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INFORMAL GUIDING

Enacting Immediacy, Informality and Authenticity in Cuba

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To better conceptualize the tourism encounter, scholars have highlighted the importance of mediators, notably tourist guides, in framing visitors' experiences of a destination, encouraging to move beyond "hosts and guests", "tourists and locals" binaries. The study of informal touristic encounters in Cuba helps problematize the identification of the tourist guide, highlighting the stakes of such categorization in a context of tightly regulated, state-led tourism development. Favouring a framing of tourist-Cuban interactions as genuine expressions of intimacy that escape the worker-customer binary, these encounters enact valued forms of informality, immediacy and authenticity. Their promise is to provide a "unique" glimpse into the "real" Cuba and the lives of "ordinary" Cubans, and to generate alternative possibilities for knowing and relating with the destination and its people.

Keywords: tourist guide, informality, authenticity, intimacy, Cuba

Introduction: From Guide to Guiding

In *Being a Tourist*, anthropologist Julia Harrison (2003) foregrounds the notion of "touristic intimacy" to highlight the importance of the value of intimacy as a driver of people's travel. While much of her focus is on the connections tourists make with other fellow travellers, Harrison also reflects on tourists' expectations of "meeting the local people" (2003: 61–66), their desire to engage, however briefly and incidentally, with residents of the visited destination. The desire "to connect with others" (Harrison 2003: 47), cherished by Harrison's research participants, was very present among the foreign tourists with whom I worked in Cuba. But who were those "others" that the tourists encountered, and

what were these connections about? This article focuses on the dilemmas and implications that these questions can raise for the protagonists of touristic encounters.¹ It follows their tentative answers, showing that much is at stake in defining and categorizing who these "others" are and what connections are about, while also demonstrating the close links between these two questions. As it will appear, much can be lost in scholars' efforts to classify and give closure to roles and identities, especially when remaining open, ambiguous, and changeable seems to be one of their defining features. Anthropological work on tourism has highlighted the need for theoretical frameworks that allow "for uncertainty and ambiguity as defining factors in relationships" (Fo-

sado 2005: 75) and, I would add, in relational processes of identification (Simoni 2016a). Drawing on my work on informal touristic encounters in Cuba, this article wishes to mark a step in this direction, and act as a counterpoint to the widespread drive to categorize and typify the encounters, identities, and occupations that tourism brings into play. This seems all the more important when studying contexts in which such encounters, identities, and occupations remain contentious, and where the act of fixing them is fraught with ethical, political, and epistemological implications.

Since the foundational publication of the edited book *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism* (Smith 1978a), the notions of “host” and “guest” – evoking the process of receiving and entertaining outsiders (Smith 1992: 187) – have raised much debate in tourism social science. In their recent review of anthropological interventions in tourism studies, Leite and Graburn (2009) point to the key problem in the use of these notions, which is that “as a social field comprised of manifold interactions, ‘tourism’ includes far more than the basic binary of ‘hosts’ and ‘guests’” (2009: 47). Writing on the issues, Chambers highlights the increasingly “mediated” character of tourism, whereby this activity is now “dependent on the intervention of others who serve as neither hosts nor guests in any conventional manner” (1997: 6). Under these circumstances, “[t]hinking of tourism as being predominantly a relationship between ‘real’ (i.e., residential) hosts and their guests has become problematic in several respects” (1997: 6). In line with these insights, the figure of the “mediator” has received increased attention in the last decades (see in particular Chambers 1997; Cheong & Miller 2000; Werner 2003; Zorn & Farthing 2007), and anthropologists have made new headways in the study of guides and guiding activities (Bras & Dahles 1999; Buntin 2008; Crick 1992; Dahles 1998, 2002; Feldman 2007; Picard 2011; Salazar 2010). Earlier studies of tourism paid attention to the roles of “middleman” (van den Berghe 1980), “cultural broker” (McKean 1976; Smith 1978b; Nuñez 1978), and “guide” (Cohen 1982, 1985), which may be seen as the quintessential tourism mediators, actors devel-

oping skills and engaging in entrepreneurial activities specifically tailored to tourists. Resonating with the Cuban material on which I draw in this article is the work of authors who have focused on informal guiding activities, featuring guides who operate without official licence at the margins of the formal tourism sector, and who do a lot more (or less) than what is commonly understood as guiding (Crick 1992; Bras & Dahles 1999). These are situations in which the boundaries of guiding become blurred, and where the identification of the guide can itself be problematic.

