

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Dual Sovereignty and the Commodification of Difference in Caribbean Tourism

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This article analyses how the dual sovereignty of Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten is translated into a marketable dual exoticism in recent destination branding. Drawing on the 2024-2025 ‘Twice the Caribbean’ campaign, the study examines official St. Maarten Tourism Bureau and partner materials across Instagram, Facebook page, Facebook video, and Discover Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten features. A multimodal content analysis identifies three recurring dynamics: (1) colonial hybridity repackaged as upscale aesthetic capital; (2) hurricane risk reframed as resilient luxury while labour and inequality remain unseen, and (3) Black femininity mobilised as a sensual gateway to ‘authentic’ island life in ways that can align with colourism and class hierarchies. Situating these dynamics within the island’s colonial legacies, neoliberal branding logics, and the marketing of islandness as scarcity, exposure, and connectivity, the article extends feminist Caribbean scholarship to show how race, gender, and sovereignty intersect in the tourism imaginary. A brief comparison with single-metropole territories suggests dual sovereignty intensifies brandable contrast. The findings contribute to island studies, postcolonial tourism analysis, and critical branding scholarship. The study shows how dual sovereignty works as a ‘contrast engine’ that markets resilience as luxury while erasing labour and inequality, offering a caution for island-branding policy and scholarship.

1. Introduction

Small island nations occupy a paradoxical position in the global tourism economy. They are simultaneously marketed as remote paradises and hyper-accessible gateways, as culturally distinct yet easily consumable, as vulnerable to climate risk but resilient enough to guarantee visitor safety. This tension becomes especially visible when islands carry dual colonial legacies that can be repackaged as aesthetic capital. Here, aesthetic capital refers to brandable place-images designed for circulation. Tourism bodies and their commercial partners convert this into market advantage (visibility, arrivals, positioning), while tourists mobilise it as symbolic capital through shareable images that signal taste and cosmopolitan mobility. Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten, a single

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Caribbean Island divided since 1648 between French and Dutch administration, offers a distinctive case for examining how sovereignty, colonial history, and island geography converge in destination branding.

I argue that binational administration functions as a branding mechanism that I conceptualise as a ‘contrast engine.’ Contrast engine is a mechanism that describes how dual jurisdiction supplies a ready-made juxtaposition that campaigns can repeatedly render as split-screen aesthetics, dual-language taglines, and itinerary logics (“Dutch cool”/“French chic”) while keeping the structural asymmetries that produce those differences persistently out of frame. Where single-metropole territories accumulate heritage cues, Sint Maarten stages juxtaposition itself as a product, converting political complexity into aesthetic mood while maintaining the structural erasure on which tourism branding depends. These dynamics raise critical questions: How does dual jurisdiction function as a branding mechanism? What gets foregrounded when binationalism becomes a tourism asset, and what remains systematically out of frame? How do race, gender, and vulnerability circulate in images designed to sell ‘resilient luxury?’ To answer these questions, I draw on Black and Caribbean feminist scholarship. I treat race and gender as structuring conditions of tourism representation rather than secondary themes. This matters here because dual sovereignty allows European-coded sophistication and racialized sensual authenticity to be distributed across bodies and spaces within the brand’s contrast logic.

The island’s recent *Twice the Caribbean* campaign, launched in 2024 by the St. Maarten Tourism Bureau (STB) in partnership with Big Idea Advertising, drew on this dual sovereignty as a unique selling proposition. Visitors are promised “twice” the beaches, cuisine, and cultural experiences through a branded pairing of “Dutch cool” and “French chic” marketed as complementary lifestyle choices within a single destination. This branding strategy emerged in the aftermath of two major crises, Hurricane Irma in 2017 and the COVID-19 pandemic, that devastated the island’s tourism infrastructure and prompted urgent efforts to rebuild both physical assets and international perception (Big Idea Advertising, 2024b; World Bank, 2020). The campaign can be seen as operating at the intersection of post-disaster resilience narratives, neoliberal place-branding logics, and long-standing colonial dynamics that continue to shape how Caribbean islands are imagined and consumed, largely by European and North American audiences.

To address these questions, this article examines the visual and textual grammar of the *Twice the Caribbean* campaign through the lens of island studies, postcolonial tourism scholarship, and critical brand analysis. Drawing on multimodal content analysis of official STB materials, the article identifies three interconnected effects of the contrast engine that extend existing Caribbean tourism scholarship: (a) Colonial hybridity is repackaged as upscale aesthetic capital where Dutch and French markers are foregrounded while Afro-Caribbean heritage is staged as sensual performance. This is the engine’s primary mechanism, producing partition as consumer choice; (b)

hurricane risk is reframed as ‘resilient luxury,’ converting vulnerability into exclusivity while rendering labour and structural inequality invisible. This is the engine’s temporal operation, converting crisis into an aspirational origin story, and (c) Black femininity is mobilized through Carnival imagery as a gateway to “authentic” island life, reproducing colonial tropes of hypersexuality even as performers negotiate agency within commodified display. Together, these dynamics show dual sovereignty operating as a single branding apparatus that converts political complexity into marketable contrast.

The article proceeds by outlining the theoretical framework, tracing Sint Maarten’s colonial and dual jurisdictional background, and then analysing three effects of the contrast engine in the Twice the Caribbean campaign: commodified binationalism, resilient luxury, and the mobilisation of Black femininity.

By focusing on an officially divided but collaboratively marketed island, this study contributes to the understanding of how sovereignty becomes a branding resource, how colonial legacies are reworked into neoliberal promotional logics, and how islands, especially small, vulnerable, and politically complex ones, are made legible as luxury commodities in the global tourism imaginary.

2. Theoretical Framework

Three frameworks organise this study: island studies’ concept of islandness, postcolonial tourism scholarship, and Black and Caribbean feminist scholarship on race and gender in representation.

