In this paper, I question how representations of tourist destinations color and are colored by...
development. Presenting the results of ethnographic fieldwork conducted on the southern Caribbean coast of Costa Rica, I find that the authenticity of portrayals of place is important not for its veracity, but for the social work it performs. Authenticity is not merely socially constructed but expressive of social relations which value people and places. Tourist perceptions of the caribe sur as genuinely underdeveloped—gauged by an analysis of photos and guidebooks as well as surveys—produce an approach to resource use within the community that is limiting. Because the value of the place is its underdevelopment, development itself constrains the possibility of sustaining further growth. Ultimately, reading development via place can be a guide for critically appreciating contemporary patterns of tourism and sustainable development in the caribe sur and elsewhere.