



Mr. Richie and the tourists

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ABSTRACT

This paper tracks the affective intensity and emergent potential that is part of making contact with Richie, a local Creole villager from Walliceville, Belize. Tourists and expats are drawn to Richie and seduced by him, his colorful language and personality. My attention in this paper is directed to the spatialized force fields of contact between tourists, expats and local creole villagers, like Richie, by attending to the way these contact fields conjure forces of wild vitality that both agitate and fascinate social life in Belize. I focus on how Richie acts as a powerful representation of tropical “no worries” Creole life. But more than that, he carries a sensory charge, seducing tourists and expats into crazy moments of abandon, a “sensing beyond security” (Manning, 2007: 134–161), that exceeds the work of Caribbean tourist representations to become moments when forces are activated as impacts that provoke things, for better or for worse. I argue that such moments spawn worlds that build forms of attachment and become the vital fields of sensations that incite life as emergent forces coming into play in this postcolonial state of emergency taking shape as neo-liberal exception, on the edge of global empire, in Belize.

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1. Mr. Richie¹

Mr. Richie is seductive like a sudden and surprising touch that packs a jolt straight through the small of your back into your ideas, a sensation without yet a name. The impact of Richie’s seduction stays with you in the troubling way a gossip conversation does, when you have gnawed at someone else’s negative qualities or secrets but end up revealing your own pettiness and insecurities. Richie calls that “baggage.” Or like the crazy way a lingering scent remains in the air, unidentified, thick and heavy as it rides the waves of heavy June humidity on the coastal cayes in Belize, disturbingly seductive for the immediate effect it has on you and what gets conjured by scent sensations. You draw the smell in and an impulse grows intense, only to be transfixed by the impact of the sensations activated by the flash of images and the tug of feelings triggered with each breath you take: an unattached, floating sensation that has an impact, an active generative force of something in a state of emergence. But that’s how a seduction works, as a moment of generative emergence, a sensation unfolding, something still not assembled as a concept; things, instead, in a shifting state, renegade, opportunistic, haphazard, unsteady and unfinished things in the eventfulness of some surprising realization (Stewart, 2007: 2).

It’s contact with Richie through his funny stories, verbal antics, and perplexing performances that index some emergent generative force of the “local” as a seductive unfolding in Walliceville, a small fishing village on a popular caye that, over the past fifteen years, has quietly moved into the Caribbean tourist scene as a “go to” destination as one of “mother nature’s best kept secrets.” And there is not a day that goes by that some tourist somewhere in the village doesn’t say something about contact with Richie. A middle aged English sailboat tourist told me that “everyone’s just wild about Richie.” She and her husband find him “engaging,” “knowledgeable”, and “amusing, rotten teeth, scraggly beard and all. He’s like a cute pirate,” she bubbles.² She knows because she and her partner sail the Caribbean around Honduras, Guatemala and Belize as part of their retirement project and have developed quite “an eye for tropical cultures and adventures.” Richie has lived most of his life in Walliceville, and over the years he has watched his “sweet little beach front village” go “crazy” for, and get “roughed up” by, international tourism. Once a fisher as a younger man, then one of the very first village tour guides and operators, now, at 60, he has become a popular “man about town,” a “Creole Cassanova,” (a tourist’s description), and a modest tourist entrepreneur who rents out beach front cabanas while dispensing “native” insights about “Creole life and experience” to short and long term visitors alike. Often such dispensing occurs around Richie’s table at “The Sundowner”, a neighborhood tourist beach bar, or under Richie’s tree grove. “It’s a living,” he laughs, commenting on his role as a “performing” local.

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Richie often invites visitors to sit with him and that's when he beguiles and ensnares them with his antics, ribald jokes, mostly good natured abuse, and his trademark laid back manner of engagement that acts like a local and seductive "ready-made" for tourists. Richie's smooth and relaxed "don't worry, be happy" performance activates tactile images of a generic care-free "native" life in paradise. It is seductive, pretty much because Richie's seductive, and that's just the way he likes it. His image, his stories and his personality combine to become a force of copy/contact, a force of mimetic excess that tourists enthusiastically go for, or not (Taussig, 1993).³

2. Richie's expressivity as bad example

It's not a matter of whether Richie believes his own stories or performances, nor is it a matter of dissecting the representational politics of his routines, as much as it is a matter of attending to the charged up tendencies of abjection or seduction that are fashioned out of moments of "Richie contact" and that together compose themselves as a "consistency," a dense entanglement of affect, attention, and matter (Grosz, 2008), "slowing the indeterminate chaos of sensations enough to extract something from them that is not so much useful or meaningful as intensifying," a potentiality and an event, an expression; "affective dynamized forces" rather than a system of signifying images with a context: in short, a force field of contact (Grosz, 2008: 3). I say a force field of contact rather than use the more recognized concept of the "contact zone" (see Pratt, 1992) in order to distinguish the way the zone is often used as a social description of liminal creativity, as a space of identifiable affects, a socio-cultural zone of mobilizations that engage given political and economic infrastructures not from one side or the other (tourist or local) but from their merging. Force fields of contact may include all of this in that they are interstitial and engaged, but they are more than that too; they are more like different edges of an interface. As both actual and imaginative fields they are a milieu and a trajectory that enact new infrastructures of difference, new modes of relatedness that affirm, augment, and keep open the spaces of dissolution and irruption, the charged up potentialities that index contact and further facilitates the multiple occasions of their collective presencing (c.f. Haraway, 2008). "The trajectory," Deleuze says (1997:61), "merges not only the subjectivity of those who travel through a milieu, but also with the subjectivity of the milieu itself, insofar as it is reflected in those who travel through it."