Scholarship on Caribbean tourism has extensively documented how colonial imaginaries persist in contemporary marketing, where islands are staged as sites of exotic authenticity, sensual pleasure, and escape from metropolitan modernity (Pattullo, 2005; Sheller, 2003; Thompson, 2007). These representations draw on centuries of European depictions that positioned the Caribbean as simultaneously dangerous and desirable, primitive but accessible. Schmidt (2001) traces this to colonial-era constructions of indigenous “Carib” people as violent “Others” whose lands required European intervention. Modern destination branding reworks these tropes through updated aesthetic vocabularies of luxury, cosmopolitanism, and curated diversity (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017), while tourism practices continue to reproduce underlying geopolitical hierarchies and cultural asymmetries (Mostafanezhad & Promburom, 2018). More recent work examines how post-disaster “resilience” discourse commodifies recovery for external consumption (Sheller, 2021). What remains underexplored is how dual-jurisdiction islands intensify these dynamics by making contrast structurally available as a branding resource.

Islandness is conceived as an ‘intervening variable’ that conditions events (Baldacchino, 2004, p. 278) and as land imbued with cultural meaning that transcends geography (Baldacchino, 2013; Luo & Grydehøj, 2017). For Sint Maarten/Saint-Martin, three features are pivotal: (a) bounded space (87 km²)

creates coastal land scarcity; (b) twin sovereignty renders political contrast visible within walking distance; and (c) strong air transport connections sustain remoteness while driving tourist flows. Together, these three material conditions (boundedness, walkable jurisdictional contrast, and hyper-connectivity) enable the contrast engine. Moore (2019) demonstrates, through the Bahamas case, that islands are continually remade through the entanglement of global change science and tourism, producing ‘Anthropocene Islands’ and other spatial products that are made legible as Anthropocene sites while also being developed and marketed as destinations. This helps frame islandness as something actively produced and made consumable. I treat ‘islandness’ as a mobilised, relational assemblage, activated through scale, mobility, and the external gaze for a specific audience (Foley et al., 2023). Dual sovereignty makes contrast operational within walking distance: at one moment, Sint Maarten/Saint-Martin appears as a hyper-connected gateway (“non-stop island hop”), at another, as a staged refuge.

The contrast engine operates when three enabling conditions coincide: bounded territory that compresses beaches, towns, and coastlines into scarce and repeatable frames; walkable jurisdictional difference that makes metropolitan contrast (French/Dutch) immediately visible and easily narrated as consumer choice; and hyper-connectivity (air/cruise) that makes that contrast purchasable at scale.

These material conditions of islandness interact with representational logics analysed through postcolonial tourism scholarship (Sheller, 2003; Thompson, 2007) and Black and Caribbean feminist scholarship (Kempadoo, 2000; Mohammed, 1998; Murrell, 2023), which treat race and gender as structuring conditions of how Caribbean places are imagined, staged, and consumed.

3. Case Background: Binational Governance, Colonial Legacies, and Risk

Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten is a single island administered by two metropolitan states: the northern collectivité of Saint-Martin (France), an EU Outermost Region, and the southern Sint Maarten, a constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (since the 2010 dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles). This is not “dual sovereignty” in a narrow legal sense; rather, it is a dual-jurisdiction island embedded within two distinct state and EU regimes (ECORYS, 2020; HCCH, 2010). Scholars have explored the significance of Sint Maarten’s colonial relationship with the Netherlands in shaping local identity (George, 2013; Halfman, 2020; Oostindie & Klinkers, 2003; Schings, 2009). These scholars demonstrate how formal autonomy masks continued metropolitan control, with The Hague retaining authority over defence, foreign affairs, and conditional disaster aid. The island has been officially divided since the Treaty of Concordia (1648) with a largely open international border that has long supported interdependence and exchange (Oostindie & Klinkers, 2003; Roitman & Veenendaal, 2023).

Before detailing this historical trajectory, it is important to acknowledge the politics of Caribbean scholarship itself. As Groenwoud (2021) demonstrates, the Dutch Caribbean has been systematically neglected in academic research compared to extensively studied Anglophone territories. This disparity reflects colonial hierarchies of attention: while robust literatures exist on Jamaican, Barbadian, and Trinidadian tourism (Pattullo, 2005; Sheller, 2003; Thompson, 2007), Sint Maarten scholarship remains comparatively limited. This article, therefore, draws on broader Caribbean frameworks to identify regional patterns while foregrounding the work of local scholars and Dutch-Caribbean scholarship where available, in order to avoid reproducing the metropolitan gaze as the default analytic framework.

Against this scholarly and political backdrop, Sint Maarten's colonial administrative trajectory helps explain why dual jurisdiction can later be converted into marketable contrast. Sint Maarten was formally integrated into the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1815, after centuries of shifting European colonial possession, although Dutch influence and control had been present since the 17th century. As part of the Kingdom, the island developed a plantation economy reliant on enslaved African labour, linking it to broader Dutch Caribbean trade networks and fostering creolisation processes (Alders, 2015; Haviser & MacDonald, 2016; Roitman & Veenendaal, 2023). Despite this integration, Sint Maarten remained relatively marginal within the colonial administrative structure. It was governed indirectly through Curaçao, a "colony within a colony," an administrative marginalization that produced two enduring effects: it fostered hybrid identities less legible to metropolitan tourism markets, so requiring more intensive branding work to establish distinctiveness; and it created structural economic dependencies making tourism recovery politically fraught, as post-Hurricane Irma aid negotiations would later demonstrate.

The semi-autonomous status granted by the 1954 Charter for the Kingdom of the Netherlands was met with scepticism; while it ostensibly marked an end to direct colonial rule, many in Sint Maarten perceived this arrangement as a subtle form of colonial control rather than genuine independence (Oostindie, 2011; Oostindie & Klinkers, 2003; Roitman & Veenendaal, 2023). Within the Kingdom, Sint Maarten exercises internal self-government but remains bound by Kingdom affairs (e.g., foreign affairs, defence) under the 1954 Charter; it became an autonomous country on 10 October 2010 (Oostindie & Klinkers, 2011; Veenendaal, 2015). Scholars describe this as a classic Sub-national Island Jurisdiction (SNIJ) arrangement, where autonomy is real but circumscribed, and where metropolitan oversight persists (Baldacchino, 2006; Baldacchino & Hepburn, 2012; Veenendaal, 2015). This institutional configuration conditions how crises (and the terms of aid) are negotiated, and it helps explain why "recovery" can become a contested terrain between local priorities and metropolitan governance expectations.

