

# TOURISM AND INFORMAL ENCOUNTERS IN CUBA

Valerio Simoni

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«Tourism and Informal Encounters in Cuba» is a book about the challenges that tourists and hosts face in establishing meaningful connections with each other, and the complex «relational idioms» they deploy to overcome inequality, distrust and misunderstanding. It explores the ambivalence of encounters between strangers in a cash-mediated environment imbued with post-colonial imaginaries and tourism fantasies.

Tourism encounters are a plentiful source of inspiration for anthropologists. They are paradoxical situations where worlds collide and differences emerge, but also moments of social loosening, cross-cultural exchange and transgression. As any «culture contact» (Herskovits 1938), tourism encounters are permeated with simplistic categorizations, shifting moral judgements and misleading conceptions of otherness. Valerio Simoni's anthropological account of *jineterismo* – a kind of interaction between tourists and Cubans often associated with forms of «tourism riding», harassment, hustling or even prostitution – allows us to untangle the complex feelings, misunderstandings and interests at stake in host-guest relationships.

After a first chapter on the contemporary history of tourism during the Revolution and the Special Period, chapter 2 analyses the political implications of *jineterismo* in a context of ingrained inequalities, economic embargo and tourism apartheid. For many young Cubans, it is part of a «culture of struggle» (*la lucha*) against State policies aiming to retain control over cultural and political exchange between international tourists and Cubans, a way to challenge the channelling of tourists into pre-established circuits. For public authorities, *jineterismo* is seen as a devious course to access capitalist lifestyles, a «moral corruption making decadent selves guided by a lust for luxuries and capitalist consumption» (p. 197). These moral interpretations of *jineterismo* shape the expectations towards tourism encounters, and therefore the way they get in touch (or avoid

one another) on a daily basis. Even tourist guidebooks alert their readers to «hustlers» and «hookers», reinforcing the diffuse climate of suspicion and scepticism between Cubans and tourists.

By unfolding these moral definitions of *jineterismo*, Valerio Simoni shows the ambiguity of informal encounters in tourism and the many «relational idioms» on which they are based: idioms of instrumentality and economic transaction, friendship and hospitality, romance and sex. While tourists often get the sensation that they are being used for cash, the author puts forward the multiplicity of expectations and feelings experienced by Cubans when they engage with tourists, as well as the skills and strategies they develop in doing so. Whether it is motivated by «necessity or desire» (p.53-54), the financial and material interests of *jineteros* are often expressed through dissimulated demands (a drink, a meal, a ride, a gift) and are rarely the sole motivation for contact. Finding love, building friendship or a family, and obtaining opportunities to emigrate or experience other cultures are also part of their aspirations. Like tourists, *jineteros* can too feel tricked and used by foreigners when their friendliness and complicity is not duly rewarded, whether materially or morally, or when the reward doesn't fit their expectations.

The ethnography describes a grey zone of open-ended encounters that can lead to long-term relationships, taking the reader beyond the old debates on the «host and guests» divide (Smith 1989) and the over-determination it encapsulates. Although these encounters are often fraught with inequality, ambiguity and mistrust, cross-cultural friendships, love and friendship are not impossible. Chapters 3 and 4 offer a meticulous ethnographic description of the skills and strategies of «presentation of self» (Goffman 1973) developed by *jineteros* to break the ice with tourists, «transcending the idiom of economic instrumentality and overcoming mistrust and radical asymmetries as the predominant grounds for action» (p. 192).

Definitions of *jineterismo* are always situated. In this sense, Valerio Simoni's «quadripartite ethnography» (Graburn's preface, p. X) of men/women and Cubans/tourists reveals the gender inequalities in Cuba, as *jineteras* are more easily associated with prostitutes and *jineteros* with thieves or *luchadores* (strivers). Sex-for-money relations are part of informal encounters, often in a dissimulated way, through «taxi fares» and other fringe benefits. Again, the author clearly shows how commoditized sex is subject to various moral standpoints, from rejection to accommodation, acceptance and cynical instrumentalisation, avoiding the moralizing bias of categorical descriptions under the banner of «sex tourism».

Valerio Simoni finds his way in this complex moral terrain of touristic, festive and intimate transactions by referring to a nuanced and well-referenced theoretical framework, borrowing from economic sociology, tourism anthropology and gender studies. The notion of «informal encounters» allows him to step back from morally-connoted concepts like sex tourism, hustling and informal economy. One should be cautious with notions that tend to describe a phenomenon by the negative, as this tends to relate to a normative horizon of a model (the «formal economy», «formal encounters») perceived as universal. But Valerio Simoni uses it as a generic notion that allows us to draw attention to the blurred boundaries in touristic relationships between public and private, merchant and non-merchant, friendship and instrumentality, romance and prostitution, work and leisure, social and economic, rather than as an analytical and explanatory concept.

One could sometimes lament the lack of biographical elements on the research participants, elements which would help us understand the social trajectories and «system of dispositions» (Bourdieu 1990) of these individuals before and after the tourism encounter, and understand how some become (successful) *jineteros* and others don't. Also, this could have been an interesting theoretical and empirical way to connect the ethnographic focus on situated identifications and modes of engagement with other holistic views of the Cuban society and their foreign counterparts.

Throughout the book, Valerio Simoni demonstrates an intimate sense of Cuba, its inhabitants, its tourism stages and occasional visitors, a sense of empathy acquired by navigating in a variety of places and environments and by building trust relationships. The restitution of his research participants' views and experiences is always respectful and exposed with care for scientific neutrality and theoretical discussion. «Tourism and Informal Encounters in Cuba» lifts many taboos on friendship and love in touristic settings and paves the way for future research on the articulation between tourism, love migration and intimacy in a globalized world. The book should become a classic read for tourism anthropologists, and more generally, for those who see in touristic phenomena something more than an industry of illusions and golden hordes.

## REFERENCES

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