew into a familial bond—traveling together, sharing meals and even sleeping in the same bed "like a mom and a big son" (Mirella, 11.12.2024). Mirella explained that they were just really good friends and not in a romantic relationship. Over time, however, this relationship gradually exceeded the boundaries of a friendship and began to include unpaid responsibilities, as Mirella started taking care of this friend's house and garden. While Mirella experienced this as an act of care and loyalty and approved the situation for a long time, from a critical analytical perspective it resembles similar labor structures and power hierarchies as discussed above. Mirella's willingness and joy in accepting such tasks—described as normalized in the name of friendship and loyalty—mirror gendered and racialized expectations of service and care (see Section 4.2.3). At the same time, this critical analysis does not diminish the importance Mirella herself places on these meaningful encounters and friendships.

Gloria recalled moments of meaningful relationships with short-term visitors that grew out of shared religious and spiritual values. As a religious Christian, like many Afro-Antilleans in Old Bank[19], she described how the recurring visits of a group of American ladies on a church excursion developed into a lasting friendship, marked by mutual exchange, shared laugher and dancing together. While Carlos often expressed more critical stance towards long-term tourists, he shared similar experiences of friendships with tourists. One example he recounted was a short-term visitor who intended to stay at Carlo's hostel for one night but then ended up remaining for over a year. Reflecting on such bonds, Carlos states:

> "I tell you the truth, I almost, I most have good relationship with many tourists. More than bad. […] You make real good friendship with them. They feel themselves at home. So when they go back, they go with good experience." (Carlos, 08.12.2024)

Extractive Encounters

By extractive encounters I discuss those experiences where relationships with tourists began in friendliness but ultimately serve the tourists' own benefit. Oscar and Lucia both described situations in which long-term tourists initially approached them with friendship, seeking to learn from their local knowledge, only to distance themselves once they had taken what they needed. What at first felt warm and like genuine intentions of friendship, turned into extractive relationships and left participants with feelings of betrayal, mistrust and 'feeling bad', like Oscar expressed:

> "it make me feel a little bad inside, it make me feel a bad sensation feeling […] After you don't think of it it's okay but if you think of it in the moment it make you feel that sensation of ewww." (Oscar, 06.12.2024)

Nevertheless, even after encounters like these, many participants expressed their joy in hospitality, generosity and value of sharing and caring. However, there was also an emerging sensation of mistrust described in moments when knowledge-sharing is misused, leading to skepticism and resentment toward tourists (field journal 12.12.2024). Oscar's thoughts capture this ambivalence: while he enjoys teaching and guiding tourists, repeated experiences of exploitation have left him cautious about long-term relational encounters and uncertain about tourist's genuine intensions. He also recognized that that not all long-term tourists follow extractive practices: "Some come to know and learn and don't take. And some of them come to take. [laughs]" (Oscar, 06.12.2024). Amara adds to this dimension of mistrust that, "you don't know everyone who is coming. You don't know really, who really is who" (Amara, 18.12.2024).

Lucia shares an anecdote where she felt this betrayal of her knowledge has been extracted:

> "Like even my husband, he have a friend […] let's say 25 years ago. And he came, he say he will make a resort well like a bungalow stuff like Thailandia type of things. […] And he said my

[19] In particular, most elderly community members are actively practicing their religion and are part of churches.

> husband and his brother gonna work with him, directly with him, with the tourists, to make the tours. So he needs to know the fishing place, the fishing tours, because he's a fisher man [her husband]. […] In the beginning he and his brother were working with him [...], he started call him two or three times, that was it. He took him with the people the fishing, he knows where the fish could be. And you know what happened after? He stopped calling my husband. Because why? He comes with that most of people comes with. I think they come like this, they come friendly, nice, good everything and then when they got what they want, they're finished with you. You know, like for example he came and he wanted to know the fishing spot, he [tourist] get, he [local] showed him, the surfing spot everything and now he don't need my husband no more for work for fishing, you know" (Lucia, 04.12.2024).

Marisol, by contrast, shared a different perspective in a similar situation of teaching long-term tourists about chocolate-making, who then used and commodified her knowledge by offering chocolate tours and selling chocolate to other tourists. While other community members recounted this story with feelings of mistrust, betrayal, and frustration for the unequal exchange, for Marisol the same story of sharing her skills and place-based knowledge with long-term tourists did not feel like an instance of extraction but as an act of generosity, cultural exchange and a joy in sharing, emphasizing, "I'm not selfish" (Marisol, 16.12.2024).

An ambiguity is also evident in the everyday encounters with long-term tourists on Bastimentos, who also live on Bastimentos or rent their places to short-term visitors. For some, like Gerlad, having long-term tourists as neighbors is experienced in positive terms:

> "[M]any tourists […] have places here and we have good relations. They come around and we have a good relations. I mean me and my personal ways are my personal feelings. I don't have a problem, it doesn't affect me." (Gerald, 30.11.2024)

Yet, for most participants, long-term tourists' residence is marked less by co-living but more by separation and frustration. A shared narrative describes how most long-term tourists tend to live separately from local communities, often settling on the outer shore, on the "prettiest parts of the island" (Marisol, 16.12.2024), with little or no initiative to engage with Afro-Antilleans. This practice of settling away of the Afro-Antillean neighborhood in Old Bank, creates a spatial but also a social distance, fading out encounters or turning them into moments of exclusion, extraction, rejection or discrimination. While these spatial patterns will be discussed in Section 5, the following examples give an insight how some participants feel about these separating dimensions within long-term relational encounters.

Lucia, for example, lowered her voice when describing how this separation and rejection with long-term tourists make her feel:

> "I feel bad, because sometimes people, I will say like most expats who live here, they segregate. If you see, I show you the part where you have the ocean view: There are just gringos or Europeans

> live there. […] some people are really selfish and they don't want to mix. […] we local we can't go there, we can't do that, I don't feel good" (Lucia, 04.12.2024)

For Carlos too, this separation is experienced as forms of racial segregation, mentioning: "they have a mentality that locals gonna steal" (Carlos, 08.12.2024). For him, long-term tourists' 'selfish' practice feels frustrating as he explained he would like to be more unite with tourists and have solidarity also among foreign businesses but that "they [tourists] unite with each other. They have their own party, their own stuff. […] they never come and say hey you know we interested to make a meeting with all the locals them who are business and see what is the interest we passing" (Carlos, 08.12.2024).

This section illustrates the different forms and layers of long-term relational encounters. Afro-Antillean experiences reveal both the possibilities but also limits of long-term encounters to transform into relational or meaningful relationships. On one hand, participants described how repeated encounters at workplaces were experienced positively through 'good' labor relations, emphasizing their joy in attending tourists, sharing knowledge, or welcoming visitors and having good relations with foreign employers. These forms of repetition can foster personal ties and even genuine friendships, moments that echo Wilson's (2017) claim that encounters may deconstruct binaries and social differences through personal connections. These experiences of relational encounters also resonate with literature that point out 'hopeful possibilities' where meaningful encounters are discussed to have the potential of provide hope instead of reproducing inequalities (Everingham 2016; Gibson 2021).

At the same time, participants' experiences with such encounters entail ambivalence. Friendships like those of Mirella that first were characterized by trust, social proximity and hope to overcome social hierarchies, slowly transform into service relationships illustrates how quick underlaying colonial hierarchies between Afro-Antilleans and tourists reassert themselves. As cautioned by Valentine (2008), proximity or politeness need thus to be treated critically as broader structures shape who has the privilege to 'tolerate' in the shape expectations of relationships. In Mirellas' friendship case for instance, her American tourist friend was the one holding the privilege and power, illustrating that even in these personal encounters coloniality of power is operating, but managed by the tourists, deciding if they want to enact on it or not.

Experiences where participants felt used by long-term tourists through their practice of knowledge extraction and followed by segregation further demonstrates how repeated patterns can reinforce both social and spatial boundaries between tourists and Afro-Antilleans: A complex interplay of friendly encounters, social hierarchies and oppression and mistrust. Repetition of encounters are thus two-fold (Gillen and Mostafanezhad 2019; Wilson 2017): Either they can have very positive effects if the personal encounter can help both navigate or contest difference and hierarchies. On the other hand, repetition of colonial extraction or segregation can also reinforce prevailing colonial hierarchies and intersecting inequalities (see Section 2.1).

4.2.3 Service and Care Encounters

Across all female and male participants' narratives, their relations of service and care were central in the way encounters with tourists unfold. Whether at workplaces, through formal employment in hotels, guesthouses, and restaurants, or in everyday informal interactions in public and private spaces, Afro-Antilleans frequently position themselves in the role of providing hospitality. Their practices include examples of offering assistance, protection, sharing home grown fruits or place-based knowledge or provide traditional medical care to tourists. I understand these as encounters of service and care, which are simultaneously rooted in place-based Afro-Antillean cultural and community values of hospitality and solidarity, sharing, while also being shaped by the structural dependencies of the tourism economy. Many participants emphasized that caring for tourists feels natural and often extends beyond formal work obligation. Mirella, who worked many years in hospitality, described with pride how much she cares for tourists both at work and beyond formal labor:

> "I take care of them. Yes. I want to see that they feel themselves at home […] I just feel like that is the service we are supposed to give […] If we are gonna work in tourism, we are supposed to have that in us […] for me it's like a service because I am going to take care of them because it's tourism, right. So give the service properly. Many people don't do it that way. They only like attend the people or work for the sake of the money they are making. I didn't have a big salary and I used to give one hundred percent of me to my people, to my tourists" (Mirella, 19.12.2024)

Mirella's perspective illustrates how she embodies the role of being the host and has internalized the need to provide service to tourists and take care. Similarly, Marisol explained that "what I have to share, I share" showing that caring and sharing is part of her identity (Marisol, 16.12.2024). Expressing how important, normal and beautiful sharing with tourists feels for Marisol, was extended with a memory of her preparing a traditional remedy for a tourist who suffered from stomach problems. Marisol was never paid for her acts of medical care, described with pride that she enjoys helping tourists which can be understood as an integral part of her solidarity:

> "I'm not selfish […] I like to help. When I can help, I help. Or like I was telling, well, I want to try. I don't know but if it helps, thank God!" (Marisol, 16.12.2024).

As previously discussed in Section 4.2.1 on superficial encounters, Afro-Antillean hospitality was also described as practices of everyday openness towards tourists, expressed through greetings such as "morning" or "welcome", as embodied by Lucia:

> "[F]or me, nothing is like Basti. It's almost like it's a warming warm island. The people receive you with your arms, you know, like what I like from here is that, that people, no matter how long you go and you come back, people always like this stranger or local people, you know." (Lucia, 04.12.2024)

During my field experiences, Lucia's described desire to make tourists feel at home was something I encountered daily through greetings and friendly faces that created an immediate sense of being welcomed and cared for. From my outsider perspective, this openness of Afro-Antillean hospitality was experienced not as limited to paying guests but extended to everyday interactions that shape community life in Old Bank. Carlos added another layer to this practice of care, framing it as a deeply ingrained community value but also pointing out its asymmetries: He feels proud about local's generous way of approaching tourists, yet he also emphasized that these values were rarely reciprocated by long-term tourists:

> "We local we live with a better, a big heart on what with tourism. Yeah, we want to share, we want to share […] But they [tourists] could do like what we do, the place would [be] better" (Carlos, 08.12.2024)

Importantly, participants often articulated hospitality in the context of economic dependence on tourism. Lucia's perspective gives an insight where providing care and services is tied to complex interplay of community values but also considered an obligation that goes hand in hand with the dependence on tourism as a livelihood:

> "I was receiving them with a smile and say hello welcome because I think it's very important for us to be the host here to welcome the people. Because we depend on tourism, I think one hundred percent because we don't have an income if it's not for tourists. So we have to keep the place in good shape, in good manners, in good way that people want to come back" (Lucia, 04.12.2024)

Similarly, in Gerald's narrative, the same pressure of feeling obliged to treat tourists with a good service as he is depending on a good reputation, was expressed despite his emphasize on how much he likes to care for and is happy about tourists:

> "Even though you know sometimes the thing is not right. You try to make people feel good as a business person. […] Don't make people feel bad. Because, you know, a person feel bad, they will talk bad about you. That's why we try to make them feel good." (Gerald, 30.11.2024)

Lucia's and Gerald's account point to emotion labor embedded in such service encounters. Even with caring and sharing embodied as important community values of solidarity and contextualized in joy for customer service, lived experiences have shown that in cases of facing disrespect, discrimination or other moments of frustration, Afro-Antilleans feel obliged to maintain friendliness towards tourists. I interpret such reactions to encounters as strategic friendliness whereby this strategy reflects an internalization of tourism's service expectations but also an obligation to secure livelihoods in a precarious economy.

Another theme that emerged around service and the 'performance' of hospitality were narratives in among others Gerald, Amara, Angélica and Lucia expressed a sense of needing to 'do more', or 'having more activity and attraction in Basti' to draw tourists to Basti again (see Section 4.1). These shared reflections among participants who are directly involved in tourism highlight both an internalized pressure to

maintain Basti as a welcoming destination but also reveal Afro-Antillean agency (see Section 6.2): demonstrating of entrepreneurial thinking, innovation and resilience in adapting to external developments and shifting tourist expectations.