When set against the backdrop of the rich literature on tourism encounters, mediation, and guiding briefly addressed above, the Cuban cases explored in this article present striking features that enable us to advance reflections on how both scholars and their research participants approach tourism relations and identifications. More precisely, the study of informal touristic encounters in Cuba, understood here as encounters between foreign tourists and members of the Cuban population who are not officially employed in the tourism sector, helps problematize the identification of who counts as tourist guide and mediator, highlighting the stakes of such categorization in a context of tightly regulated, state-led tourism development. My attention will mainly be on the techniques and narratives of Cubans – predominantly young men in their twenties and thirties coming from marginalized sectors of the population – who strived to establish connections with foreign tourists and bring about a sense of immediacy and authenticity in such an encounter, in contrast to the more staged, scripted, and mediated nature of official guiding tours led by state-employed guides (Látková et al. 2018).

The material on which I draw comes from sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out intermittently in Cuba between 2005 and 2016, mostly in Havana but also in the beach resort of Playas del Este (a half-hour drive east of the capital) and the rural town of Viñales (about 200 km west of Havana). During fieldwork I relied mainly on participant observation to generate data on encounters in the realm of tourism. This led me to observe and engage

in conversations, of varied duration and scope, with hundreds of foreign tourists and members of the Cuban population, including informal guiding-related situations in which they engaged with each other. The reflections presented here are informed not only by my [engagements](#) in a broad range of informal instances of guiding, but also by several experiences with official guiding tours, which enabled me to appreciate contrasts between the two, and to better grasp some of the key features of the former, notably in relation to valued enactments of informality, immediacy, and authenticity. As it will appear, in the informal encounters I consider, resistance to assuming the formal role of guide could become important not only to generate the feelings of serendipity and authenticity that gave value to these interactions, enabling in some cases the establishment of longer-term relationships, but also to counteract their identification as illegal economic practices and punishable forms of harassment. While providing broader insights on the stakes, risks and limits of analytical categorization and closure when addressing the ambiguous relations and identifications that can emerge in tourism, the empirical material discussed here contributes more specifically to the reflection on the notion of tourist guide, problematizing its conceptual value in contexts where its use is fraught with serious implications and can have a profound impact on the lives and experiences of the protagonists involved.

My approach is inspired by recent scholarship on the relational (Abram & Waldren 1997), purposeful (McCabe 2005) and locally situated (Frohlick & Harrison 2008) nature of tourism-related identifications. Accordingly, it backs away from holistic views of “the tourist” and “the local” to focus instead on situated identifications and modes of engagement. The goal is to shift the focus of analysis from “tourists”, “locals”, and “guides” in this case, to the practices and discourses circulating in and characterizing the moment of encounter, and to illustrate the insights that can be gained by reorienting research from a prevailing focus on (id-)entities towards a study of the relational processes from which (id-)identifications emerge. As a last caveat, it should be clear

that the examples presented in this article do not aim to be representative of the range of relationships and identifications that took shape in the realm of tourism in Cuba. Instead, they have been selected to advance analytical reflections on the notions of guiding and tourist guide, to explore their boundaries and test some of their limitations.

Informality

Towards the end of the 1980s, after about three decades of relative stagnation in terms of international tourist arrivals, a rapidly worsening economic crisis prompted the Cuban authorities to renew their efforts to develop tourism, which received further impetus with the beginning of the Special Period in Time of Peace (*Período especial en tiempo de paz*) in 1990 – the time of austerity and economic hardship that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Cuban people struggled to get by and ameliorate their economic conditions, the Special Period saw the explosion of an ample range of informal economic activities on the island, among which tourism-related ones played an increasingly salient role. This realm of activity has come to be known as *jineterismo*, from the Spanish for “rider” (*jinete*). With the metaphor of “tourist riding”, *jineterismo* tended to evoke notions of tourism hustling and prostitution, sexual conquest and instrumentalization, and was employed more broadly to designate various informal engagements in tourism, including guiding activities.² Significantly, while my research participants could easily refer to their actions using the verb *jineteare* (e.g. *estaba jineteando*, I was engaging in *jineterismo*), thus denoting a situated activity and temporary engagement, they were less keen on assuming an overarching identification as *jinetero/a*, a point that underscores the relational nature of such identifications and supports the broader analytical approach advocated above. Notions of *jineterismo* were grounded in the reification of an us–them divide that objectified tourists as sources of hard currency and promoted the image of the cunning Cuban deceiving foreigners via duplicity and dissimulation of economic interest.