Roitman and Veenendaal (2016) show that despite its nominal autonomy, Sint Maarten's political culture is influenced by historical oligarchic structures and remains constitutionally subordinate to The Hague (located 7,000 km away). At the same time, inter-island rivalries and binational entanglements have produced a durable sense of local distinctiveness (Roitman & Veenendaal, 2023). Deane (2021) shows that local perceptions of Sint Maarten national identity are framed around the notion of peaceful coexistence and cosmopolitanism. Murrell (2023), by contrast, shows how Afro-Caribbean subjects from Sint Maarten narrate and navigate racialised and gendered structures across transnational settings, including the negotiation of whiteness, respectability, and institutional as well as digital visibility. In this article, I use 'racialised modernity' to name the process through which 'modern' status is coded in part via proximity to Europeanness/whiteness and middle-class respectability, shaping which cultural forms can circulate as sophisticated versus folkloric. Building on this lens, I argue that Sint Maarten's national-brand can be assembled through global hierarchies in which race, class, and proximity to Europe shaped which Caribbean identities register as "modern" versus "traditional;" a distinction that branding then operationalised by foregrounding European markers of sophistication while staging Afro-Caribbean elements as sensual performance.

These contemporary hierarchies have historical roots. In European writings, the Caribbean was often depicted through colonial imaginaries portraying the indigenous inhabitants as "Carib," a term appropriated and exaggerated by Europeans to suggest violence and cannibalism (Schmidt, 2001). Such representations helped justify conquest but also administrative neglect, embedding racialised hierarchies that later cultural and tourism branding continues to rework through optics of sensuality, authenticity, and civility (Roitman & Veenendaal, 2023; Sheller, 2003; Thompson, 2007). These representations also contextualised the island within broader European imaginaries of the Caribbean as dangerous but appealing, as local intellectuals responded by emphasising cosmopolitan heritage and resilience (Groenewoud, 2021; Roitman & Veenendaal, 2023).

Sint Maarten's Afro-Caribbean heritage negotiates and resists these imposed frameworks. The island's Carnival, established in the late 1960s when residents appropriated the Dutch Queen's Birthday holiday for Caribbean celebration, has become central to both local identity and tourism marketing (Uildriks, 2025). Yet as George (2013) and Halfman (2020) document, post-colonial debates consistently positioned European affiliation as 'progress' while relegating African heritage to folklore and festivals valued for their tourism appeal but marginalized in governance and education. I argue that this hierarchy is subsequently reworked in tourism branding, where European markers work as shorthand for sophistication, and Afro-Caribbean elements are mobilized as sensual performance.

Binationalism also maps onto EU differentiation. French Sint-Martin, as an Outermost Region (OMR), sits inside the EU's legal-welfare architecture (European Commission, 2024; European Union, 2012; Lörincz, 2011). Dutch Sint Maarten, by contrast, is an Overseas Country and Territory (OCT) outside the EU's customs and VAT space, tied to Brussels through association (Council of the European Union, 2013; European Union, 2012). These asymmetries become most visible during crises, when EU-integrated Saint-Martin benefits from welfare mechanisms unavailable to Sint Maarten, amplifying perceptions of structural inequality.

While objecting to Dutch colonial dominance and seeking greater autonomy was of central importance to late 20th-century nationalists (George, 2013; Roitman & Veenendaal, 2016), recent crises such as Hurricane Irma (2017) and the COVID-19 pandemic revived accusations of neo-colonialism when Dutch aid was tied to strict governance reforms (NL Times, 2021).

On September 6, 2017, Hurricane Irma made landfall on Sint Maarten as a Category 5 storm with sustained winds of 285 km/h (National Hurricane Center, 2018). The devastation was comprehensive, with an estimated 90% of the island's buildings sustaining damage, including the near-total destruction of Princess Juliana International Airport's terminal and the Simpson Bay boardwalk that had anchored tourist activity (NRRP, 2019; ReliefWeb, 2023). An estimated 19,400 homes (nearly all residential structures on the Dutch side) were damaged, and 40,000 residents were severely impacted, displacing over 5,000 residents, roughly 12% of the island's population (ReliefWeb, 2023). Tourism infrastructure bore the brunt: major resorts, including Maho Beach Resort, Sonesta Ocean Point, and Mullet Bay, were rendered inoperable, while cruise port facilities sustained an estimated \$ 40-50 million in damage to marina and port facilities (NRRP, 2019).

The economic impact was catastrophic. Tourism arrivals and cruise visitors in 2018 plummeted by about 55% in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma, declining from approximately 1.8 million visitors in 2016 to well under 1 million by 2018 (Republic Bank St. Maarten, n.d.; World Bank, 2020). The Netherlands pledged € 550 million for Sint Maarten's reconstruction, conditional on integrity and border-control reforms (Government of Netherlands, 2017), conditions that local leaders later characterized as reflecting neo-colonial oversight (NL Times, 2021). The aid package led to the establishment of the National Recovery Program Bureau (NRPB) with the World Bank managing the reconstruction fund. By 2020, only around 35-40% of committed trust fund resources had been disbursed, contributing to delays in public reconstruction projects, even as private investment in tourism infrastructure advanced outside the trust fund mechanisms (World Bank, 2020). This asymmetry, the swift restoration of tourism infrastructure versus the delayed recovery of resident services, set the material conditions for "resilient luxury" branding.