To discuss the underlaying structures of encounters of service and care, I consult the intersecting literature on (de)coloniality (Section 2.1), discussions of tourism performance (Section 2.2.3) and imaginaries (Section 2.2.2) as part of critical tourism studies and the feminist lens on embodiment (Section 2.3). I argue that the lived experiences of service and care encounters cannot be understood separate from racial and gender hierarchies that are rooted in coloniality and shaped by Panama's histories of racialized service work in (see Section 2.1.2). If encounters are read through postcolonial lenses of binaries (Said 1979; N. Salazar 2012), narratives of hospitality position Afro-Antilleans as host and caretakers, while Global North tourists are positioned in the role of guests, arriving with the presumption of being 'served'. On one hand, this clear role divide and binary has manifested itself in many narratives of Afro-Antilleans who centered their practices of care or services. A link to Fanon's theory of psychological effects of internalization (Fanon 2008; Maldonado-Torres 2017), can explain how Black subjects have a normalized perception of themselves 'performing' in these service relations, though participants narratives reveal that these performances (Edensor 2001; MacCannell 1976; N. Salazar 2012) are often blurred with identity, values, and power structures rather than being unambiguously staged acts as tourism performance literature suggests (see Section 2.2.3).

Analyzed through structures of coloniality of power (Section 2.1.1), Bocas host/guest binaries reproduce racialized expectations of service, in which whiteness and Global North class privilege[20] confer superiority, while Blackness is associated with labor and service. A feminist lens on embodiment, reveals that such binaries of serving vs. being served are embodied encounters between Afro-Antilleans and tourists and although personal, not at all apolitical. Navigating these hierarchical power structures of coloniality involves both physical and emotional labor in everyday encounters, both at workplaces and in private sphere: Physical labor in terms of the embodied practice of providing a service or care; emotional labor in terms of navigating power structures and expectations. A feminist perspective further reveals that although narratives of both male and female participants have shown embodiment of service and care, the divide in occupations, both labor but also in private spaces, illustrate how women face intersectional oppression as they are mostly the ones in low paid jobs of domestic work, creating more exposure to service expectation. Afro-Antillean female perspectives have shown that they embody the holders of care work beyond work, but in their household, towards tourist and in community. Men, especially those in a self-employed role can exercise more autonomy, not entirely but with easier to escape service expectation.

From a decolonial perspective (Escobar 2007; Mignolo and Walsh 2018), I suggest that Afro-Antillean hospitality should not be simplified and reduced to colonial binaries of host/guest or oppressed/privileged.

[20] including the interrelated tourism dependence based on the class hierarchy

Instead, values of community solidarity and openness to care and share are core elements and expressions of local identity, community and culture, promote a strong sense of unity and belonging among Afro-Antilleans. For this reason, I also aim to highlight the empowering effect of these values and practices as an active form of agency that has the potential to navigate and contest structural inequalities and or even deconstruct binaries in encounters (see Section 6.2). From this perspectives, Afro-Antillean hospitality can be considered to offer a ground for deep, reciprocal connections in Global North tourism encounters—based on mutual learning, genuine interest, and meaningful conversations. Similar as Carlos suggested, if visitors reciprocate these practices of sharing and caring, encounters between Afro-Antilleans and tourists could move towards a decolonial turn in tourism, built on uniting, exchange, and respect, rather than extractive dynamics and colonial power hierarchies.

4.2.4 Digital Encounters

While human geography scholarship has increasingly turned critical attention to how digital spaces (re)produce tourism imaginaries and reinforce a colonial tourist gaze to consume the 'Other' (Bergmeister 2015; Gibson 2021; Oh 2022; Said 1979; S. Smith 2018; Urry 1990), my conversations in Bocas showed that Afro-Antillean residents do not see these issues as immediately relevant. When I asked about the visual representations of Bocas as a tropical paradise on Instagram, most participants did not feel concerned but rather proudly agreed with these images representing their home of the tropical paradise. This alone shows that what appears critical from an academic Global North perspective does not necessarily resonate as an issue locally. Yet, the topic of digital platforms emerged strongly in interviews with participants who run their own tourism businesses. For them, platforms such as Airbnb, Booking.com, or TripAdvisor constitute important infrastructures, shaping not only the flow of visitors but also the character and frequency of encounters. I therefore discuss these as digital encounters and conceptualize them as interactions that unfold online especially in the form of reviews and promotion. While these forms of encounters are not embodied as a personal face-to-face encounter, data shows that they do affect personal feelings and have a key influence on whether such in-person encounters happen at all. From the narratives, two central dimensions emerged: the role of reviews and platforms as spaces of encounter, and digital literacy that shape possibilities for encounter.

The use of platforms like Airbnb or Booking.com are unavoidable for Afro-Antilleans business owners. These platforms control the visibility of accommodation for tourists and handle all bookings and reservations, ultimately determining whether a guest visits a place or not. Gerald explained how dependent he feels on these platforms, especially as tourist's reviews have a power to shape future visits:

> "They come, they need a room, maybe they come in a family. And I try to treat them the best I can. And they still will make a bad review about you. […] I had two women, they come from Airbnb. I try to treat them the best I can. I'll give them breakfast, we cook for them, we keep their

> room clean and em things like that. And they still will make a bad review and Airbnb closed […] my account." (Gerald, 30.11.2024)

Gerald's experience not only shows his frustration of receiving a bad review despite offering care and hospitality—treating tourists the best he can—but also how an indirect encounter through a tourist's digital comment can lead to precarity in Gerald's case such as this blocked profile. For him, such inexplicable reviews also carry a racist component with them as he questions, "that means you don't like the black people?" (Gerald, 30.11.2024). This insight shows how platforms and digital review can become a space where discrimination and economic vulnerability intersect. Similarly, Lucia recounted when a European tourist, who refused to pay for a room he had already used but didn't like, threatened her with leaving a bad review on TripAdvisor if she charged him. Here, the online review system became a tool for tourists to impose authority and negotiate encounters in their position of power. At the same time, Gerald expressed resilience, speaking of negative reviews as temporary and with a smile:

> "Other guests will come again, it's so many thousands of people who are traveling through the whole world. So when somebody makes a bad review, I just don't make it bad on me. No, I feel funny about it because it doesn't make me bother me, you know why? Because I'm sure they will come back one day. And I go say, 'Hey, you remember me?'" (Gerald, 30.11.2024)

The second recurring theme is the unequal capacity or to use digital technologies for tourism promotion. Whereby long-term tourists who manage their tourist places as digital natives and have economic access to computer hardware and software, many Afro-Antilleans lack this access to resources and IT skills, putting them at a significant disadvantage in the tourism economy. Lucia explains the lacking digital literacy: "We don't have that skills because we are not really techno" (Lucia, 04.12.2024). While foreign business owners hire social media teams and use Instagram or TikTok to attract tourists[21], many Afro-Antilleans lack the time, training, or resources to promote their places equally. Lucia elaborates, "I have no time for that you know. […] but like they [long-term tourists] have that like a job and they do so good that they draw more people" (Lucia, 04.12.2024). This dynamic creates a digital divide that directly shapes the frequency and visibility of encounters.

Lorena, who like other younger residents, is familiar with computer skills and is using social media herself. She explained that many local business owners are elderly people and used to what she called the 'old system' of walk-in tourists who arrived in Old Bank without bookings. In her family's hotel, Lorena is thus the one managing the online booking system. Without a strong online presence, many Afro-Antillean businesses remain invisible to potential visitors who decide their destinations through digital platforms. While most participants I talked to own a smartphone, they do not have a platform to promote their

[21] There is for instance a party label in Bocas that organizes parties every Friday. With their strong social media presence backed with a marketing team with tourist employees, this label got so popular that they reach an international audience, attracting short-term visitors from all over the world. Lorena explains that locals do not have the same resources to reach tourists and attract them to their local businesses.

business online. Like Lucia, who offers walking tours but lacks the time and digital literacy to promote them online, many Afro-Antillean initiatives remain invisible to tourists, who instead tend to book tours advertised by foreign-owned businesses. This resonates with Pleasant and Spalding's (2021: 6), findings, who emphasize that lacking IT skills and access to computers for Afro-Antilleans in Bocas reinforces precarity, as mobile phones alone do not provide the kind of digital literacy and tools necessary to thrive as an Airbnb host, tourist operator, or small business owner in the contemporary tourism economy.

Amara and Carlos both pointed out that foreign-owned businesses have advantages not only in terms of digital skills and experience (Amara, 18.12.2024) but also because 'foreigners convince other foreigners' (Carlos, 08.12.2024). In other words, digital representation not only amplifies visibility but also reproduces social proximity and trust within Global North tourists. Hence, digital encounters reinforce the same racialized and classed hierarchies that shape face-to-face encounters in Bocas tourism economy. Amara further reflected on how the spread of Airbnb has reshaped the island itself. More houses are being rented out to tourists rather than lived in, reducing housing availability for locals and is shifting Bastimentos from a community-oriented space to an increasingly oriented around tourism.

While only a few participants spoke directly about digital platforms[22], their insights reveal how digital infrastructures have the potential to shape participation in Bocas' tourism economy: they can open opportunities for visibility but at the same time, they often reinforce inequalities in the businesses between tourists and Afro-Antillean locals. Participant's narratives demonstrate that digital platforms play a central role in mediating relationships of hospitality and have the potential to amplify power imbalances and precarity. In Basti, the lack of digital literacy and resources among many Afro-Antilleans deepens existing structural inequalities of unequal economic means, often resulting in economic disadvantages and fading personal encounters. As I observed myself, short-term visitors are more likely to be drawn to aesthetically curated and digitally visible businesses operated by long-term tourists, while Afro-Antillean-run places remain less visible online.

Digital encounters thus highlight how coloniality of power and knowledge (Quijano 2000) is reproduced not only in face-to-face encounters but also through the digital infrastructures that mediate visibility and reputation. Even if participants did not express concern about tourists' private social media imaginaries, such as 'tropical paradise' representations, the digital marketing capacity of long-term tourists[23] nonetheless reinforce the visibility of Global North perspectives through their economic presence and the dominant imaginaries of their tourism promotion.

As Gerald's experience showed, reviews add another layer to digital encounters, whereby platforms can create social distance that enables subtle forms of discrimination. Despite a friendly personal interaction,

[22] The use of digital platform economies was particularly of interest and emerged in conversations with participants who are involved in a local owned or self-employed tourism business, while for other participants in an employee role, this thematic did not came up or was not of personal interest.
[23] who use this capacity to advertise their places for tourist consumption

the same person can post a negative review. Such virtual exchange can easily threaten tourism-dependent livelihoods and become spaces where tourists are positioned in unequal position of power, economically but also through racialized representations. At the same time, participants like Lorena demonstrate how Afro-Antilleans are not passive in this digital landscape. Lorena actively negotiates digital spaces, using social media and managing platforms for her family's business. Yet, as digital literacy, access, and visibility remain uneven, and as long as Global North tourists consciously or unconsciously leverage these unequal conditions to advance their position in Bocas' competitive tourism economy, digital encounters are likely to continue reproducing class-based hierarchies and marginalization.

4.2.5 Encounters Shaped by Stereotypes and Tourism Imaginaries

Based on literature review on critical tourism studies, I incorporated some questions on how Global North tourism imaginaries shape Afro-Antilleans experiences in encounters with tourists. While I was expecting critique on representations of Bocas framed as a Caribbean paradise, in line with scholars' critique on imaginaries rooted in Global North discourse (see Section 2.2.2), I soon realized that this framing rather reflects Global North perspectives more than local's. Rather than contradicting these imaginaries, various narratives illustrate how participants describe Bocas or Basti as a 'paradise' themselves: "Basti is a beautiful, beautiful, wonderful, quiet place" (Amara, 18.12.2024); "I always say, like Basti is like the paradise on earth" (Angélica, 22.12.2024); "I love Basti. The culture, the people that are so friendly (Lorena, 17.12.2024), "I like Basti and I love Basti a lot. I think what I love from here most is the environment of the island" (Lucia, 04.12.2024), expressed pride in their home. These expressions show how these paradisiacal imaginaries are not only imposed from the outside but also shared by locals.

Although direct critiques of the 'paradise' framing were less present in my conversations, other imaginaries and stereotypes emerged strongly in participants' narratives. These include drug tourism and Rastafari stereotypes, experiences of racialized criminalization, and expectations around romantic or sexual encounters—all of which shape how Afro-Antilleans are perceived, engaged with, and positioned in everyday encounters with Global North tourists.