By the time I undertook my fieldwork, after over

a decade of impressive growth in international tourists' arrivals, narratives of encounters between visitors and Cubans had gone beyond the images of welcoming hospitality, generous and disinterested friendships, and easy and spontaneous sexual affairs that may have prevailed in the early 1990s. An additional scenario, tainted by notions of prostitution, tourism hustling and *jineterismo*, had emerged and gained visibility on the tourism scene. In this sense, *jineterismo* had become an integral part of what Cuba was about and what tourists had to expect, and avoiding cheating and deception tended to be among the visitors' major concerns. Cubans dealing with tourists were generally also aware of such fears and scepticism, and many tourists knew that Cubans "knew they knew", so a hall of mirrors of reflexive self-presentations and reciprocal expectations could inform relationships between them. Rodrigo³, a Cuban man I visited regularly throughout my fieldwork and an occasional street guide in Havana, told me that tourists were getting more and more untrustworthy (*desconfiados*) by the day. They were harder to get in touch with, and excessively worried that one would cheat them. To have any chance of developing a relationship, Rodrigo argued, one had better know how to address, soften (*ablantar*) and charm them.

Rodrigo was very fond of making typologies of tourists, notably based on their nationality, and also liked to rank the visitors' level of trust in Cubans like him in relation to their countries of origin, with North Americans generally coming on top and Spanish and Italians being the more mistrustful (the countries and their position on the list could quickly change depending on his latest experiences). But beyond the specific reference to national differences, which could no doubt matter, there seemed to be widespread recognition by Rodrigo and other Cubans engaging in similar informal activities that foreign tourists, in general, had become increasingly reluctant and sceptical of engaging with them. Such growing scepticism constituted a major obstacle to meeting and relating with visitors. The main challenge was how to move beyond the instrumental horizons of *jineterismo* and the overdetermined identifications of (deceitful) tourist hustlers and

(gullible) tourists that it implied. Rodrigo's informal economic activity, offering tourists to be their guide while having no official license for doing so could quickly lead him to be cast as a *jinetero*, making him look like the typical "tourist hustler" in the eyes of sceptical tourists. This was an identification that would deter tourists from engaging with him, and which could also carry legal sanctions – and Rodrigo did indeed spend several months in police custody during the years we were in touch. It is important to mention here that at the time of writing this article, no legal provisions exist in Cuba that would authorize Cubans to act as private guides for tourists (Látková et al. 2018). All official guides were employed by the state, and as Rodrigo and others offering similar services made clear to me, it could be extremely hard to get into those jobs (see Dahles 2002 for an Indonesian parallel).

On the other hand, many tourists I met stated their willingness to meet and engage with "ordinary" Cuban people, and sought contact with them to learn about everyday life in the country. This was what people like Rodrigo could bank on, emphasizing their insider-ness, their being a "lay" Cuban as opposed to an officially appointed guide. Several narratives circulated among visitors regarding the Cuban government's efforts to channel and control tourism on the island, and to obstruct "ordinary Cubans'" possibilities of interacting with foreigners. Such interpretations converged with those of people like Rodrigo, and could thus work to establish a certain complicity, prompting alliances between tourists and Cubans to evade the authorities' control. Dahles (2002) has shown how in Indonesia official guided tours can act as "highly effective instruments of controlling the tourists and their contacts with the host society as well as the images and narratives by means of which the host society presents itself" (2002: 787). The peculiar political context of Cuba, with the same regime in power for over fifty years, made it easy for tourists to cultivate similar views on official guiding practices, a view that Cubans interacting informally with visitors could quickly capitalize on, urging them not to get caught in the usual "tourist bubble" and government mediated

propaganda, and to venture instead in the “real”, “unfiltered” and “unmediated” Cuba.⁴ As I consider in the next section, such a “direct” experience of the island could be portrayed as intimately connected to and dependent on the establishment of equally “direct” and “immediate” relations with its “lay” inhabitants, cast as the legitimate spokespersons to shed light on Cuba’s everyday life and reality.