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a collapse in tourism activity in Sint Maarten as containment measures and travel restrictions brought major segments of the sector to a halt, contributing to a sharp economic contraction (IMF, 2021a). During the pandemic, the Kingdom of the Netherlands provided liquidity support through reform packages (“landspakket”) that emphasized fiscal consolidation and a path toward balanced budgets, even as unemployment rates increased to about 16.9% by late 2020 (IMF, 2021b, 2025). As an EU outermost region, French Saint-Martin, by contrast, accessed EU emergency funds without such conditions, deepening the EU-differential grievance (European Commission, 2022). These arrangements stabilized public finance but reinforced metropolitan leverage; background conditions against which the campaign can safely foreground mobility, comfort, and “resilient luxury” while rendering labour and inequality less visible.

It is against this backdrop of catastrophic physical destruction, conditional reconstruction aid, differential EU access, and delayed resident recovery that the “Twice the Caribbean” campaign emerged in 2024. The campaign could market “resilience” because tourist infrastructure had been prioritized in rebuilding, creating a renovated coastal façade while inland neighbourhoods remained scarred by hurricane damage. What the campaign frames as triumphant recovery was, for many residents, ongoing displacement and precarity. The historical trajectory traced here, from colonial marginalization through contested autonomy to asymmetric crisis response, provides the raw material that branding converts into contrast. Dual sovereignty supplies two differently positioned relationships to Europe, two welfare regimes, two reconstruction timelines. The contrast engine extracts value from these asymmetries while rendering the asymmetries themselves invisible.

The island sits in an intensifying hurricane risk regime. Macro-studies show hurricanes dent tourist arrivals and threaten coastal infrastructure (Granvorka & Strobl, 2013); Irma is now a signature referent in local memory and international reporting (Moatty & Grancher, 2022).

4. Method: Multimodal Content Analysis of Digital Tourism Materials

This study employs multimodal content analysis (Serafini & Reid, 2019) to examine how the St. Maarten Tourism Bureau’s “*Twice the Caribbean*” campaign constructs dual sovereignty as marketable difference. Multimodal content analysis is a qualitative approach that examines how text, images, audio, and design interact to produce meaning; in this case, staging exoticism, resilience, and luxury through coordinated visual-textual grammar. The empirical focus is on Sint Maarten (Dutch side) because the “Twice the Caribbean” campaign was designed and run by the St. Maarten Tourism Bureau (STB); French Saint-Martin appears as a symbolic asset in the brand’s Dutch-side materials, not as a coequal institutional producer.

The dataset comprises [N=43] items produced and circulated through the St. Maarten Tourism Bureau (STB) verified accounts on Instagram (*Vacation Sint Maarten*, 2026a) , Facebook (Vacation Sint Maarten, 2024, 2026b), and

YouTube, as well as named campaign partners (e.g., Big Idea Advertising, 2024b) and co-branded campaign content; and Discover Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten (Discover Magazine, 2024) features (print/online) where the issue/feature promotes the campaign or its motifs. This focus on official/affiliated channels isolates the campaign's authorised visual-textual grammar beyond the generic user-generated tourism content.

The platform-specific logics of social media shape what gets represented and how. Oh (2022) shows how Instagram's visual protocols shape tourism seeing and can influence how destinations are rendered and remade as circulation-ready attractions. In Sint Maarten's case, dual sovereignty becomes brandable because it lends itself to platform-friendly forms of contrast: split-screen aesthetics, walkable juxtaposition, and dual-language taglines are easily formatted for visual circulation. These logics help explain why some contrasts are repeatedly foregrounded while labour, governance, and inequality remain cropped out. The contrast engine is effective on social media because it translates political difference into concise, visually legible contrast.

The inclusion criteria included items carrying the "Twice the Caribbean" slogan/branding or reproduced campaign motifs, like the French/Dutch contrast (e.g., language, architecture), pelican iconography, Carnival imagery (SXM Carnival, 2026), Maho Beach aircraft landings, and post-hurricane recovery/resilience narratives. Excluded were posts without branding or verifiable affiliation, generic references to Sint Maarten lacking campaign-specific visuals or language, and reposts that duplicated items already sampled. Carnival material was obtained from the official Sint Maarten Carnival Instagram and Facebook feeds.

Content analysis was conducted, attending to image composition, caption/copy, and audio (where present). Wherever relevant, specific campaign materials are referenced through endnotes with direct links. Analysis proceeded through deductive coding informed by island studies, postcolonial tourism scholarship, and critical branding frameworks (Baldacchino, 2004; Harvey, 2002; Sheller, 2003; Thompson, 2007). The categories were iteratively refined through close engagement with the dataset. A codebook guided tagging across six dimensions: islandness, dual sovereignty cues, race/gender, labour visibility, risk/resilience, and luxury signifiers. Data collection and coding continued until new content repeated existing patterns without revealing new themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analysis purposefully restricts the article to the official state/partner communications to diagnose the authorized visuals of dual-sovereignty branding. User-generated reactions or community reception fall outside the present design and are flagged as future research.

5. Mobility as Attraction: Tourist Gaze, Spectacle, and Gateway Desire

From the neoliberal economic perspective, Caribbean nation-states are increasingly framed as competitive brands. Caribbean states commonly emphasise their cultural diversity, heritage, and natural beauty as competitive

advantages in global tourism markets. Destination branding has evolved into a central mechanism for translating place identity into marketable differences, turning local culture and landscape into selling propositions signalling distinctiveness and authenticity to potential visitors (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017). Branding scholarship in tourism further demonstrates how this differentiation operates through aesthetic contrasts and experiential cues that encourage tourists to consume places as a lifestyle and emotion (King & Yeung, 2024). Under these marketing logics, cultural distinctiveness becomes a form of symbolic capital, transforming nationhood and everyday life into commodities of experience and desire. In the Caribbean context, this dynamic positions natural and cultural resources as geopolitical tools of visibility and investment, perpetuating exotic imaginaries that echo colonial hierarchies.