Fields of contact are autonomous zones of virtual-actual circuits (c.f. Massumi, 2002b: 1–45), at once social and material, affectively infused intensities and trajectories, by which I mean co-constituting movements through milieus as enactments of desire, need, curiosity, or simply attempts to find room to maneuver and breathe in the entrenched political and economic system of a tourist state in Belize. So too, tracking Richie through fields of contact is more than simply treating him as a constituted subject within a social formation revealed through his experience. Not only do the fields of contact in Walliceville and in Belize "leak", not only are they incomplete and so unable to constitute "subjects" like Richie in any determinant sense. When Richie speaks and acts in concert with others he does more than reveal an experience as it has been constituted for him. He also performs a desire toward becoming that is much more than an experience can govern and control. Richie enacts a worlding as an assemblage of sand, water, atmospheric pressures of beachside temperaments and temperature, tourists and local bodies, palm trees, color, climate as they touch upon and become vibrant in contact.

In the process of being lured by a force field of Richie contacts as a milieu of transiting social, material, and psychic strata, a

transitional immediacy of real relations of desire, opportunities and challenges present themselves not only to track new forms of sociality but to enact a sociality that is an infinitely open process of collective self-elaboration. Such a sociality composes and consists, assembles and reassembles, in ways that are incommensurate with the telos and demands of the imperial prerogatives of tourist capitalism as they are enacted on the frayed margins of empire or to any extant political-economic formation of the good-life plans of Belize tourism (Massumi, 2002b; Manning, 2007; c.f.; Povinelli, 2006; Dave, 2011). For Richie it's a matter of attending to what's happening, sensing out, attuning, accreting attachments and detachments, differences and indifferences, wins and losses and proliferating possibilities in a conflicted tourist dreamworld. For me it is a matter of attending to the attunements to such a milieu of contact sensations. It's a matter of taking "a step sideways into what normally gets stepped over" (Stewart, 2010: 4) in the social analysis of tourism in general and in Belize tourism especially. It's a matter of being right where you are only more intensely, in the eventfulness of Richie's performative expression, in Walliceville, in the heat of the Caribbean, in a bustling tourist destination dappled in that official all too blue that credentializes any tropical beach scene on the margins of Empire, and to pause and wonder what might matter in singular moments of contact with him, attuning to the alerted sense that something is happening, and sensing out whatever it is: seductive contact as a generative, compositional worlding.

Tracking such acts of composing means dropping an insistence on analytical binaries like the material and the representational. It means not holding concepts up for evaluation as good or bad, or as subject or object relations. It is not trying to present a critical analysis of touristic contacts with Richie as an instance of Belize social change under the several characteristics of global empire that by now are habitually employed to define such processes. Rather, it is sensing and evoking the capacity of a field of incommensurate forces that somehow hang together as a consistency, a complicated intimacy of things that matter because they are thrown together into things happening-little moments, big scenes, nervous encounters, uncertain intensities-as they pick up texture and move through bodies as expressions. Mine is a paratactical writing that lingers in the milieus of contact where bodies are fashioned by repetitions of forceful sensations as a sensual affirmation, for better or for worse. So I take up the precariousness of writing and the potentials of what Deleuze (1987: 104–105) calls a "minor literature." This requires more of the subversive's creativity than the social scientist's methods of description, born in part in a willingness to cross planes of reference without regard to received expectations that translation and order are supposed to control difference. This is what I am trying to create with my writing: paratactical expressions of Richie on a plane of becoming, or better, Richie worldings, a milieu of uncontainable movements that form as a contact situation, some unstable version of events becoming one more instantiation that stands along with so many others in a non-hierarchical extension of forces as a field of composition, a consistency (Deleuze, 2001: 25–31).⁴

Thus it is to a consistency and the various forces of its expression that are in and of the body, both sensing and sensual that I turn my attention. Massumi (2002a: xvii) argues that the "force of expression...strikes the body first, directly and unmediatedly. It passes transformatively through the flesh before being instantiated in subject-positions subsumed by a system of power." That means that its effect is one of "...differing. The body, fresh in the throes of expression, incarnates not an already-formed system but a modification—a change. Expression is an event." It is to world-making entanglements that contact with Richie, and those with whom he makes contact, provides the opening for an event, for eventfulness.

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