Immediacy

As self-professed “ex-*jinetero*” Fernando, one of my key “mentors” on the world of *jineterismo*, once put it to me, *entradas* (openings) were the most difficult part of establishing a relationship with a tourist. Once you had managed to get the tourist’s attention and started an interaction on a positive note, interesting and profitable possibilities were likely to open up. As I soon realized during fieldwork, tourists also tended to place great emphasis on these first moments of encounter, which enabled an initial assessment of the intentions of the Cuban person at stake. “It all depends on whether you initiated the contact or they came towards you,” several visitors told me. If the latter was the case, the rationale was that you could be sure the Cuban in question was a hustler and wanted to get something from you, which was not a good start. At issue were the directionality of the encounter and its premeditated nature, elements that could indicate people’s intentions and agendas. Were tourists dealing with a well-planned approach from a “professional hustler”, a *jinetero/a* with a clear agenda in mind who wanted to profit from them? Or were they facing an “ordinary Cuban” who did not specialize in the tourism trade and had no intention of cheating? Resisting the analyst’s drive to differentiate and typify those who counted as “informal guides” – and therefore also as potential *jineteros* – or as “ordinary Cubans”, it seems more relevant and insightful (and less condescending) to follow empirically how similar characterizations were played out by the protagonists involved, and to show how this matter could become a rather contentious one to settle once and for all.

To counter the impression of a well-rehearsed *jinetero*-style approach, my Cuban interlocutors

experimented with conversational openings that could give encounters a fortuitous result. Striking parallels appear with Dahles’ (1998) notes on the techniques used by street guides in Yogyakarta (Indonesia), suggesting that in different parts of the world, similar solutions are devised to engage informally with tourists. Dahles (1998: 35) observes that “from the tourist’s perspective, they [street guides] seem to bump into a visitor purely by coincidence, actually being on their way to some important appointment”. According to her, “this impression is carefully staged” (*ibid.*). The same could be said of many “fortuitous” encounters in Cuba. Jorge, a Cuban man in his forties with whom I spent several hours talking about tourism and tourists, and whose “street turf” was in Old Havana, explained his technique for producing the effect of a “chance meeting”: he would start walking in the same direction a targeted tourist (or group of tourists) was going, as if on his way somewhere. When passing his target, he would find a pretext to say a few words and strike up a conversation. With similar opening techniques becoming increasingly common and widespread, the impression of serendipity was always at risk of fading away, together with the promise of a “genuine encounter” with “ordinary Cubans” as opposed to the more predictable exchange with a *jinetero*. To keep this promise alive, people had to devise creative approaches that preserved a sense of something special, of an encounter like no other. Their ability to decode tourists’ behaviour, to detect their potential interests and focus, could help tailor and personalize approaches, as Fernando explained upon delighting me with an instructive tour of Havana enlivened by concrete examples of his tactics.

Fernando’s *entradas* were designed *not* to give the impression of the well-scripted, predictable *jinetero*-type approach, a fact that exemplified *jineterismo*’s intrinsic drive to innovate and surpass itself. In his view, openings were to be seen as genuine expressions of interest, whereby tourists could feel they were recognized as “real persons” (Harrison 2003: 63), less as “mere tourists” (Sant Cassia 1999: 253) and more as individuals, with their specific personalities, interests and agendas. We can join here the remarks of

Tucker (2003, 2009a), going in the same direction, on “the importance of serendipitous events to ‘traveller’ tourists”, for whom “such chance encounters serve to individualize their experience and identity” (2009a: 31) – something that Fernando seemed well aware of. Besides his ability to creatively grab tourists’ attention, Fernando was very skilled at nourishing their interests and thus giving continuity to the encounter. “Those [*jineteros*] who don’t know” (*los que no saben*, i.e., who don’t know how to “open” properly), he told me, would, having caught the tourists’ attention, let them slip away, unable to give new impetus to the encounter. The ability to sense the tourists’ degree of openness, their interests and inclinations was fundamental, as was the capacity to cater to their potential desires and eventually awaken new ones. This corresponds to Crick’s considerations on Sri Lankan street guides’ “insightful, if essentially pragmatic, understanding of human nature, their ability to read a social situation, and their skills in turning it to their advantage” (1992: 138). Similar to what Dahles (1998: 35) has shown for street guides in Yogyakarta, in the first moments of an informal encounter with tourists, Cuban men and women tried to gather relevant information that could help them orient the ensuing steps in the interaction. How this was done reflected further differences in skills and expertise, given that too many too straightforward questions could make visitors suspicious. Indeed, as repeated observations and conversations with tourists in Cuba showed me (Simoni 2016a), one should recall that they also valued these initial moments of interaction in making up their minds and typifying their Cuban interlocutor. Was she or he a hustler? What was his or her agenda? Clearly, tourists were not passive targets of Cubans’ questionings but also tried hard to grasp the latter’s intentions.