Sint Maarten's transformation into a global tourist destination began during the mid-twentieth century, reflecting broader trends in Caribbean tourism development. Initial tourism infrastructure emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, driven mainly by hotel and resort construction aimed at attracting American and European tourists seeking an exotic tropical experience (Apostolopoulos & Gayle, 2002; Pattullo, 2005). From the 1980s onwards, Sint Maarten witnessed a significant expansion with the arrival of cruise tourism, which intensified real estate investment and large-scale resort development in coastal regions like Simpson Bay and Cupecoy (Duval, 2004; Wilkinson, 1999). By the late 1990s and early 2000s, Sint Maarten's tourism industry had become integrated into the global neoliberal market structures, promoting luxury, exclusivity, and tropical exoticism through extensive branding campaigns (Pattullo, 2005; Sheller, 2003).

The COVID-19 pandemic caused massive international disruption to tourism. This was preceded by Hurricane Irma in 2017, a Category 5 hurricane that devastated much of the Caribbean region. As a result of these crises, the Sint Maarten tourism industry and the government saw an urgent need to emphasise the island's resilience and desirability as a luxury destination (Big Idea Advertising, 2024b; World Bank, 2020; Government of Sint Maarten, 2024). The Sint Maarten government developed a systematic tourism recovery plan, aimed at rebuilding and enhancing the island's international image through targeted branding campaigns (World Bank, 2020). Today, the Sint Maarten government collaborates closely with commercial branding agencies, influencers, and tourism stakeholders, promoting the island through carefully orchestrated campaigns that emphasise its exotic appeal. For instance, the St. Maarten Tourism Bureau (STB) partnered with Big Idea Advertising to launch the "Twice the Caribbean" campaign (Big Idea Advertising, 2024a; Government of Sint Maarten, 2024), celebrating the island's dual Dutch and French heritage to attract a diverse tourist demographic. STB has further collaborated with the Dutch travel TV show "Sky High" to showcase the island's attractions to European audiences (Sint Maarten Talks, 2025). These initiatives, aimed at

increasing tourism numbers, often present a sanitised version of the island, omitting to mention the socio-economic disparities and historical context in favour of what MacCannell (1973) theorises as staged authenticity, carefully orchestrated experiences that appear genuine but are structured for external consumption. The examples provided in the next section primarily explore the “Twice the Caribbean” campaign, reflecting on Sint Maarten’s ambiguous identity: as simultaneously European-coded and Caribbean-coded, exoticized yet presented as modern, and positioned as both remote and well connected. This positioning is attractive largely due to its perceived detachment from Europe’s colonial legacy and associated dynamics of power and domination.

6. Visual Constructions of Duality, Desire, and Risk

The *Twice the Caribbean* campaign reimagines St. Maarten’s binational condition as a marketing asset. As the contrast engine’s primary mechanism, commodified binationalism transforms partition from a historical-political arrangement into consumer choice. The promotional imagery integrates typography, colour, and casting into a coherent semiotic system; the campaign aestheticizes difference, mobility, and pleasure as its core value proposition. To make the contrast engine analytically visible, I organize the findings around three recurring effects: (a) colonial hybridity repackaged as upscale aesthetic capital (where “Dutch/French” becomes a luxury palette and itinerary logic); (b) hurricane exposure preimmunized as ‘resilient luxury’ (where recovery and controlled risk become exclusivity); and (c) Black femininity mobilized as a gateway to ‘authentic’ island life (where Carnival and nightlife imagery supply sensual authenticity while respectability and class hierarchies remain implicit).

7. Commodified Binationalism

The “Twice the Caribbean” campaign, initiated in early 2024 by STB in partnership with The Big Idea Advertising agency (2024a), uses social media, billboards, print features, and targeted sponsorship. One of these high-profile activations ran from a Times Square digital takeover through cruise-port displays aimed at converting transient visitors into stay-over tourists (Big Idea Advertising, 2024a; Media Post, 2024).

This observed strategy can also be situated within existing scholarship on neo-colonial tourism structures in the Caribbean. The “Twice the Caribbean” campaign functions as what Sealy (2018) identifies as a characteristic alignment between governmental promotion and transnational private-sector interests, presenting a unified island narrative that packages local distinctiveness for external consumption. This framework helps explain how Sint Maarten’s government and tourism sector combine resources to construct a singular, marketable image. This configuration corresponds to the competitive playbook discussed in *Marketing Island Destinations* (Lewis & Roberts, 2010), where bundling sub-identities under a shared umbrella, offering a “two-for-one” proposition, helps diversify segments and leverage crisis-recovery narratives, transforming exposure into value. In “Twice the

Caribbean,” dual sovereignty supplies the bundle (Dutch/French). This bundling relies on what island studies scholars discuss as islandness, often associated with the compression of difference within a bounded space (Baldacchino, 2004; Foley et al., 2023). On the 87 km², visitors can shift from “Dutch cool” to “French chic” in minutes, transforming boundedness and proximity into a branded asset.

Following Harvey’s (2002) theorization of cultural commodification, cultural distinctiveness becomes a source of monopoly rent within the global economy, where claims of uniqueness and authenticity can be strategically leveraged for competitive advantage. In the “Twice the Caribbean” campaign, Dutch-French heritage is packaged as this form of capital. The island’s dual identity is framed as a rare and exclusive asset, presenting the short drive from ‘French Riviera’ to ‘Dutch cool,’ of the island’s twin sovereignty as a micro-archipelagic itinerary. This translation of colonial hybridity into aesthetic capital transforms historical political arrangements into a marketable brand, in which symbols like pelicans, Carnival parades, and beachfront casinos are recast as modern exotic markers. The “gateway to the Caribbean” discourse frames the island as a cosmopolitan crossroads, while main local attractions like Maho Beach’s low-flying planes (even post-Hurricane Irma) remain central to the island’s brand. That optic descends from colonial and tourism imagery, deploying visual strategies that operate within Thompson’s (2007) ‘tropicalization,’ the production of a recognizable tropical template that renders the Caribbean legible as leisure while cropping out labour, governance, and historical violence. Dual sovereignty provides effective material for this visual economy: split-screen aesthetics, walkable border crossings, and “two-for-one” framing are inherently postable juxtapositions. The contrast engine is platform-ready for branding, optimised for the Insta-gaze that anticipates sharable contrast and algorithmic circulation (Oh, 2022).