Drug Tourism and Rastafari Stereotypes

A dominant—yet controversial—imaginary that emerged from conversations and observations concerns the association of Bastimentos, and particularly Old Bank, with marijuana use and Rastafari culture. Many participants described how young Afro-Antillean men approach tourists on the street asking, 'do you wanna buy weed?' or ''Wanna smoke ganja[24]?' (Gerald, 30.11.2024) and at the same time felt that many tourists themselves arrive with this expectation of smoking weed as part of the associated image of the Caribbean Rastafari lifestyle. A postcolonial lens offers critique of tourist's romanticized view of Caribbean life and exoticization of locals and their culture that can be linked to a tourism gaze and

[24] Ganja is used as a synonym for marijuana or weed

Othering narrative (Said 1979; Urry 1990). The reality, however, seems more complex: While this imaginary is a lived reality by some young Afro-Antillean men who adopt Rastafari styles and openly smoke and sell marijuana, other Afro-Antillean residents condemned their practice and named drugs as the most negative layer of experiences with tourism. This is shown in narratives of Lucia and Amara:

> "The tourism brings a lot of good but also a lot of bad. In the first place, it bring a lot you know like drugs" (Lucia, 04.12.2024)

> "And one of the worst things is the drugs […] The tourist them, some of them, they come and they bring new stuff. I see all of it. They bring new stuff, show the youth." (Amara, 18.12.2024)

Gloria, for example, recalled that "first time, the young people here, no one ever used no ganja, no drug, it was just the old folks that I told you about, used to do that, well old men and just a couple of them. […] And they hide and smoke" (Gloria, 05.12.2024). Marisol agrees and adds "and if they [elderly Afro-Antilleans] were to take their marijuana, they go in the bush" (Marisol, 16.12.2024). Like many other participants, both see drug encounters as eroding community values and a bad influence on the local culture, like Gloria's worries about youth involvement in drugs reflect:

> "[A]ll these young people, they're getting into drugs and drinking and that is through the tourism. Because whenever they [tourists] come, they using them to buy drugs and give them money and things like that, you know. And break them in that style." (Gloria, 05.12.2024)

Like others who are not involved in consuming or selling drugs, Lucia distances herself from this stereotype and imaginary of reducing Basti to a place to smoke weed. She recounted her discomfort when she saw a shirtless young Afro-Antillean man offering drugs to newly arrived tourists, immediately after arriving by water taxi and setting foot on land:

> "first thing the guy who was walking without T-shirt was like, 'do you want some marijuana or some coke?'. And I was like, I said what kind of respect he had for himself, the island or the people?" (Lucia, 04.12.2024)

Like Amara's notion above, Lorena also emphasized tourists direct influence on drug use in Bocas: While before locals used to hide to smoke weed as it is illegal, now with tourists smoking on the street, locals started doing the same. Moreover, Lorena observed how tourism expanded drug use beyond marijuana, as tourists bring cocaine and other drugs (Lorena, 17.12.2024).

At the same time, what most research participants explained as a stereotype shaped by tourists, for some, like Oscar who identifies with Rastafari culture himself, practices like picking coconuts, growing his own vegetables, listing to Bob Marley music and this way of dressing and hairstyle are integral parts of his sense of belonging, and fosters his connection with nature. As reflected in Section 3.2.3 on positionality and reflections, I did not get the chance to interview other Afro-Antillean men who might have brought in similar perspective like Oscar. Even tough for some, the image of consuming marijuana and Rastafari

culture are experienced as deeply constructed by and performed for tourists, Oscar's narrative complicates the one-dimensional framing of Rastafari identity, which for himself is an embodied cultural expression that he proudly shares with tourists. These contrasting narratives illustrate how encounters shaped by cultural expressions entail more complexity than what tourism scholars frame as performance (Edensor 2001; MacCannell 1976). Yet, these narratives illustrate how the drugs and Rastafari culture create ambivalent encounters.

Racialized Criminalization

Another prevailing narrative that shapes both tourist encounters and the spatial landscape of Basti is the racist association of Old Bank and its predominantly Afro-Antilleans population with crime. As I will explain in the following sections, Old Bank is often characterized by narratives of crime. Several participants explained how, upon arrival in Bocas, tourists are warned by people working in Bocas town, mostly Panamanian Latinos and long-term tourists, not to visit Old Bank, saying "they will rob you" (Lucia, 04.12.2024). Lucia has witnessed how tourists were told these narratives of crime about Basti[25] whereby she links this discourse to an economic competition of foreign business owners from Bocas town who try to keep tourists away from other places that compete with them:

> "they [people in Bocas town] do that because they wanted people to concentrate Bocas so they can make more money from them. They don't want them to come here [to Basti]. So they would say "don't go to Basti they because there you'll get robbed. Don't go to Basti, they're nothing good there, there's nothing good". […] So they're giving them negative propaganda or negative publicity (Lucia, 04.12.2024)

This narrative that frames the Black community from Old Bank as criminals is understood by participants as a racist representation and imaginary of Black that steal, as Lorena put it:

> "When they [tourists] see black people, they think like all of black people is going to steal, you know, going to thieve you." (Lorena, 17.12.2024)

Lorena explains that this racialized suspicion is often not directed towards her as a woman but at young Black men, depending on their "rasta, dreads, or the way they dress" (Lorena, 17.12.2024). Carlos echoed this perception of racialized criminalization, describing how some long-term tourists do not want locals to cross near their property and tourism areas like resorts or beaches, being afraid to be robbed. Amara shared a similar repeated experience where she was denied access to a public beach[26] that felt like racialized criminalization.

[25] Narratives of crime have been mentioned in the context of both Basti (short for Bastimentos) but also for Old Bank, which is also part of Bastimentos and sometimes referred to as Basti as well.
[26] In Panama, all beaches are public and cannot be privatized. On Bastimentos island, there are many cases where only the beaches are officially public but the land and access to these beaches are privatized, often only accessible to tourists.

> "[T]hey have a lot of security there. Guys who are not even from here, from Panamá city, who is gonna keeping us from the beach like we are criminals, always stealing on the beach. […] They don't want that we do like 'muchas cosas'[27] on the beach." (Amara, 18.12.2024)

In my own experience, these dynamics of restricted access and racialized surveillance and criminalization became visible as well. During field visits, I noticed how Afro-Antillean residents were questioned or blocked from entering 'tourist areas', judged by their appearance as Black locals. At the same time, white people that obviously embody a tourist appearance—myself included—were welcomed without being questioned, even when not paying guests of the resort. This contrast showed how the same security measures that criminalized Afro-Antillean locals also unquestionably privileged white bodies and tourists from the Global North—both those with class privileges and those with racial privileges due to their white skin color. How these dynamics of criminalization manifest spatially is discussed in more detail in Section 5.2.1.

While most participants distance themselves from acts of crime, several people acknowledged that criminal activity is not only a narrative but also a reality in Bocas[28]. While the root causes of crime were not directly addressed by participants, parallels to the repeated references to precarious livelihoods caused by tourism development in Bocas do not go unnoticed. At the same time, local businesses owners like Gerald, suffer from others' criminal actions[29] and bad reputation. For such reasons, among others, Gerlad warns tourists too about criminality, aiming to protect short-term visitors.

Romantic and Sexual Encounters

A third pattern of imaginaries shaping encounters is found in romantic and sexual encounters. With reference to literature, these types of encounters—where Afro-Caribbean women and young Rasta men are sexualized—can be contextualized as tourists' racialized desire or fetishization of Afro-Antillean bodies as 'exotic Other' (Devine and Ojeda 2017; Gibson 2010; Said 1979; N. Salazar 2012; Sheller 2003). Lorena humorously described how she often encounters older tourist women walking around or having romantic relationships with young 'rasta' men. She calls them "sugar mommies", as these older white women tend to go shopping for these locals (Lorena, 17.12.2024). Marisol recalled with more sadness how mainly tourist men look for sexual encounters: "They look for […] the girls them that would give away themselves and they pay them with money. And it's sad" (Marisol, 16.12.2024).

For Afro-Antillean women, some encounters with male tourists do not follow the same patterns of mutual interest observed among young men who actively seek attention of female tourists[30]. Rather, such

[27] Translated to English: 'a lot of things'
[28] in this case Bocas refers specifically to all islands and the entire area of Bocas del Toro.
[29] examines but even if these may be linked to economic precarity caused through tourism too
[30] Due to limitations of my own positionality as a female researcher (see Section 3.2.3 and 3.5), I was not able to initiate a conversation with Afro-Antillean men about their perspectives on romantic or sexual encounters with tourists or how they experience a potential fetishization of their appearance by

encounters are based on sexual harassment and unwanted attention. Both Angélica and Lorena described encounters at their workplaces with male tourists who insisted on hugging them, getting their phone numbers, and unwanted touching. In Mirella's case, male tourists' gestures such as touching her breasts while slipping money into her blouse as a tip, were experienced as normal parts of her service role as she felt close friendships with guests. Narratives by Lorena, Angélica and Mirella illustrate how Afro-Antillean women are often positioned in unequal and vulnerable ways within gendered and racialized hierarchies of tourism. This layer resonates strongly with Mollet's (2022: 334) research, which documents that all thirty Afro-Antillean women interviewed shared experiences of sexual harassment or abuse in their jobs as domestic workers.

These narratives of Rastafari culture and drug use, criminalization, and romantic or sexual encounters demonstrate how imaginaries and stereotypes are multilayered (Maldonado-Torres 2017; Radcliffe and Radhuber 2020) and central in structuring everyday encounters between Afro-Antilleans and tourists in Bocas. Based on these nuanced experiences, I critique the postcolonial literature on tourism imaginaries (see Section 2.2.2) which is often reducing locals to passive victims of exoticization, focusing on the Global North lens of the tourist gaze and the construction of the Caribbean as paradise that is framed as a one-dimensional 'Other'(Said 1979; N. Salazar 2012). By contrast, Afro-Antillean narratives reveal more complex realities: imaginaries may be rejected, contested, or (strategically) embodied, but they also coexist with humor and agency.

As argued before, a decolonial lens helps situate these encounters within the broader structures of coloniality (Escobar 2007; Fanon 2008; Maldonado-Torres 2017; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Quijano 2000). Participants experiences have shown, yet some tourists arrive with expectations shaped by racialized imaginaries of the Caribbean like seeking to smoke weed and experience the Rastafari culture, or the fetishization of Black bodies, yet Afro-Antilleans are not passive in how these imaginaries and stereotypes shape encounters. For instance, while some openly critique the dominant imaginary of Basti as a place for marijuana and Rastafari culture, some young men actively embody this lifestyle with pride.

Encounters shaped by criminalization and sexual harassment reproduce racialized and gendered hierarchies rooted in coloniality of power. Participants frequently described being associated with crime, a discourse that reinforces spatial segregation and privileges white tourists through access and importance of their safety. Women's experiences of sexualized encounters of harassment at work illustrate gendered and racialized hierarchies that need to be navigated in everyday encounters with tourists (see Section 0).

Referring to Fanon (2008), internalized imaginaries can be seen as a form of colonial violence: locals warning tourists with racialized narratives of crime and both distancing from and embodying of Rastafari 'stereotypes' while affirming white tourists' privileges through acts of care about their safety. These

tourists. However, I base my argumentation on my own observations and narratives of research participants, who experience that most Afro-Antillean men enjoy female attention.

accounts show the ambivalence of encounters: Afro-Antilleans both resist and reproduce imaginaries, navigating hierarchies in everyday life. At the same time, what may appear as ‘stereotypes’ to outsiders can also represent chosen identities or lived realities for Afro-Antilleans themselves.

Finally, while scholarship on performed tourism (Section 2.2.3) describes these dynamics through the lens of tourism performance, the narratives here complicate such literature. The lived experiences I engaged with were never framed as conscious performances but emerge at the intersection of identity, internalized and expected imaginaries and colonial power structures. Experiences and perspectives shared by Afro-Antilleans highlight how the lines between performance, lived reality and agency are blurred, and less clear than a distinction between ‘authentic’ and ‘performed’ than suggested in this body of literature (Edensor 2001; MacCannell 1976; N. Salazar 2012).

5 Spatial Politics

This section examines how spatial politics of Global North tourism shape Afro-Antilleans' everyday lives and encounters, and how tourism materialized through spatial dynamics. Building on the previous sections that have outlined how encounters are experienced in the moment at the personal and identity-political level, I now turn to how these encounters manifest spatially. I argue that the experienced spatial politics of Bocas tourism landscape reinforces colonial geographies through land ownership, privatization and segregation.

An excerpt from my field journal illustrates the importance of these dynamics: One afternoon, as I accompanied Oscar to a neighboring island, he proudly pointed out the beauty of the landscape. Suddenly, his tone and facial expression shifted, from excitement to viable frustration as we passed newly built houses behind the beachfront marked with a 'Private Property, Keep Out' sign. "Fucking buildings", he muttered. His anger felt personal but also reflected a collective concern among participants about foreign investments and privatization linked to tourism development (field journal, 22.12.2024).

This moment captures the broader dynamics of spatial politics that shape Afro-Antilleans' daily lives: tourism is not only experienced socially through direct encounters but is also inscribed onto space through privatization, restricted access and unequal control over land. In what follows, I outline land ownership structures in Bocas (Section 5.1), situate them within Panama's broader geopolitical land politics (Section 5.1.1), and discuss how privatization, segregation (Section 5.2.1), and ongoing enclosures (Section 5.2.2) intersect with place-based memories (Section 5.2.3) to shape Afro-Antilleans' experiences of tourism encounters.