The wider the range of assets and competences Cubans could mobilize in dealing with tourists, the better chances they had of establishing and lending continuity to relationships with them, which was what many were hoping for. Several of my research participants highlighted the importance of knowing how to cater to the widest possible spectrum of tourists’ interests and desires. Hence their interest in cul-

tivating a broad range of skills and abilities, similar to the “multi-functional guides” described by Dahles and Bras (1999: 287) in Indonesia, among which the establishment of intimate relationships and romance with tourists was, like in the Cuban case examined here, also a priority (see Frohlick 2007; Herold, Garcia & DeMoya 2001; Mullings 1999; Pruitt & Lafont 1995 for further parallels). In this multitasking scenario, adaptability became a considerable asset, and it was precisely the importance of such “chameleon-like qualities” (Bowman 1996: 90), “the ability to tailor situational identities” (Bunten 2008: 388), that Jorge made clear to me in the course of a long conversation we had one afternoon in Old Havana. Describing his informal tourism-related activities, which included guiding tourists around, Jorge told me that he could quickly assess what kind of person he was dealing with, and that this informed the way he would present himself: “If he [the tourist] is cultured, I [Jorge] am cultured. If he is delinquent, I am delinquent.” As Jorge suggested, the same person could thus become a “university student” for certain tourists (or in his case, given his age, a “university professor”), a “salsa teacher” for others, and a “cigar manufacturer” for others still.

Scholars have shown the potential of touristic encounters to act as a space for cultural invention and self-creation (Bruner 2005; Causey 2003; Cone 1995; Graburn 1983; Picard 2011; Tucker 2009b), with Feldman highlighting more specifically the transformative potential of guiding and suggesting that via their practice, guides also “engage in remaking themselves” (2007: 367). This resonates strongly with my ethnographic material, all the more so once we consider that many among my Cuban interlocutors spent their days trying to interact with tourists, confronting and measuring themselves in relation to foreigners, and seeing themselves in the foreigners’ light. Feldman (2007) recalls Lanfant’s (1995) comment that “[t]he evaluation of the affirmation of (one’s) own identity can only be accomplished by reference to the Other” (1995: 36, in Feldman 2007: 367), and it was this relational constitution of self that was very much at play in the touristic encounters I researched in Cuba. The persona that Cubans

enacted in their interactions with tourists, however, cannot be reduced to being a “superficial” self-construction or a “frontstage” presentation – as a simple reading of Goffman (1959) and MacCannell (1976) may suggest – neither can it be fully encapsulated in Bunten’s notion of a “commodified persona tailored to and compartmentalized within a tourism context” (Bunten 2008: 389). As I show elsewhere (Simoni 2015, 2018), the constructions of the “self” that emerged in informal touristic encounters in Cuba might be better apprehended as exemplifying one mode of being within the repertoire that constituted my interlocutors’ heterogeneous lives, a “self” whose commodified character remained contentious and was frequently contested, rising in tourism (see Causevic & Lynch 2011) but overflowing its confines, and easily escaping any compartmentalization within that realm.

Even in analyses of informal guiding, we see a tendency to focus predominantly on the entrepreneurial qualities and economic motives of the informal guides, a view that leads for instance to portray their claims of “love” for their tourist partners as eminently strategic and part of an economic rationality (see for instance Bras & Dahles 1999). Such approaches and an overemphasis on economic strategy and commodification, however, can overlook how roles and relationships developed in informal touristic encounters can become more than, and depart from a simple earning strategy and economic calculus, becoming in some cases a primary source of self-assertion and identification (Simoni 2015, 2016b, 2018). What seemed important to my Cuban interlocutors was to maintain open the possibility of switching from one form of identification to another – from guide and service provider, to friend and lover, for example – making such ambivalence in positionality and self-identification a constitutive and foundational aspect of their informal engagements with tourists, one that cannot be adequately captured in definitive either/or categorizations.