What distinguishes Sint Maarten within this regime is the addition of internal metropolitan contrast. The campaign overlays Dutch and French architecture, linguistic, and culinary cues onto the tropical template, producing a doubled exoticism: ‘authentic Caribbean’ and ‘authentic European,’ marketed as distinctiveness through juxtaposition. This bundling creates the appearance of diversity while maintaining tropicalization’s core erasures. The contrast engine also relies on a racialized and gendered division of semiotic labour within the brand’s representational economy. While Dutch and French cues supply metropolitan sophistication (“chic/cool”), Afro-Caribbean culture (often mediated through stylised images of Black femininity in Carnival and nightlife scenes) recurrently supplies the “authentic Caribbean” charge, functioning as a gateway signifier that completes the bundled aesthetic without reintroducing the island’s structural inequalities into view.

In practice, however, this ‘dual’ branding leans heavily toward European referents. Visual cues associated with Dutch and French presence (architecture, language, lifestyle styling) are repeatedly foregrounded as

shorthand for cosmopolitanism and safety, framing the island as familiar-yet-exotic and compatible with metropolitan tastes. By contrast, Afro-Caribbean heritage is more often staged as performance, especially through Carnival imagery, where it is aestheticized, sensualised, and commodified rather than treated as a substantive register of national history or political identity. This selective emphasis aligns with the island's ongoing metropolitan affiliations, in which proximity to Europe is positioned as a competitive advantage and Afro-Caribbean culture becomes a vibrant but secondary layer in the brand hierarchy.

The goal of such campaigns is to attract seasoned as well as first-time Caribbean visitors with a “two-for-one” proposition, increasing year-round arrivals and portraying Sint Maarten as a blend of European culture and Caribbean vibrancy. The dual identity is stylised visually with Dutch & French taglines naturalising colonial hybridity as aesthetic capital and marketing lifestyle. The material produced reflects this through vibrant imagery of Sint Maarten's beaches, nature, boats, and elevated lifestyle. The images' use of dual identity and sensory appeal imagery pairs with terms like “non-stop island hop” and “Dutch & French,” which together present the island as a fusion of European culture and Caribbean vibrancy. This stylisation subtly naturalises colonial hybridity as a form of aesthetic capital, transforming complex histories into marketable differences.

At a brief comparative glance, single-metropole territories obviously lack the “two-for-one” device; Sint Maarten leverages dual sovereignty to toggle visual palettes, languages, and itineraries (Dutch/French) within a single campaign. The contrast itself becomes the product, an intensification of brandable difference instead of an accumulation of heritage cues.

8. Spectacle, Risk, and Resilient Luxury

A plane is inbound towards Maho for landing: a man lifts his arms as the plane flies over him, and the copy promises “great flights and free nights,” selling danger as a perk. The cut to an infinity-pool overview provides a privileged, elevated gaze over the seascape. A woman then steps through the Baie Rouge arch, located on the French side, while the super still reads “St. Maarten,” quietly folding Saint-Martin into a Dutch-side frame. Street art declaring “I left my heart in St. Maarten,” a catamaran jump, a poolside toast, and a swimmer floating in clear shallows complete the itinerary before the “Twice the Caribbean” end card. The sequence places predominantly feminine-coded leisured bodies in the centre. They are styled as cosmopolitan and positioned as the natural symbol of comfort. Racialised difference appears more often in curated “local” performance scenes. It is less often centred in the unmarked subject position of leisure. Analytically, the sequence converts governance, recovery, and labour into background conditions and sells mobility as frictionless pleasure. Risk is curated as controllable thrill, Maho Beach's low flights become spectacle, while the infrastructure that serves visitor comfort remains off-screen. Read through Thompson's (2007) tropicalization, this is the production of a legible leisure template through

selective framing; in this case, dual sovereignty intensifies that template by adding a purchasable “Dutch/French” contrast as part of the experience. Much like the Victorian soap campaigns that laundered empire through spectacle, “Twice the Caribbean” converts governance and labour into background while selling feeling itself, or sanitized risk, and effortless access, as the commodity (Richards, 1990).

Resilient luxury, as mobilised in the “Twice the Caribbean” campaign, works by reframing vulnerability as a form of exclusivity. Through Thompson’s (2007) lens, it becomes tropicalization under conditions of climate and disaster risk: the same selective framing that once made the Caribbean appear timeless and safe is updated so that exposure itself becomes a premium asset. In this campaign, recovery is aestheticized as proof of endurance, allowing danger to be consumed as exclusivity while the unequal labour and infrastructure that make that consumption possible remain out of frame. The aftermath of Hurricane Irma (2017), when much of Sint Maarten’s tourism infrastructure was destroyed, became, in subsequent branding, an origin story of endurance. Images of the rebuilt boardwalk in Philipsburg, freshly painted façades, and reopened luxury resorts were circulated alongside celebratory captions about “coming back stronger.” Such imagery aligns with what Sheller (2020) identifies in the Caribbean context as the use of “resilience” discourse in post-disaster tourism recovery, where rapid reconstruction of tourism infrastructure is prioritised, and often showcased as a visible symbol of endurance for an external audience, even while underlying inequalities persist. As demonstrated in Björnsson et al. (2024, 2026), the material realities of Sint Maarten’s luxury property sector reveal a similar paradox: marketed exclusivity depends on fragile construction quality and recurrent cycles of destruction and rebuilding. In “Twice the Caribbean” visuals, these dynamics converge. Sheller’s critique maps onto a luxury register in which rebuilding becomes part of an aspirational visitor experience, while Kelman’s (2020) framework shows how resilience is a commodified and marketable feature of island identity. In this sense, resilience branding operates analogously to what Melamed (2011) identifies as neoliberal multiculturalism and Ahmed (2012) describes as the performance of diversity, where visible inclusion substitutes for structural change. Here, surface diversity (e.g., Carnival performers of different skin tones or European-Caribbean dining scenes) works as style, aestheticizing difference while displacing the historical conditions that produced inequality.