5.1 Today's Land Ownership and Investment Dynamics

Foreign land ownership and investment dynamics emerged as a central concern across interviews, frequently mentioned by participants when describing the spatial organization of the islands and the changes they have witnessed through tourism development over time. These dynamics are also of key importance for the focus of this thesis, as they fundamentally shape how tourism encounters manifest spatially: structuring how space is organized and accessed, who belongs where and how spatial patterns shape relations between Afro-Antilleans and tourists.

As previously discussed in Section 2.2.1, the Panamanian government and sustainable development narratives pushed Bocas tourism development and investment strategies, which transformed land into a commodity and resulted in today's land politics. This section contextualizes how processes of foreign land ownership of controlling land can be linked to neoliberal processes of enclosure and settler colonial logics whereby Section 5.2 will extend how these dynamics of enclosure of commons to private properties have

created frontiers and restricted access, resulting in tourist's spatial and social segregation through exclusive enclaves.

The Panamanian government has played a central role in facilitating foreign control over land in Bocas through laws and policies as tools of neoliberal land governance, deeply rooted in imperial policing and coloniality of power (see Section 2.2.1). Once Bocas began attracting economic attention as a site for tourism development, imperial policies such as FDI incentives and tax relief for foreign investors (Gaceta oficial 1994, 2020) opened the door for large-scale foreign investment. In the 1980s and 1990s, these dynamics encouraged many Afro-Antilleans to sell their land. Participants explained that at the time, they had no knowledge of how much their land is worth, leaving them with no reference for negotiation and selling a lot of land for very little money to U.S. American and European tourists. Over the past three decades, Global North investors—already entering with significant economic privilege—have continued to purchase land at low cost and additionally benefitting from government tax incentives and later reselling it at exponentially higher prices.

As Carlos recalled, before tourism development, land in Bocas was freely available since no one officially owned it and the government showed little interest in the segregated area of Bocas. This encouraged many Afro-Antillean families from Jamaica, Martinique, Guadeloupe and elsewhere to settled down, after migrating to Panama to work on the railroad or the canal. These families started using the land, built houses, planted bananas, and lived from subsistence agriculture for free (Carlos, 08.12.2024). He explained how this land, once open and shared, has now been privatized and made inaccessible through tourism development:

> "A lot of land is private […] ninety percent of the land is private already through the tourism. That's what I say, tourism is good and bad also" (Carlos, 08.12.2024)

Afro-Antillean perspectives on land deals and today's land ownership dominated by tourists carry various emotions of anger, regrets, sadness and worries to resignation or indifference. Many participants have either been involved in selling land decades ago or witnessed it through family members who sold smaller plots for only 50 US dollars to 23 hectares for 40.000 US dollars, now realizing that tourists are reselling those for millions or billions of dollars. Fig. 7-9 illustrate how these dynamics materialize in the landscape, with Bocas visibly marked by signs advertising land for sale, investment opportunities and foreign ownership.

Gloria, who also sold land, described the experience as betrayal and scam by the tourists and their lawyers. Reflecting on her land deal, she explained that she avoids thinking about it, "because if I keep thinking about that, no, that would make me get sick. [laughs] I just forget about it" (Gloria, 05.12.2024). Her words capture an ambiguous feeling of regret and coping strategy of forgetting, expressed through humor and laughter.

Differently, both Lucia and Carlos expressed frustration and anger towards these developments and tourism practices of transforming what once were areas that no one wanted into an expensive commodity. What materializes as an inequality also feels like 'being mocked' (Carlos, 08.12.2024) and frustration for not having the vision that foreigners[31] had, not knowing that land would become the most valuable resource (Lucia, 04.12.2024).

Fig. 7, 8, 9: "For Sale" signs marking tourist land ownership and foreign investment on Bastimentos Island (Author, 2024)

Despite expressed negative emotions voiced by some participants, there were also accounts that framed foreign land ownership as acceptable or even normalized. For Erick, the presence of long-term tourists owning property was not a problem in itself, as long as it did not interfere with local businesses:

> "Well they come and buy the local and place and that we... we not against that. We not against that because that is that investment and also work for the local. But what we against that they should not come in our business." (Erick, 16.12.2024)

Similarly, Gerald described positive relations with foreign neighbors and emphasized how he considers foreign land ownership not a as something intrinsically bad:

> "I feel like everybody has to live. If you come and get some places here and want to live here, I can't stop you. […] Many tourists coming around, I can feel happy about them. Because I have many tourists that have places here and we have good relations." (Gerald, 30.11.2024)
>
> "No doesn't affect me. They want to live just a life […] We feel good about them coming here. We can't use all those land by ourselves. Somebody have to come in and help us." (Gerald, 30.11.2024)

On one hand, Erick and Gerald's narratives illustrate a more accepting or pragmatic stance, where tourist land ownership is framed as normal investment and part of today's reality. These perspectives need to be

[31] Lucia refers to the practice that foreigners investing in land divided their property into small lots to resell those for a multiple of the once paid price.

situated to the narrators, who are both elderly male participants who own property themselves and might be less directly affected by raising property prices compared to younger Afro-Antilleans who worry about affording a plot of land for their own families. On the other hand, even participants who expressed acceptance of tourism development and foreign owned properties shared frustration towards situations where they were confronted with restriction in their everyday movements (see Section 5.2). This dissonance indicates ambivalence toward tourists: while long-term tourists and foreign investors are cognitively accepted, embodied restrictions and exclusion are felt as negative experiences shaping personal encounters.

5.1.1 Linking Local Dynamics to Broader Geopolitical Relations

Following Gillen and Mostafanezhad's (2019) call to bring the personal encounter into conversation with broader geopolitics, narratives of land ownership in Bocas can be read not only as a micro-scale dynamic but also as embedded in Panama's broader imperial and colonial geographies (see Section 2.3.1). I argue that the everyday struggles over land and access reveal how global and national colonial structures—manifested through Global North-South class hierarchies, FDI and neoliberal tourism policies that reinforce social hierarchies and privileges—are lived and embodied in personal ways and experienced through encounters (see Section 2.3).

As Mollett (2021, 2022, 2023) has argued, foreign land ownership in not only about land but also directly tied to labor hierarchies. This connection resonates with Lornas experience:

> "You know, the local they like to sell. They just sell their land, spending money and after, we're going work for the one that they sell their land [to]" (Lorena, 17.12.2024).

This shows how broader structures of coloniality of power and imperial power relations (Section 2.1) are personally experienced: Lorena's words highlight how Afro-Antilleans get pushed to the margins of their homelands, often end up working for the same Global North tourists who dispossessed them. Land politics, in this sense, are inseparable from racialized and gendered labor relations (see Section 2.3, 4.2.2 and 4.2.3) shaping encounters as well as livelihoods within Bocas' tourism economy.

From a historical and geopolitical perspective (see Section 2.2.1), Bocas del Toro has historically been positioned as a peripheral region marked by extraction, first through banana plantations and now through tourism (Pleasant and Spalding 2021). While state investment and policies prioritize tourist needs and profitability, local communities—Afro-Antilleans and Indigenous communities[32] alike—face long-standing neglect in infrastructure, education and vulnerable livelihoods. This neglect was a recurring sentiment in my fieldwork. In an informal conversation, Lorena expressed her frustration: "The

[32] This dynamic resonates with the imperial relationships between Bocas—Panama—U.S. (core-to-periphery) discussed by Pleasant and Spalding (2021): Bocas as the internal periphery and segregated area is extracted for tourist purposes and tourism revenue, advancing Panama's GDP, while economically and socially facing segregation and lacking reinvestment in the area.

government does not care about Bocas and the communities that live here" (field journal, 14.12.2024). Similarly, Lucia explained how the province of Bocas del Toro was completely neglected before tourism started: "Bocas del Toro has never been on the map of Panama" (Lucia, 04.12.2024)—not in a literal sense, but to illustrate how the province has historically been marginalized along racial lines. It was only with the rise of tourism that the archipelago began to receive greater financial attention. The marginalization of Bocas as a region, and of the Afro-Antilleans as a community, has also been linked to racial oppression. Lucia captured this dynamic as she reflected:

> "Black people have a curse. Everywhere Black people live it's very run down, very dirty, trashy. But Black people are actually very tidy people. They like to have their places clean" (Lucia, 04.12.2024).

While Lucia struggles to explain her observation, through an analytical lens, her words highlight how structural neglect is racialized and an outcome of state disinvestment and racial segregation. At the same time, state neglect such as lacking reinvestment of tourism revenues in improvement of education and health infrastructure, coexists with state presence through militarization in towns and at beaches. Participants explained this in relation to Bocas position on drug trafficking routes between Colombia and Central America. Gerald appreciated the police presence because they also protect tourists and he wants tourists to be safe (Gerald, 30.11.2024). This contradictory dynamic—absence in terms of investment but presence in terms securitization—echoes with the idea of territorialization and securitization are central to how states use tourism to control territory (Devine 2017; Devine and Ojeda 2017; Gibson 2021; Gillen and Mostafanezhad 2019) (see Section 2.2.1).

Finally, these geopolitical dynamics intersect with tourism's sustainability narratives (see Section 2.2.1), whereby Bocas is marketed as a sustainable 'eco-tourism' destination, a discourse that is used to legitimize FDI and ongoing development. Yet, when addressing advertised sustainability projects[33] active in Bocas, participants described no or limited involvement in those, except for their service involvement such as cooking for volunteers or renting accommodation (see Section 4.2.3). While some participants framed these initiatives as 'helping local kids'—demonstrating an internalized perception of White savior patterns— others pointed out that they offered little benefit to locals and rather exclude Afro-Antilleans from positions as partners with agency.

The gap between sustainability discourse and Afro-Antillean experiences has only been examined on the surface in this thesis and would need more specific attention in further studies. However, participants' reflections mirror critique of critical tourism studies on 'eco-tourism' as a vehicle for neoliberal enclosure and commodification (Section 2.2.1). At the same time contradictions of sustainable development through tourism narratives were visible on the ground: while tourists were the ones visible and recognized for their

[33] Some intitiatives framed to seek sustainable development are Give & Surf, the community-based tourism initiative Aliatur, or the School of Field Studies.

practices of taking care of the environment—framed through sustainable initiatives but also internalized in Afro-Antillean perspectives—tourism creates increasing amounts of waste and huge construction projects impacting land and water and local practices living in harmony with nature are undermined.

5.2 Privatization and Encountering Frontiers

Building on the discussion of land politics (Section 5.1) and long-term relational encounters (Section 4.2.2), this section turns more closely to the spatial dynamics of privatization, as restricted access to land and sea were raised by participants as one of the most pressing concerns in their everyday lives. Today's realities and experiences illustrate how tourism development Bocas has intensified processes of land enclosure, producing forms of social and spatial exclusion through tourist's segregation. To unpack these processes, I put them in conversation with local customs and place-based Afro-Antillean memories. I examine the three interrelated dynamics: the rise of tourism enclaves and spatial and social segregation, the ongoing enclosures and dispossessions, and the erosion of place-based memories.

I argue that privatization is a crucial layer for understanding the spatial conditions that shape experiences with tourism encounters. The spatial organization of tourism not only determines how and where encounters unfold but also becomes an encounter in itself—when Afro-Antilleans are confronted with privatized property that produce frontiers, boundaries and exclusions. I understand these moments as encountering frontiers.

5.2.1 Segregated Tourist Areas

As discussed in Section 4.1 memories from the 1990s show how Afro-Antilleans in Old Bank were among the first react to tourism and start investing in community-led tourism, transforming private homes into guesthouses and investing in hotels and hostels in Old Bank. However, as Section 5.1 outlined, politics of facilitated FDI and arrival of Global North tourists with the financial capital to purchase land shifted the dynamics of land ownership and access on the islands of Bocas, changing both encounter patterns (Section 4.1) and long-term relational encounters with tourists (Section 4.2.2). Today, the island landscape is increasingly marked by segregated tourist enclaves—economic and spatially exclusive places built by and for tourists—long-term tourist residences and hostels and resorts for short-term visitors.

Spatial analysis who how these tourist areas are spatially separated on 'remote' parts of the islands—like Marisol explained as 'the prettiest parts, on the shore side' away from the Afro-Antillean neighborhood in Old Bank. One of the tourist areas in Old Bank but also separated to the shore is described by locals as 'gringo village[34]', a settlement where only tourists live and Afro-Antilleans feel unwelcome (Lucia, 04.12.2024). Carlos emphasized how racialized criminalization underpins these exclusions:

[34] A neighbourhood in Old Bank where only American long-term tourists live and operate their hostels and guesthouses, separate from the community life.

> "[F]rom the point you have right back there, it's pure American, […] That is American area. And there if local pass through that area, 2 or 3 times, they [long-term tourists] don't like it because they have a mentality that locals gonna steal. […] No, they're [locals] not looking to steal, they just like walk through around" (Carlos, 08.12.2024)

This resonates with the dynamics of long-term relational encounters discussed in Section 4.2.2 and the racialized imaginary of crime analyzed in 4.2.5. Here, segregation between tourists and local Afro-Antilleans is enacted both spatially—through separation of land and neighborhoods and restricted in local's mobility—and socially through mistrust of Afro-Antillean presence. The economic consequences of these spatial components of tourism flows are echoed by Lorena, Oscar and Lucia who experience that short-term visitors follow the same separation patterns as long-term tourists, visiting the segregated tourist enclaves while tourism in the community-led tourism infrastructure in Old Bank is fading. These layers of spatial patterns in encounters have been discussed in Section 4.2.2 and is further linked to the changing frequencies of encounters identifies in Section 4.1.

The emergence of segregated tourism enclaves is closely tied to the enclosure processes, that are based on Panama's land politics (Section 5.1). Tourist's practice of privatizing land mostly comes hand in hand with restricting local's access and exercising physical exclusion. Various narratives point out the restricted access:

> "They do not want locals on their land even though I respect them" (Gerald, 30.11.2024)

> "Some places we can't walk, we can't visit no more. Some places" (Oscar, 06.12.2024)

> "The island, they get, they sell, the tourists they come, they build. When they're done build, you cannot, they told you can't pass [laughs] by. Yes, you cannot pass by. You cannot go around." (Amara, 18.12.2024)

Tourist practices of their spatial segregation and exclusion of local communities materialize through "keep out" signs, gates and fences, legal instruments like security guards or lawyers but and through economic barriers like payments to use a path. Participant's experiences of these restrictions on their own island illustrate what I call encountering frontiers: embodied borders that may not always physically stop Afro-Antillean's movement but inscribe boundaries across island landscapes and bodies. As illustrated in *Fig. 10 & 11*, Lucia described:

> "The beach is the governments[35]. They can't prohibit you to pass through […] but most people now are trying to do that because they want to have a beach for private, for their own business.

[35] Based on a Panamanian law, beaches must remain public. However, resorts can build right at the coastline, with a 60-meter public access limit. Red Frog resort is an example who uses this legal loophole as they building their resort infrastructure next to the shore. While the beach itself is still public, there is no way to reach the beach on a land way than through the resort. In other words, the beach is almost exclusively accessible for resort guests or for people who go there by boat. This

> Yes. Well not quite as yet like definitely, like that happened not, we could still go to the beach it's not privatized but it's going to be, because when you look at it, we can't pay price people paying. […] We used to walk from Wizard to Red Frog, from Red Frog to Wild Cane Key and from Wild Cane Key to Polo beach. […] So when you passing […] like one, two, three beach and on the way coming, there is a big gate. You could pass. It's not quite close yet. Well you know what that means, a borderline means a limit you can't really go. But what happened is like I feel as a local person like we've been we've been giving away our properties for low money low price and now we are out of it. Is like I bring you and I show you this place and I rent you it and then you say you can't come here don't come to my place. Excluded, exactly that's how I feel" (Lucia, 04.12.2024)

The big gate, Lucia refers to, is a large metal gate blocking the walking path to Polo Beach (*Fig. 10*). Although the gate could be bypassed by walking through water, Lucia's sentiments show that it still feels like a physical borderline, representing spatial restriction and embodied dimensions of privatization processes.

Fig. 10: Gate blocking a path on Bastimentos (Author, 2024)

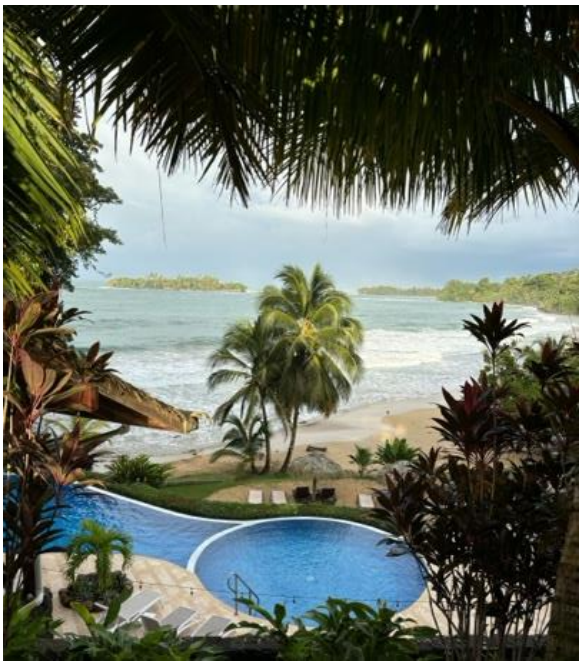

Fig. 11: Resort pool built on beachfront (Author, 2024)

In other cases, tourists put 'keep off the property' signs, a message which participants like Gloria not only understand as soft borders but very clear statements of keeping local communities away, restricting them to pass. Erick who has mostly been speaking positively about seeing tourists, changed his emotional state in the context of encountering tourism frontiers:

effectively privatizes the beach's access and illustrated how enclosures and land dispossessions by tourists take place within legal frameworks yet restrict public space.

> "They put up the signboard, that you cannot enter here. […] I don't feel good because that was our property. And then you come and you put up that... That's not good. […] Before the tourists them, we used to walk the whole island, anyway we wanted to go and no one said nothing. Had different trails and we just walk walk." (Erick, 16.12.2024)

Socio-economic barrier such as privatized paths operates in similar ways. One example of a path to a beach that first crosses private foreign-owned land of a tourist resort (Fig. *12* & 13)

Fig. 12 & 13: Signs indicating private property and entrence fees to access beaches on Bastimentos Island (Author, 2024)

While not a physical fence, paying a five-dollar fee to use this path creates an economic barrier that restricts Afro-Antilleans' access to the beach. In practice, these legal measures operate as frontiers that dispossess locals of public natural resources like the shoreline. Angélica explained this dynamic and how she can't do anything about it:

> "First time, we used to can use the path for free because we are local people but now, if we want to go to Red Frog, we have to pay five dollars entrance fee to walk the path. I understand, is their lot, they own it but I don't think we should pay money for to go on our beach. But what, we can't do nothing about that" (Angélica, 22.12.2024)

Other legal measures of spatial control concerned the role security guards, often hired from Panama City than locally recruited jobs, policing the local communities' mobility. Aligned with the discussion racialized mistrust and criminalization of Afro-Antillean presence (see Section 4.2.5), Amara shares, "[they are] keeping us from the beach like we are criminals, always stealing on the beach" (Amara, 18.12.2024). Access to 'powerful lawyers' was repeatedly emphasized by Gloria, Amara and Oscar as another legal tool which tourists use and reinforce their powerful position over locals. Legal disputes over land are almost always decided in favor of foreigners, since locals lack financial means for legal support and therefore rarely win a case.

While privatized and enclosed property is a pressing issue for most participants, others like Marisol and Mirella who are both elderly women and don't move around much except from their houses and town, feel less impacted and bothered by privatization and tourist's segregation. While both note that they are aware of these dynamics taking place, Marisol has understanding for tourists' different customs, stating "it doesn't bother me" (Marisol, 16.12.2024), while Mirella explains, "it don't impact or affect me personally because there where that happens it's area that I don't go" (Mirella, 19.12.2024). In contrast, for younger generations, tourism's spatial politics of privatization and land ownership is closely tight to future concern. Uncertainty about future and securing a new plot of land is a shared concern among three young women like Amara, Lorena and Angélica. None of them yet own a house or land yet and still live with their parents. They share their worries about what land will remain for future generations. As Lorena put it, "it's so hard to get a land in Bocas now, so expensive" (Lorena, 17.12.2024). Amara echoed this sentiment, expressing her concern of the changing landscapes due to privatization processes:

> "I have my kids or my kids' babies, my grands, […] when Bastimentos grow up, they don't gonna have a piece of land to build, to live here. […] I'm scared, I'm thinking about it all the time […] I worry about it" (Amara, 18.12.2024)

These processes and tourism practices of privatization and spatial segregation shape how encounters between tourists and Afro-Antilleans unfold. As discussed in Section 4.2.2, spatial separation is closely tied to social exclusion, with long-term tourists remaining within their private properties, socializing primarily with other tourists, rather than engaging or sharing with locals. In this sense, spatial segregation not only creates boundaries in the spatial landscape and creates encounters of frontiers but also contributes to the fading of everyday encounters between tourists and Afro-Antilleans.

This fading of encounters echoes participants' memories of shifting tourism flows (see Section 4.1): fewer short-term visitors coming to Old Bank, while foreign-owned hotels and exclusive tourism enclaves in Bocas Town or remote areas increasingly concentrate tourism activity elsewhere. As Lorena emphasized, tourists tend to gravitate toward foreign-owned spaces, while Afro-Antillean businesses remain less visited. Through my analytical lens, I suggest that this trend is reinforced through digital spaces (see Section 4.2.4), where the lack of IT literacy makes Afro-Antillean businesses less visible, further redirecting flows to already socially and spatially segregated tourist areas. The result: fading encounters which are linked to an increasing economic precarity of local entrepreneurs whose livelihoods remain dependent on short-term visitors as customers of their accommodations and tours.

My observations in the field confirmed these dynamics. For example, while accompanying Oscar on his work as a boat operator, I witnessed him spending an entire afternoon waiting for tourists to shuttle them between one enclave resort to another. With only a superficial encounter with Oscar, the social contact in public spaces was limited to a transactional service exchange, illustrating how spatial separation and social

hierarchies reinforce on another. In this way, spatial politics not only reorganize access to land but also reproduce social differences and hierarchies in everyday encounters.

5.2.2 Processes of Ongoing Enclosures and Dispossessions

Although many tourism development processes, such as the land deals that mark today's land ownership (Section 5.1), took place in the 1990s, these land arrangements are not static. Participants' narratives make clear that processes of enclosure and dispossession remain ongoing. For Afro-Antilleans who still hold land, land struggles form part of everyday life; for others, they may not dominate daily concern but persist as an underlying worry. The continuous efforts of foreign investors and businessmen to expand land control through new projects—whether by employing lawyers or through illegal ways of intrusions—embody the ongoing uncertainty about land.

A striking example was the land dispute over an electricity line, where foreign owners of a large tourist resort proposed to build an energy connection across local properties without compensation, although it would have destroyed the land. Framed as a project that 'helps community development', involved participants portrayed a contrasting narrative as they got to understand that the electricity line was exclusively for the resort's own needs and it was the cheapest way to build across local's properties. As Angélica explained, residents from Bocas and Bastimentos Island united and successfully resisted this attempt through collective mobilization and voting (22.12.2024). Gloria's experience with this electricity line highlights an additional layer of power asymmetry to the case: While entering tourist property is strictly prohibited and made inaccessible to locals, these foreign businessmen crossed her private boundaries repeatedly. On one hand, her own land was intruded upon and measured without asking for permission while on the other hand lawyers showed up repeatedly at her hotel, pressuring her to concede. Although Gloria and other residents effectively resisted this pressure by saying 'no', Gloria emphasized how much time and emotional stress these attempts cost her and her family (Gloria, 05.12.2024).

Another case of a more recent and repeated enclosure attempt concerns an elderly Afro-Antillean landholder who has lived on the shore for nearly sixty years and has been holding official ownership of the plot now targeted by the same tourist resort as mentioned above. As Oscar recounted, security staff hired by the resort attempted shift the property markers by moving the fences onto the elder's property land. While seeking to claim part of his property, the resort also blocked the path the elder has been walking since the age of sixteen, forcing him to walk through the water instead. The tourist's attempt to take little by little of the local's land (Oscar, 06.12.2024) reflect the gradual process of dispossession and violence, exercised through the position of power as local communities struggle to fight against Global North tourists and their economic power. Similar to the case above, the elderly Afro-Antillean landowner showed repeated resistance. In his case, a befriended American lawyer started supporting him by volunteering for decades as his lawyer. With her legal support, they achieved to win all legal disputed at the court. This story shows the violence and extractive character of long-term repeated encounters (Section

4.2.2) and attempt of land enclosure. At the same time, it tells a story of Afro-Antillean resistance as the elder navigated the tourist's power and oppression with the same means of having a lawyer for legal protection and power (see Section 6.2).

Afterall, both cases of the electricity line and the repeated attempts of dispossessing local land at the beach, tell stories of violence and White supremacy and reflect the broader processes of neoliberal territorialization and settler colonialism as discussed in Section 2.2.1. By using lawyers, Global North tourists exercised power and repeated physical and emotional pressure for local residents, reproducing colonial geographies of power (Devine and Ojeda 2017; Walter 2023). At the same time those are examples of successful resistance, either achieved collectively or through tourist's help, navigating and resisting this pressure of colonial power (see Section 6.2).

5.2.3 Place-based Memories

For a broader understanding of how privatization and enclosure processes shape the daily lives of Afro-Antilleans in Bocas, this section draws on place-based memories that recount, through personal experiences and recollections, the spatial changes that tourism development brought to the islands, closely investigating the collective narrative of 'the island has changed'.