In the “Twice the Caribbean” campaign, the island becomes a curated cosmopolitan stage, where difference is styled as a lifestyle accessory rather than a site of historical contestation. One promotional image (Big Idea Advertizing, 2024) juxtaposes a light-skinned woman facing toward a cruise ship in the harbour with a darker-skinned woman posed by brightly painted archways and the sea. Both are presented as leisure subjects, but the layout assigns them different representational roles. The left panel aligns with cosmopolitan mobility with cruise infrastructure, while the right panel uses

colour-saturated architecture and seascape to stage ‘island atmosphere.’ The pairing performs diversity as aesthetic composition while omitting any reference to the historical or structural inequalities shaping the island’s life.

In the case of Sint Maarten, unlike campaigns that rely on textual narration of identity (“we are...”), the branding communicates through stylised visual and slogan-like imperatives. Local people are visibly central to the campaign’s visual language: dancing, laughing, cooking, and raising glasses in celebratory scenes that foreground emotion, rhythm, and conviviality. These figures attempt to embody the island atmosphere through these visual cues that stage the island as joyful, sensual, and socially vibrant for the external viewer. The campaign invites the viewer to a curated affective world that offers joy, sensuality, and cultural fusion without invoking historical or political context. The experience is immersive, not reflective; the island is made through display. By framing the island as modern and exotic, the visuals position Sint Maarten as familiar but different, accessible but removed from the historical tensions that shaped it.

The campaign’s social media presentation highlights how branding strategies have moved from nationhood as narrative towards nationhood as mood. Drawing on Ahmed’s (2004) account of ‘affective economy,’ I use mood here to denote an affective orientation that circulates through images and “sticks” to surfaces, inviting attachment without requiring historical or political narration. In one of the clearest examples, two women are pictured separately (Big Idea Advertising, 2024c): one is framed against mint-green shutters, the other leans casually under an archway of sherbet-coloured walls; the words “Dutch & French” are superimposed across the image. The identity is suggested visually through architecture, skin tone, and clothing style, flattening binational governance and colonial asymmetries into aesthetic mood.

The slogan reflects a mood: cosmopolitan, stylish, and borderless. In doing so, the campaign sidelines governance as an explanatory frame and recodes differences as aesthetic contrast: North and South, Black, and white, modern, and traditional. The body is central to the frame: posed, lit, and styled to evoke a sense of leisure and diversity. These images provide a double cultural exposure, where signs of Europe and the Caribbean blend, reinforcing each other’s appeal. This island construct seeks to create distance through design. The campaign invites the viewer to scroll, swipe, or pose alongside it. Cultural identity becomes a backdrop, and the viewer is invited to inhabit its surface. It sells a visual syntax of postcolonial pleasure: saturated, frictionless, and algorithmically optimised place. The stylisation of identity in the campaign echoes dynamics identified by Dinhopl and Gretzel (2016), in which tourist destinations are reimaged as staged backdrops for performative consumption, designed to be posted with, captured, and circulated. These often depict light-skinned women, engaged in leisure activities on catamarans or poolside loungers, gazing towards the sea. The visuals emphasise serenity, sensuality,

and exclusivity: stylised bodies framed by minimal design and tropical colour palettes. The absence of labour or infrastructure reinforces the island as a curated, frictionless space made for indulgence.

9. Curated Cosmopolitanism

The ideal of cosmopolitan leisure finds one of its clearest expressions in the cover of *Discover N°37 Saint-Martin / Sint Maarten* from 2024 (Discover Magazine, 2024). This image stages a ritualised encounter between fashion, nature, and spectator: a woman, with her back to the reader, in a floor-length tropical gown patterned with oversized tropical flowers; her headwrap elaborately arranged, wearing gold bangles, and holding a fish, turning subsistence into display. Beside her, a pelican anchors the scene's curated naturalism; in the background, a male figure in a wide-brim straw hat stands by the shore. The cover manufactures the Caribbean through what Thompson (2007) calls 'tropicalization,' a regime of staging, framing, and selective cropping that constructs scenes of leisure and wealth while controlling which bodies and forms of labour remain visible. In this way, the cover turns work into leisure and cultural difference into decorative spectacle, sustaining what Urry (2002) terms the *tourist gaze*, privileging beauty over complexity.

Efforts to promote Sint Maarten today draw heavily on gendered Carnival imagery, which casts women as living emblems of island sensuality and unspoiled nature. Mohammed (1998) argues that Caribbean constructions of femininity and masculinity are inseparable from the histories of slavery, indenture, and colonial governance. These histories inscribe the body with racialised and sexualised meanings that persist into the present, even as women negotiate, resist, or repurpose them in performance.

The official Sint Maarten Carnival feeds overflow with images of elaborately costumed masquerades: feathered headdresses arching skyward, sequined bikinis cut high to flaunt skin, and glittering body jewellery that reflects in the light. Elsewhere, close-ups of dancers capture every bead and iridescent plume, their forms shot against empty boulevards to emphasise unmediated intimacy between viewer and body. Even daytime snapshots of crowds with sunglasses glittering and cocktail glasses raised reinforce these messages: female performers are icons and invitations promising unrestrained freedom and tropical sensuality. The images often rely purely on visual "copy" to promise hidden delights. A tight shot of a masked performer, grinning out from a glittering outfit, suggests a world of exotic island experience. These appear as invitations to Sint Maarten's late-night scene, where flirtation and musical activities are part of the festivities.

In other words, the imagery locates the campaign within the island's vibrant nightlife and its promise of unrestrained adventure. These women were seen as important in marketing Sint Maarten as a destination of choice. Here, islandness is embodied in performance; women's bodies stage the island as simultaneously intimate and globally connected. Carnival images mobilise the small-scale, relational quality of island life, while repackaging

it as a sensual access for external spectators. Through Nixon and King's (2013) lens, the campaign links the selling of paradise to the selling of bodies, mobilising what Alexanders et al. (2005) call imperial desire, where the state and industry can profit from sexualised displays for visitors while policing sexual citizenship at home. In this way, femininity powers the brand even as heteropatriarchal norms determine whose desires and lives are legible as subjects within the field of power, where hypersexuality has become a condition that people negotiate, refuse, and rework.