As already hinted at the sections above on foreign land ownership (Section 5.1) and the entanglements with privatization and spatial restriction of local communities (Section 5.2.1), many memories revolved around the loss or limited mobility of locals. In formal and informal conversations, Afro-Antilleans have shared that their islands' lands have traditionally been used communally by walking pathways, taking short cuts as well as for picking fruits like coconuts—practices that have existed for generations. Carlos explained the importance of 'shortcuts' and that they once allowed people to move freely across the islands but, "now, [they] do not exist anymore" (Carlos, 08.12.2024). After lowering her voice and with a sad undertone, Lorena shared a childhood memory of picking fruit in places now privatized and no longer accessible for locals:

> "What I don't like is like when you sell your land, the gringos they put it private. So where I used to go when I was small, now the kids they cannot enter because it's private. Even the land down there[36] you have like a lot of trees […] Before you can just walk and get mango, mamon chino. You could pick any fruit you want and take it. Now you have to ask for permission and they will tell you 'no, that's my property you cannot come in here'." (Lorena, 17.12.2024)

Oscar laments that the privatization of formerly communal land also entails the loss of valuable resources like coconuts—an important resource for the Afro-Antillean cuisine:

> "The island changed. They used to use it, like example the coconut is a lot of important thing here. To make coconut oil is very important. It can make oil, it can make money, it can cook for people,

[36] Lorena pointed to a private tourist resort area

> to make different things, you know. And you can use it. And you can make bread. And when they come here and they buy the land, they put private property. No one can use the coconut. No one can pick the coconut. Or they cut the trees. […] The coconut gonna waste because "you don't pick my food, don't go on fucking land, don't go my place. Keep out". They have a sign "keep off". So the nature just there, the food's wasting. No one picking it. And it's not right for me. And we used to have it, we share it." (Oscar, 06.12.2024)

Similar to loosing access to coconuts, Gerald recalled how he used to go bait fishing at a dock that is part of foreigner's property now. Loosing access to previously used commons is thus directly linked to less diverse livelihoods.

> "When you were young, you used to go there and catch bait, to go fishing. And by that place, they have a little dock on there. You can't go against the dock. You can't go look for bait or you can't pass close by because it's privatized and... 'No, we don't want anybody come by here'. Come on, you come and buy this place from a black person. You know the people, most of them. You know the people. You know they're not going to steal you […] Anybody would be angry about that. But I don't have my problem because I go to my place. […] I'm avoiding those places. Keep avoiding things. If you keep going around and you know these things happen. You want to get angry." (Gerald, 30.11.2024)

As Gerald explains the constant confrontation with restrictions make him angry and frustrated. To navigate such situations, Gerald is strategically avoiding tourist spaces. This avoidance mirrors what in Section 5.2.1 has been discussed but as a fading of encounters: just as tourists tend to avoid local spaces, locals like Gerlad keep away from tourist owned places. These narratives illustrate how spatial politics such as privatization and enclosure disrupt more than access to land; they are embodied through losing the local way of life collectively described as 'freedom'. For participants, the place-based sense of freedom has been tied to moving freely across the island, collecting fruit, fishing and using land communally. These changes are also linked to reflections on shifting community values like sharing (see Section 4.2.3).

Another layer of change emerged in the tourist practice of renaming places. Carlos expressed feeling offended at how tourists introduce exoticized labels to market properties, erasing the names that Afro-Antilleans have used for generations. For instance, the local 'First Beach' is now widely known as 'Wizard Beach', while 'Round the Point' has been replaced by 'Punta Rica' (Carlos, 08.12.2024). From a critical analytical perspective and reference to Section 2.2.1, the practices of renaming places and enclosure of communal land reflect a colonial logic of terra nullius, where tourists and in particular foreign property owners symbolically erase local histories and place-based memories, dispossessing not only Afro-Antilleans but also other native communities like Indigenous Ngäbe peoples (Devine and Ojeda 2017; Walter 2023).

Loosing access to land and formerly shared spaces is also entangled with the deep sentiment of the love for Basti and personal connection to nature. Especially in the context of losing freedom linked to place-based memories, many participants used narratives framing that Basti used to be better before tourism. However, these memories of Basti 'before tourism' are ambivalent. Compared to today's image of Bocas as a paradise—shared not only among tourists but also among Afro-Antilleans (see Sections 1 and 4.2.5)—other narratives, sometimes also stemming from the same persons, describe how their perception of Basti has changed. Lorena and Oscar recalled that only when tourists started coming and sharing these imaginaries of Bocas as a paradise, they started seeing the archipelago as more beautiful too. Before that time, however, Lorena remembers how Basti was called a 'zoo' and Lucia reflects on Basti as a 'dirty' place before tourism. The ways Old Bank or Bastimentos have been perceive— both in external narratives and internalized place-based memories (Fanon 2008)—evoke images of poverty, racial discrimination and segregation. These perceptions connect to broader colonial and imperial politics in Panama, where Bocas was formerly a neglected and marginalized place marked by racial segregation (see Section 2.1.2 and 5.1.1). Such contrasting perceptions and memories caution against romanticizing life in Bocas before tourism.

In conclusion, I argue that colonial geographies of tourism enclaves and spatial separation between tourist and Afro-Antilleans are reproduced not only through landownership but also in embodied ways—felt through restricted mobility, social exclusions, and the erasure of place-based memories. What is studied through the personal—such as experiences of walking across the island and being stopped by a 'keep off' sign—reflects the broader colonial structures and neoliberal practices of privatization. As discussed in Section 2.2.1, tourists' practices of claiming and fencing land, prohibiting the long-standing communal use or renaming places reinforce settler colonial logics of enclosure and dispossession (Devine and Ojeda 2017; Walter 2023). In Bocas, land once lived in and shared through place-based customs of sharing (see 4.2.3) is reframed through a colonial lens as 'empty', legitimizing private ownership and state supported development policies that are in line with Quijano (2007) and Mignolo's (2000) coloniality/modernity ideologies (Section 2.2.1).

Afro-Antilleans' embodied experiences of restricted access, losing freedoms, and exclusion reveal that the personal is deeply political: spatial politics of Bocas' tourism landscapes reproduce coloniality of power as white Global North tourists, backed by state policies such as Panama's FDI incentives, occupy positions of racial and class privilege and superiority, while Afro-Antilleans get pushed to the margins (Gillen and Mostafanezhad 2019; Hyndman 2004; Zaragocin 2019) (see Section 2.3 and 3.1). As feminist researcher Wilson (2017) has argued, borders are not only territorial but also lived socially and bodily through encounters. Building on her argument, I suggest that repeated embodied experiences of exclusion and restriction in Bocas reproduce colonial borders across Afro-Antillean land and bodies. As discussed in Section 4 and 5, these embodied frontiers manifest in belonging through physical access and mobility but

also through serving roles in labor relations. In contrast some of the long-term relational encounters discussed in Section 4.2.2 and 4.2.3 show how Afro-Antilleans have been navigating and contesting such borders and coloniality through developing personal friendships with tourists and agency—rooted in caring and sharing. At the same time, tourism produces spatial and social frontiers that are felt in everyday life, shaping how encounters unfold (Section 4.2), while also reinforcing social distance and hierarchies within these encounters.

6 Discussing Encounters

This discussion brings together the findings of Section 4 and 5 to examine how everyday encounters between Afro-Antilleans and Global North tourists are shaped by colonial power structures while also being negotiated and contested in personal ways. Critical attention to personal scale of everyday encounters reveals how they unfold in intimate face-to-face moments—through personal connection, emotions and identity politics (Section 4.2)—but also how they are embedded in and produced by spatial politics (Section 5).

In what follows, I discuss three overarching dimensions that emerge from the analysis. First, I examine how intersecting identities of race, class and gender structure encounter through overlapping systems of inequalities and systems of oppression (Section 0). Second, I turn to Afro-Antillean narratives of agency, discussing how encounters are also spaces where coloniality—present in forms of encounters and spatial politics—is being navigated and contested (Section 6.2). Finally, I address the ambiguities and complexities that characterize Afro-Antillean experiences with Global North tourism (Section 6.3).

Taken together, these discussions show that everyday tourism encounters experienced by Afro-Antilleans entail a personal and intimate dimension but are also political moments in which colonial geographies can be reinforced, navigated, or destructed.

6.1 Intersectionality

How everyday tourism encounters between Afro-Antilleans and Global North tourists unfold and how they manifest spatially is shaped by intersecting hierarchies of class, race, and gender. Applying Crenshaw's (1991) conceptualization of intersectionality (see Section 2.1.1 and 3.1), these identities cannot be understood as separate from each other but rather need to be analyzed in the way they overlap and lead to multiple oppression. To illustrate, class-based hierarchies lead to Afro-Antillean's dependency on tourism which intersect with racialized criminalization narratives and spatial segregation which again intersects with racial and gendered divisions of labor, producing layered forms of oppression Afro-Antilleans navigate in their everyday lives.

Afro-Antillean experiences in Bocas illustrate how identity politics are both embodied in encounters with tourists (Section 4) but also deeply entangled with the spatial politics of land, mobility, and segregation (Section 5).

First, I discuss how encounters are structured by Global North class-based privileges that shape today's colonial land relations but also create Afro-Antillean's economic dependency on tourism. As participants stressed, a perceived eighty to ninety percent of livelihoods depend on tourism, leaving the community economically vulnerable to fading short-term visitors, creating situations of precarity. Foreign land ownership relations, colonial-imperial policies and histories of racial segregation reinforce class

hierarchies as Afro-Antillean-led tourism initiatives face competition with economically more powerful players. Compared to the small family-run businesses in Old Bank, foreign owners benefit from superior financial capital, digital literacy, and access to prime coastal locations. Yet these inequalities are not merely tied to land but also to labor, intersecting with histories of dispossession and racialized marginalization. Lorena, for example, described how locals often end up "working for the one that they sold their land to," (Lorena, 17.12.2024) resulting in an employment dependency to tourists. This illustrates how normalized labor relations in Bocas—with foreign employer and Afro-Antilleans employee, often in low-paid service roles—are rooted in racialized and gendered labor hierarchies and bound to histories of land dispossessions and inequalities of Global North-South ownership (see Section 5.1). Moreover, neoliberal expansion of tourism enclaves create exclusive spaces for tourists which on one hand are experienced through an intersecting restriction of racial segregation and economically inaccessible places, on the other hand they are experienced as fading encounters resulting in economic precarity (see Section 5.2.1).

At the same time, encounters are characterized by racialized inequalities, experienced through social and spatial segregation, racialized service expectations whereby Afro-Antilleans are normalized as service labor, racialized narratives of criminalization and othering practices such as the Rastafarian culture and drug use or perceptions as in devaluing local knowledge or service. Intersecting with a class hierarchy, Afro-Antilleans are often associated with criminalization and stereotyped as low paid service workers—both through racialized service expectations and internalization of service and care—while predominantly white tourists are positioned as property owners, entrepreneurs or 'white saviors'. Spatially, such racialized hierarchies are enacted through segregation between Old Bank (predominantly Afro-Antillean residents) and tourist enclaves (predominantly Global North tourists) (see Section 5.2.1). In everyday encounters, these same racialized structures of oppression play out when Afro-Antilleans' knowledge, advice, or (emotional) labor is disregarded in favor of other foreigners (see Section 4.2.2). This refers to moments of soft violence where participants experienced not being listed to when giving an advice but rather believing other tourists, making friends with other tourists after misusing friendship with Afro-Antilleans to extract knowledge for their own use (Section 4.2.2), or not respecting place-based memories and overwriting place names for instance (Section 5.2.3).

These dynamics illustrate how spatial and social borders are mutually reinforcing: exclusion from tourist spaces produces a spatial distance that positions Afro-Antilleans as outsiders and inferior to tourist places, which in turn reinforces social hierarchy within encounters. At the same time, racial discrimination—such as racialized imaginaries of crime voiced in encounters—reaffirms white supremacy and further legitimizes spatial separation.

A third layer of gender complicates the intersectional inequalities. Women's encounters with tourists are shaped not only by racialized service expectations but also by gendered labor structures and oppression through patriarchy. Compared to Afro-Antillean men, who by contrast, more often engage in guiding or boat work, which allows greater autonomy in encounters, women disproportionately occupy roles in

domestic service and hospitality tied to hierarchical labor relations to foreigners. Service roles that are both marked by racial but also gendered expectations (see Section 4.2.3), leave women doubly exposed to both economic dependency and to risks of sexual harassment and discrimination. Female participants narratives have moreover shown how Afro-Antillean women carry care work in such as household, caring for families and kids, experiencing a double workload as families are depending on a double income due to rising living costs. Lived experiences of domestic service work (the personal) reflect structures of racism, patriarchy and colonialism inherent in today's residential tourism development as well as in Panama's and Bocas' colonial and imperial history (the political).

Through this lens, encounters are revealed as deeply intersectional and manifested in spatial politics: Global North class privilege, racialized segregation, and gendered service expectations converge in ways that not only shape face-to-face interactions but also structure how Afro-Antilleans move, live, and work in Bocas. These embodied encounters—whether welcoming tourists in guesthouses, being restricted from privatized beaches, or negotiating reviews online—are simultaneously personal and political. They show how intersectional oppressions are lived at the scale of everyday interactions while reproducing broader colonial geographies of exclusion and inequality.

My own positionality as a white, female student from Switzerland also intersect with the intersectional dynamics discussed here. As pointed out in Section 3.2.3, I have continuously reflected on how my positionality shapes what participants chose to share with me and how I read and interpret Afro-Antillean experiences. Entering Bocas as both a researcher and someone who had previously traveled there as a tourist, I embodied Global North privileges and colonial power hierarchies that structure encounters and spatial politics. My intersectional identity of class and racial privileges—enabling me to travel for my studies, move freely, and hold greater buying—positioned me in the visitor role. At the same time, some participants were in a 'service' role in relation to me, accommodating me or showing me around to help me gain access to the field. These dynamics positioned me closer to the tourists whose practices were often criticized, and I recognize that this may have shaped what participants felt able to share with me.

For instance, neutral or positive comments about tourists—such as liking tourist presence—must be understood in relation to the fact that these were addressed to me, a Global North visitor. It might have been easier for participants to express critique to me as a student interested in their perspectives when it concerned foreign-owned land deals or encounters with long-term tourists—figures who are more clearly positioned as powerful actors—than to articulate frustrations with short-term visitors, whose presence I in some ways embodied. Thus, what I analyze as a disparity between narratives of structural struggles and more positive personal comments about tourists, and interpretations as ambivalence in Afro-Antillean narratives, may therefore reflect the relational dynamic of our research encounters. These reflections are important how results and interpretations are read. At the same time, acknowledging this influence does not invalidate the Afro-Antillean perspectives discussed, but rather emphasizes the need for careful reflexivity. In short, Afro-Antillean experiences discussed in this thesis are always co-constructed and

shaped through the positionality and intersectional identities of both me as a researcher and the participants.

6.2 Agency in Navigating and Contesting Coloniality

While Section 6.1 examined how intersectional oppressions of class, race, and gender shape Afro-Antillean experiences of inequalities in tourism encounters and spatial politics, this section turns to the other side of the story: how Afro-Antilleans actively navigate and contest these intersecting and colonial hierarchies. Building on Corinealdi's (2022) call in 'Panama in Black' to foreground Afro-Antilleans as active (political) agents who claim Bocas as their land—despite colonial legacies and imperial policies that have been marginalizing them—I center Afro-Antillean perspectives that foreground agency and resilience, that challenge the coloniality of power underpinning Global North tourism in Bocas. Despite many narratives of participants claiming to be dependent on Global North tourism, Lucia articulates Afro-independence and self-determination of the Afro-Antillean community of Old Bank and refuses to be reduced to the role of the passive victim of tourism:

> "I want people to know that we are not only islanders that we only like waiting to them [tourists] to come to make money, no! We are people that have a home, have a family, have interest, have cultural, have respect, have religion and we are people that live here and we love to live here but we also share with them" (Lucia, 04.12.2024)

I understand agency following Giddens (1984) as the capability of individuals or collectives to take action and shape their lives and social structures. At the same time, agency needs to be understood together with intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991): this capacity to take action is always embedded in and shaped the intersecting social identities and power relations, as discussed in Section 6.1.

Strategies of navigating the structures coloniality of power are diverse and layered. As discussed in Section 4 and 1, Afro-Antilleans often draw on cultural values and coping strategies to navigate hierarchies embedded in tourism encounters and spatial politics. Central here is Afro-Antillean identity: solidarity, sharing and caring that remain fundamental cultural values to Afro-Antillean life in Bocas, even after struggles over land or experiences of extractive encounters (see Section 4.2.3). Despite tourist's tendency to individualize over sharing and uniting with locals and racialized service expectations that commodify Afro-Antillean bodies, these values of sharing and caring continue to be enacted and offer repeated opportunities to unite with tourists and overcome social differences. Alongside these values, a range of coping strategies—avoidance, acceptance, resignation or strategic friendliness—can be also understood as strategies to navigate oppression in social and spatial tourism dynamics. Some examples include Gerald's avoidance of tourist spaces to prevent frustration over restricted access, Angélica's strategic friendliness in encounters where she experiences racial discrimination, and Gloria's acceptance and resignation when reflecting on the sale of her family's land.

Afro-Antillean agency also takes shape through community-led tourism. Before foreign investors intervened, locals actively reacted to the arrival of first visitors by adapting their livelihoods as entrepreneurs, operating guesthouses, small hotels, or offering tours (see Section 4.1). This history adds another layer to the often simplified narrative of dependency on external tourism jobs and challenges the narrative of Afro-Antilleans as passive subjects in the tourism economy, as Angélica explained, "now, since we have tourists, it is like another option for living… you don't have to work for someone, you can work for yourself" (Angélica, 22.12.2024). Other community-led initiatives, such Lucia's walking tours that center place-based knowledge, or Oscar's choice not to show tourists the most fragile spots of marine ecosystems on his boat tours (Oscar, 06.12.2024), demonstrate how locals actively shape tourism's impact in Bocas through self-determination, rather hand being shaped by it.

A further dimension of Afro-Antillean agency lies in the potential of encounters themselves. As Wilson's (2017) argues, everyday encounters have the potential to destabilize binaries and social differences within in the micro-geographies of encounters and open possibilities for societal transformation (see Section 2.3.1). As argued in Section 4.2.2 and 4.2.3 from Afro-Antilleans' perspectives, meaningful encounters and relationships—whether through friendship, conversations, or shared care—can be understood as moments of hope where colonial hierarchies and binaries of host/guest or server/tourist can be blurred or deconstructed. I argue that these facets of encounters, particularly when repeated over time (Gillen and Mostafanezhad 2019; Wilson 2017) have the potential to contest the intersectional inequalities and colonial structures shaping tourism encounters.

At the same time, participants repeatedly expressed a desire for more meaningful forms of encounters with tourists—based on reciprocity, mutual respect, and cultural exchange. For example, Gloria emphasized the wish for tourists to "share with people here and do that you know, not be selfish," (Gloria, 05.12.2024), while Angélica expressed a hope for tourist's practices to "respect people, nature, respect law, respect our culture" (Angélica, 22.12.2024). Erick argued that "they must take more advice from the local" (Erick, 16.12.2024) and Marisol articulated:

"Well, I would like Bastimentos to be a place of people that socialized more, more tolerant, that we learn to share more. And that we could teach the tourists them the good of Bastimentos, not the bad things. That is what I would like" (Marisol, 16.12.2024)

These desires to be more united and socialize on a more relational level open opportunities to contest colonial hierarchies and power structures that shape segregation and extraction that are often predominant in structuring encounters and spatial politics. Such visions of desired encounters also extend to collective agency and solidarity withing local communities. As a hostel owner himself, Carlos, called for more unity among Afro-Antilleans and advocates for a locally driven tourism industry. He envisions more community-gatherings and local initiatives to empower residents and push back against exploitative or socially unjust tourism development, structured through a Global North-South divide. Sharing a similar

vision, Lucia has been advocating for a community center and an alliance for local businesses in Old Bank to strengthen the community businesses (Lucia, 04.12.2024). Yet, participants also acknowledged the harsh reality that many locals are economically struggling whereby economic precarious often foster internal competition and individualism rather than unity.

Despite the structuring force of intersectionality, these narratives reveal openings where Afro-Antilleans negotiate, resist, or contest the reproduction of coloniality of power. I argue that these openings can even be understood as carrying decolonial potential. Such moments of contesting coloniality often takes place on the micro-geographical scale of the encounter rather than in broader structures such as land politics: in personal moments of sharing, laughing, conversations, or mutual recognition that subtly unsettle the power hierarchies at play. Yet, building on Tuck and Yang's (2012) reminder that decolonization must not be reduced to metaphor, it is important to recognize that deeper transformation requires political and structural change—such as decolonizing land ownership and addressing racialized inequalities in labor relations. While a decolonial turn towards more social justice ultimately mandates such broader structural shifts, the repeated everyday practices of care, solidarity, and community-centered tourism among Afro-Antilleans nonetheless contribute to small but meaningful steps towards decoloniality within the micro-scale of the encounter.

Finally, encounters are never one-sided. While I have discussed Afro-Antillean agency in contesting coloniality within encounters, their transformative potential equally depends on tourist's willingness to reciprocate through respect, solidarity and genuine engagement. Reimagining relations need to take place at both ends of an encounter. Positioning everyday Global North tourism encounters and spatial politics in Bocas as inherently political is therefore essential—not only to expose how intersectional inequalities, colonial hierarchies and systems of oppression operate, but also to understand how the personal as political can open spaces to contest and reimagine them.

6.3 Ambiguity and Complexity in Encounters

As the final analytical section of this thesis, insights from Afro-Antillean perspectives—discussed throughout and grounded in the literature on feminist geographies of encounter—show that Afro-Antillean experiences with Global North tourism cannot be captured in simple binaries of positive/negative or exploitative/meaningful. The lived and embodied experiences with tourism encounters discussed in Section 4 and their spatial manifestation in Section 1 reveal moments that are ambiguous, layered and emotionally complex, where coloniality of power intersects with social proximity. On one hand, Bocas' tourism economy provides livelihoods, opportunities for exchange and personal moments that allow Afro-Antilleans to challenge colonial hierarchies. On the other hand, Global North tourism reproduces these hierarchies through colonial land and labor relations, racialized service expectations, social exclusion, and economic dependency—structuring tourists as superior and Afro-Antilleans as inferior.

Tourism encounters in Bocas are shaped by complex histories and legacies of Panama's colonial and imperial nation-building (see Section 2.1.2), experienced through intersectionality (Section 6.1), and navigated or contested through Afro-Antilleans agency (Section 6.2) and cultural values like solidarity (Section 4.2.3). They thus produce multilayered experiences where structural oppression, interpersonal relations and emotional responses converge. A critical analysis shows that contradictions often co-exist within the same individual: cognitively expressed acceptance or normalization about tourism, or feelings of joy and pride in hosting tourists co-exist alongside embodied experiences of restriction, exclusion, or extraction, which generate feelings of frustration, anger, or mistrust. Everyday strategies how Afro-Antilleans navigate these tensions through avoidance, humor or strategic friendliness have been discussed in Section 6.2 and reveal how hierarchies can be reinforced but also how they can be unsettled in the moment of the encounter.

This fluid characteristic of encounters holds the potential to reproduce or reinforce colonial hierarchies, but also to destabilize them, opening spaces for recognition, reciprocity, and the contestation of power hierarchies between Afro-Antilleans and Global North tourists in Bocas. Recognizing these ambiguities and complexities is central to the thesis argument: Afro-Antillean experiences with Global North tourism are not only structed and performed through coloniality and intersectional inequalities, nor solely contested through Afro-Antillean agency. They are lived as multilayered, personal and political, intimate and structural, often contradictory and continuously negotiated in the moment of the encounters. In this sense, everyday tourism encounters in Bocas are best understood as fluid and continuously negotiated in the moment, carrying the weight of coloniality and the potential for its disruption.

7 Conclusion

This thesis has examined how Afro-Antilleans in Old Bank, Bastimentos Island experience Global North tourism and the ongoing transformation of Bocas del Toro as a tourism frontier. Guided by a feminist political geography approach, I employed the framework of everyday tourism encounters to center personal, embodied, and lived Afro-Antillean experiences. This analytical lens has allowed to analyze how the macro-geographical structures of coloniality in Global North tourism (see Section 2.1 and 2.2) are not only abstract and imposed from above but also embodied and negotiated on the micro-geographical scale of daily encounters. The analysis drew on five weeks of fieldwork, employing a qualitative research approach by combining interviews and participant observations where I engaged with the question how Afro-Antilleans experience Global North tourism through everyday encounters and what the role of space is in shaping them. These narratives have shown that everyday encounters are inseparable from the spatial organization of tourism landscapes in Bocas, where privatization, dispossession, and segregation inscribe colonial power onto space. Together, my research approach has revealed how colonial hierarchies are simultaneously reproduced and contested in the daily lives of Afro-Antilleans: Tourism in Bocas is thus both a site of colonial power but also of Afro-Antillean agency, that navigates and contests this power. In short, I have answered these questions by arguing that Afro-Antillean experiences of tourism are multi-layered, complex and often ambiguous, instead of reducible in binary categories of exploitation or empowerment. I suggest that recognizing these complexities—and amplifying marginalized perspectives—offers a path toward a more nuanced and decolonial understanding of tourism.