In the visual copy, it plays to a much older colonial framework. As Kempadoo (2000) reminds us, "few women in the colonies escaped [the] eroticising, sexualising gaze," a trope that casts Black femaleness as at once "naturally born a slave" and irrepressibly promiscuous (Kempadoo, 2000). The foregrounding of feathers and glitter revives the centuries-old stereotypes. The embodied Carnival practices carry their own form of resistance: Hem-Lee-Forsyth et al. (2019) trace the Carnival "wining movements" back to a "body-memory of resistance," arguing that the controlled, circular rotation of the hips isolated from the torso, or hip-swaying gestures, constitute sensual dance that embodies links to West African lineages that quietly undermined colonial constraints (Hem-Lee-Forsyth et al., 2019).

This argument suggests that Sint Maarten's ads flatten winning into a spectacle, where the masquerades tap into a tradition of female empowerment. In these marketing materials, agency is negotiated under conditions where eroticised display is already commodified. Many of the performers actively repurpose the commodified sensual tropes as assertions of self-making. Sint Maarten's carnival advertising strategy mirrors that of the early 20th-century "advertising bands" in Trinidad (Green, 2002), when merchants began sponsoring masquerade bands to promote their stores and products. In those bands, sponsors adorned parade trucks and emblazoned their names on costumes and T-shirts to capture the attention of Carnival audiences.

Hall (2015) reminds us that modern European identity and culture cannot be disentangled from the trans-Atlantic slave trade: what we think of as "European" was constituted through the process of defining itself against, and exploiting, African and Caribbean people. Sint Maarten's dual European heritage and the Caribbean's broader symbolic alignment with 'exotic' sensuality locate the island within a representational space where colonial hierarchies and racism remain structurally embedded. Even when promotional images of the island show natural beauty or Carnival dancers in scanty costumes, they do so without needing to signal race because the hierarchies are already assumed. The power of this exotification lies in how white tourists can partake in these spectacles without having to confront their own position within those hierarchies. In the "Twice the Caribbean" campaign, Sint Maarten is presented as inherently European, both Dutch and French, with tropical inclinations. Shots of chefs with captions referring

to “European cuisine” emphasise this duality, while sequined masquerades and swaying dancers promise exciting nightlife. In a video clip from the Caribbean Carnival parade, the celebration of Caribbean culture is displayed vividly through energetic performers dressed in colourful Carnival costumes. Performers are seen moving rhythmically to the music, their bodies engaged in the lively dance of calypso and reggae. The dancers are frequently seen waving their hands and moving their hips in the characteristic “wining” motion often associated with soca and calypso. Their colourful outfits, often adorned with feathers and sequins, enhance the visual performance of their dynamic movements.

Although branding initiatives seek to reshape perceptions, their success ultimately rests on how these efforts intersect with the target audience’s pre-existing associations held in tourist memory (Cai, 2002). Sint Maarten’s Carnival traces its roots to the Queen’s Birthday festival on April 30, 1969, when islanders first seized on this Dutch holiday to stage a full-blown Caribbean carnival, laying the foundation for tourism-driven spectacle (Ulidriks, 2025). This genealogy shows how practices formed within colonial entanglement can later be rendered marketable, even as their political stakes recede behind the affective surface of spectacle.

10. Conclusion

The article has argued that dual jurisdiction operates as a branding mechanism, a ‘contrast engine’ that converts political complexity into marketable aesthetic contrast. The *Twice the Caribbean* campaign demonstrates how Sint Maarten’s binational condition supplies a ready-made juxtaposition (“Dutch cool” / “French chic”) that can be rendered as split-screen visuals and itinerary logics while keeping underpaid labour, inequality, and metropolitan oversight systematically out of frame.

The contrast engine concept extends existing frameworks by specifying a mechanism that tropicalization (Thompson, 2007) leaves undertheorized. Dual sovereignty makes contrast repeatable, embedding it in political geography. The campaign exploits the juxtaposition itself, staging partition as consumer choice. Resilience discourse is applied to luxury registers, converting post-disaster recovery into an aspirational origin story while displacing the conditional aid and differential EU mechanisms that structured actual rebuilding. The analysis reveals a representational economy organized around the racialized and gendered distribution of semiotic labour. European markers function as shorthand for cosmopolitanism and quality. Afro-Caribbean culture is used to represent atmosphere, vibrancy, and sensual authenticity. This patterning echoes colonial hierarchies of value, now formatted for platform circulation. Gender politics follow the same logic. Femininity is aestheticized throughout as part of the product, but not uniformly. Light-skinned women more frequently appear in the unmarked position of aspirational subject: poolside, yachting, and enjoying effortless mobility. Black femininity is more consistently mobilized as a gateway signifier, particularly through Carnival imagery, where sensual display stands

in for cultural authenticity. This patterning structures the field within which agency is negotiated. The ‘resilient luxury’ register reveals how vulnerability becomes a commodity. Hurricane Irma’s devastation is transformed into proof of endurance; rebuilt façades circulate as spectacle. The branding celebrates resilience while rendering invisible the labour that rebuilt the boardwalk, the conditional aid that financed reconstruction, and the EU asymmetries that left Sint Maarten outside welfare mechanisms available to French Saint-Martin.

The contrast engine may operate wherever dual jurisdiction creates a legible difference within a bounded territory; Hispaniola, Cyprus, or border towns marketed as “two countries in one day.” The concept offers transferable analytics for postcolonial tourism scholarship and critical branding research. For policy, the analysis offers caution: campaigns that trade on ‘difference’ and ‘resilience’ without narrating their structural conditions risk converting inequality into visual pleasure.

Future research should focus on reception, such as how residents whose labour sustains tourism engage with, resist, or repurpose this visual culture. What this study establishes is that dual sovereignty is brandable, and branding is one mechanism through which colonial hierarchies are reworked and made newly consumable.

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