In Section 4, I have outlined a detailed account of everyday encounters experienced by participants, demonstrating how Afro-Antilleans encounter tourism in Bocas in various forms—superficial greetings, long-term relationships, service and care labor, digital interactions, and encounters shaped by imaginaries and stereotypes. These encounters are experienced in multiple ways and intersectional structured by race, gender, and class hierarchies. While many encounters reproduce colonial dynamics—such as racialized criminalization or expectations of service—others open space for relationality, solidarity and meaningful exchange. An in-depth analysis of spatial politics in Section 5 examined how tourism development shaped the landscapes of Bocas through privatization, foreign land control, and spatial segregation. I have argued that these processes inscribe colonial power onto space, creating tourism frontiers that structure where and how Afro-Antilleans can move, live, and encounter tourists. At the same time, Afro-Antilleans actively negotiate these frontiers—through relational encounters, resistance or avoidance, entrepreneurial practices, and strategies rooted in cultural values of sharing and caring. Finally, an analytical lens and discussion in Section 6 brought these strands together, showing how encounters are deeply intersectional, shaped simultaneously by racialized service expectations, gendered labor hierarchies, class privilege, colonial territorial settler structures but are also actively shaped by Afro-Antillean identities and community values. Hence and crucially, I centered agency highlighting how Afro-Antilleans are not

passive “hosts” but active agents who navigate and sometimes contest these hierarchies. Afro-Antillean narratives highlight their felt ambivalence towards tourism: tourism in Bocas offers livelihoods and possibilities for connection but also reproduces colonial hierarchies and exclusions. Afro-Antillean experiences thus reveal how tourism is lived as ambiguous, negotiated, and continuously re-made in the moment of encounter.

Grounded in feminist political geography, this work contributes to the broader field of critical tourism studies in three interrelated ways. First, it offers valuable insights from micro-geographies and embodied perspectives for understanding how colonial structures are lived in everyday encounters. Second, it adds to a decolonial perspective by critically engaging with (de)coloniality and centering Afro-Antillean voices that tell how power is not only imposed but also actively negotiated through bodies, spaces, and relationships. Foregrounding Afro-Antillean experiences as valid sources of knowledge and critical insight adds additional layers of counter-narratives—that historically have been marginalized in Panama’s context—to dominant Western tourism scholarship, which often remains tied to postcolonial critique and binary analysis that frame tourism as extractive and local communities as passive victims. Third, it underscores the value of engaging with multiple truths, lived experiences, and situated knowledges—such ambiguous feelings, contradicting perspectives, or complex interplay of colonial histories, spatial and identity politics—to understand Global North tourism.

A limiting factor of this research reflects my positionality as a Global North scholar, reading Afro-Antillean experiences through colonial filters (see Section 3.2.3). While centering Afro-Antillean voices, the study needs to be understood as personal and situated knowledge—on one hand shaped through my positionality and on the other hand as it remains based on twelve narratives, primarily of individuals embedded in tourism economy. Further research should extend this scope to include Afro-Antilleans with fewer economic ties to tourism, as well as Indigenous perspectives, which are crucial for understanding more layers of Global North tourism in Bocas. In addition, with tourism as a rapid growing phenomenon shaping places all over the world, I recommend future work to study tourism frontiers making use of the framework employed in this thesis. Further, I call for critical attention to spatial expansion of tourism frontiers legitimized through sustainable tourism discourses, as well as to the digital geographies of tourism (Gibson 2021), particularly how online platforms increasingly shape encounters and Afro-Antillean lives (see Section 4.2.4). Finally, while this thesis is grounded in decolonial thought, I acknowledge that true decoloniality cannot be achieved within the confines of academic research alone but rather need material change of decolonialization of territories and transformation of political, economic, and social structures (Tuck and Yang 2012). This thesis contributes to critical debates and foregrounds Afro-Antillean perspectives, but it cannot substitute the systemic changes necessary to dismantle coloniality in practice

For practical insights, the Afro-Antillean perspectives voiced in this thesis suggest that ‘problem’ in Bocas is not tourism per se but the coloniality of power that structures land, labor and the making of Global

North frontiers. On a micro-scale of the in-person encounter, I suggest that tourism practices that respect Afro-Antillean land, knowledge, and culture carry the potential to dismantle colonial power relations and open more meaningful encounters. On a broader macro-scale however, I suggest that development strategies that promote 'sustainable' tourism without addressing inequalities of coloniality, risk deepening structural inequalities—rooted in coloniality—between Global North tourists and Afro-Antillean locals. A more transformative vision toward social justice would recognize Afro-Antilleans as active partners in shaping the tourism landscapes. I therefore recommend a transformative policy approach that could be based on cooperative models which shift land ownership and labor relations away from hierarchical structures of Global North ownership and control towards more solidary and sustainably shared land use. I would suggest a reinvestment mechanism where foreign capital is reinvested into Afro-Antillean communities in Old Bank—among other native communities in Bocas such as Indigenous Ngäbe—and their local economies. However, such measures imply profound structural changes at the governmental level, particularly regarding laws on FDI. But without such reforms, community-based initiatives risk being undermined by broader colonial structures of Global North tourism. Such an approach could embody the uniting vision voiced by participants (see Section 6.2) and underscores how Afro-Antillean place-based values of solidarity, care, and sharing hold the power to drive transformative change—challenging the unequal landscapes of Bocas del Toro's tourism frontiers and imagining more just futures.

8 References

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9 Personal Declaration

I hereby declare that the submitted thesis is the result of my own, independent work. All external sources are explicitly acknowledged in the thesis.

In line with the recommendations on the use of generative artificial intelligence at UZH, I further declare that the following generative AI tools were used during the development of the work: ChatGPT[37] for brainstorming and linguistic improvement like rephrasing, DeepL[38] for translation and Grammarly[39] for grammar. These AI tools have specifically helped to improve language quality of this thesis. I assume full responsibility for the content of this thesis.

Zurich, 29.08.2025

Mirjam Steiger

[37] chatgpt.com
[38] deepl.com
[39] grammarly.com

10 Appendix

A. Informed Consent for Participation in the Master Thesis Project "Tourism Encounters in Bocas del Toro, Panama"

Investigator/ Contact: Mirjam Steiger, Master student, Department of Geography, University of Zurich

Project funded by Department of Geography & Geography Alumni, University of Zurich

Project duration: September 2024 till August 2025

1. What is the purpose of this project?

This project aims to understand Western tourism in Bocas del Toro and how tourism impacts livelihoods, sense of place and identity. The research focuses on the Afro-Antillean community living in Old Bank/ Bastimentos/ Bocas del Toro and how they experience and challenge tourism.

2. Why have I been invited to take part?

I would like to talk to you to know more about experiences and feelings about tourism encounters in Bocas/Old Bank.

3. Do I have to take part?

No. You are welcome to ask questions about the study before deciding whether to participate. If you agree to participate, you may withdraw from the project at any time. All information learned will be kept confidential.

4. What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

You will take part in an interview with me. Important to know about the interview:

- Interviews will be recorded only if you agree
- Your participation is voluntary
- You can end the interview at any time or skip any question

5. Are there any potential risks in taking part?

We can discuss what personal information you want to be included or anonymized in the research (e.g. your name, age, gender, specific places mentioned, etc.). If you should you feel uncomfortable with the research, you are welcome to speak with me about your concerns (see contact information below). You may pull out of the project at any time for any reason.

6. Are there any benefits in taking part?

While there are no directs benefits to participating in this research, it offers an opportunity to openly share your experiences and feelings about tourism. I will share my findings with you and stay in touch with you, in the hopes that this will be helpful to you in the future.

7. What happens to the data provided?

All data, including notes, transcripts, and audio recordings (if applicable) will be stored on password-protected computer files. I am the only person with access to these. When writing the thesis, I will follow the confidentiality rules we agreed on, including anonymizing of your name and identity.

8. Will the research be published?

The research will be written up in the form of a Master's thesis, and may also be presented to the participants in Old Bank. However, in doing so, the identities of individual participants will be kept confidential.

9. Who is organizing and funding the research?

This research is funded by Department of Geography at the University of Zurich, Geography alumni of University of Zurich and myself.

10. Further Information and Contact Details

You are welcome to ask any questions or raise any concerns with the research. You may contact me at any time.

B. Interview Guide for Afro-Antillean Community in Bocas del Toro

Introduction:

1. Introduce Myself and the Research Project:
2. Consent and Anonymity:
    - Go through informed consent together.
    - Ask if they consent to being recorded and/or if I can take notes.
    - Offer them the opportunity to comment on what can be included in the research.
3. Thank and Reassure the Interviewee:
    - Emphasize that I value their perspective, experiences, and comfort.
    - Explain that the questions will start with general life topics and gradually explore their views on tourism and encounters with tourists.

Part 1: Establishing Background and Context

1. Personal Background and Living in Old Bank/ Bocas del Toro:
    - Could you tell me a bit about yourself and your connection to Old Bank/ Bastimentos/ Bocas del Toro? How does it feel like to live in this place? Have you always lived here, or did you move here from somewhere else?
    - What does your (everyday) life here look like?
    - What do you love most about living here?
    - What is your community? (Afro-Antilleans, mixed culture, etc?)

Part 2: Tourism Encounters

2. First Impressions of Tourists and Tourism:
    - How often to you see tourists and has this changed over time/ years/ seasons?
        - I heard that in the last year there were not so many tourists coming. Why? Does that have an impact on your life (e.g. work, less stress, more worries)?
    - Where do you see tourists in this region?
    - What are places where tourists go and you don't? (or sharing space?)
    - Can you describe your contact with tourists?
    - Who are the tourists/ foreigners you meet or interact with?
3. The Spatial and Emotional Dimensions of Encounters:
    - Are there any places/ spaces that are important for you on the island?
        - How do you feel when tourists visit places that are special to you? (example?)
        - Do you think tourists understand what this place means to you and your family? Why or why not?
        - What did this place mean to you before it was turned into tourism hotspot? How did you use that space before/ What was here before? (spatial memories)? And how do you use it now, if at all.?
    - Are there specific places or spaces where you often interact with tourists? How do these interactions usually feel for you? Do you have an example of such a place or situation?

Part 3: Spatial Politics

4. Perceptions of Change and Territoriality (spatial exclusion, dispossessions, privatization):
    - What has changed on the island or in Old Bank because of tourism? (e.g. changes of land, ownership, etc.)

- What has changed for you personally?
- I have noticed that there are a lot of private hotels, hostels, restaurants, resorts, often with foreign owners. How do you feel about that?
    - Are there places you don't visit anymore because of tourism changes?

5. Environmental changes:
    - Have you experienced changes in the ecosystem and how?
    - Are there sustainabiltiy organizations/ projects? What kind of people are involved there? Would you like to have a say as well?
6. Impacts on Community and Space:
    - How has the growing tourism industry in Bocas del Toro affected the meaning of this place?
    - Are there ways the community here had to adapt or change due to tourism? Why? How do you feel about that?
    - Are there things or values that you don't want to lose because of tourism?
    - Are there activities that you only do/ offer for tourists because they want to see it?

Part 4: Tourists vs. Local Perceptions

7. Tourism Imaginaries and Local Perceptions:
    - How would you describe Basti/ Bocas to someone, what would you say?
    - What would you like tourists to know about Bocas/ Basti?
    - "I experienced, that (Western) tourism often promotes certain images or ideas about Bocas del Toro—such as exploring nature (some surfing, indigenous culture, or a Caribbean 'flair'):
      Show imaginaries: show them some images, Insta posts and ask them what they think about it.
        - How do you feel about these images?
        - Do you think your idea of Basti/ Bocas is different from what tourist see/ expect? (How would you like to portray this place?)
        - Do you think that Western ideas/ expectations influence/ change this place?

Part 5: Embodiment and Emotions of Tourism Encounters

8. Embodiment and Affects in Tourist Encounters:
    - Could you describe your relationship with tourists/expats that come visit this place/ live here?
        - Who in your community benefits the most from tourism? Who benefits the least? Why?
    - How do you feel about the tourists who come to visit Bocas del Toro? How would you describe their impact (tourism practices/ development) on the community or the places that are important to you?
    - Do you have any feelings, emotions or bodily experiences regarding tourists or tourism development?
    - Can you tell me some experiences you had when you meet/ see tourists?
    - Could you describe the experiences you normally have with tourists?
        - Can you describe an experience you had with tourists/ foreigners that made you feel good/bad? Follow-up: What happened? Where did this happen? Often or only one experience? Example? Do you still think of this moment? How did it make you feel? What emotions/ reactions did you have?
        - Are there times when you feel uncomfortable because of tourists? What happens in those moments?
        - Have you ever been badly treated at work, by tourists/ people who come visit this place?
        - Have you ever felt discriminated?
        - How does your body feel when you work/meet with tourists (e.g., tired, proud, happy, stressed)?

Part 6: Agency & Resilience

9. Future Perspectives: Changes, Resilience or Resistance:

- What are your hopes or concerns regarding tourism in Bocas del Toro?
- If you could change anything, what would it be?
- Would you like that your perspective, your knowledge is heard/ taken seriously?
- Are there stories of you or others showed resistance against tourism? (protest, fight for values or traditions?)
- Do you know of any organizations, initiatives or projects in Panama or Bocas del Toro that support communities' empowerment within the tourism industry?

Closing:

1. Final Feedback: Do you want to add anything you feel wasn't covered but is important?
2. Express Gratitude:
   - Thank you for their time and insights + ask for ways to give back
3. Next Steps: Briefly explain possible follow-up they should expect:
   - Share my number: I'm available if you have concerns, questions or you want to stay in touch with me.
   - If you are interested: I would love to present you some findings of my research and share my thesis with you.