Cubans’ determination to deeply connect with tourists also found expression in the communicative abilities that were valued and cultivated among my research participants. Beyond the knowledge of

foreign languages, we should consider aspects of interpersonal communication that enabled to capture the tourists’ attention and maintain the flow and intensity of engagements. What mattered here was one’s skill in bringing up possible topics of interest, finding ways of communicating that could please and charm – the kind of dramaturgical qualities already evoked by McKean (1976: 10–11) and Cohen (1985: 16) for “culture brokers” and “guides” in tourism⁵ – listening empathetically and showing understanding, remaining sensitive to the tourists’ specific needs and desires, and offering solutions and alluring prospects for the way ahead. This is how I interpreted the expression *saber hablar*, “knowing how to talk”, to which Juan, another Cuban interlocutor, drew my attention in one of the many conversations we had on touristic encounters. What this young Cuban man was referring to was not just how to speak languages or the quality of the information provided, but more about the “how” of communicating. It is useful to recall here Tucker’s insights on the importance of recognizing not just the cognitive but also the more emotional and embodied dimensions of tourism encounters, and how significant differences in both locals’ and tourists’ abilities “to read the element of emotional moral discharge from their own and each others’ bodies” (2009b: 459) can inform the relative success of such interactions. As Juan put it, *saber hablar* also had to do with the ability to “vibrate” (*vibrar*), to have the “good vibration” that would lead tourists to enjoy his company and follow him. For my friend Ernesto, a Cuban man in his mid-twenties with whom I spent many days and nights hanging around in tourism spots in Havana, and who was also fond of the “vibration” metaphor, what mattered most for success in dealing with tourists was “to be a mind” (*ser una mente*): to be smart and perceptive, to know about people, relationships, sentiments – “working the truth” (*trabajar la verdad*) of these things.

Grasping multiple points of view, understanding different approaches to tourism and tourists, attending to subtle emotional variations and moral sensitivities when relating to people who differed in terms of their origins, age, gender, socio-economic status,

interests and more – such endeavours, as some of my interlocutors put it, could be seen as *un arte*: an art of communicating and dealing with people, of sparking interest and developing relationships. There was arguably a portrait of *jineterismo* in its most anthropological and cosmopolitan mode: a positive body of knowledge about humans and human relationships. We rejoin in this sense the considerations of Forshee (1999), Frohlick (2007), Salazar (2010) and Tucker (2009b) who, in different touristic contexts – studying pedicab drivers in Yogyakarta (Indonesia, Forshee), sexual and intimate relationships between female tourists and local men in Caribbean Costa Rica (Frohlick), tourist guides in Yogyakarta and Arusha (Tanzania, Salazar) and informal tourism encounters between tourists and local “hosts” in central Turkey (Tucker) – have likewise highlighted the “cumulative knowledge” (Frohlick 2007: 149) and know-how of tourists’ preferences, imaginaries and desires, and the peculiar cosmopolitanisms that members of a visited population can develop through their engagements in the tourism realm.

The problem, according to Ernesto, and the source of many of his colleagues’ mistakes in dealing with tourists, was that they considered themselves superior, that they were vain (*vanos*) and looked down on tourists as if they were *bobos* (stupid, naïve). This major error in judgement, he maintained, went on to colour Cubans’ ways of relating with visitors, grounding them in typifications and objectifications that the latter were bound to sense and resent. Instead, Ernesto advocated remaining open and respecting the individuality of every tourist. This was also a call for tourists to reciprocate by doing the same, as opposed to confining him to the realm of *jineterismo* and the *jinetero* identification. The moral demand at stake was to respect the integrity of the “other” and avoid reducing him or her to a type, a “summative account” and illustration of a more general pattern (Throop 2014: 72, 75). Seen in this light, Ernesto’s approach can be seen as a call for openness, for charting new paths and partaking in a world as yet unwritten and unscripted but full of generative potential for ways of being and doing things together. While effectively guiding tourists around,

Ernesto would refuse reducing his role to that of a “guide”, “cultural broker”, or “mediator”, identifications that evoked a degree of formalism, standardization, and instituted a certain distance between “self” and “other”. The notions of broker and mediator evoke the bridging of two different entities, but also the possibility of leaving those two entities intact, separate, different, while what was at stake for Ernesto was a transformative experience that would engulf him and his foreign partners in equal measure, clearing new territories for both. Rather than reproducing a well-known pattern and script, what he was looking for, in his relations with tourists-as-persons (Simoni 2014a), was to develop something unique, personal, and intimate: a relationship that was irreducible to any other, that escaped any attempt of typification, and that could open the way to explore what was true and authentic in life, including life in Cuba.

Authenticity

In spite of widespread scepticism towards potential hustlers and *jineteros/as*, most tourists I encountered cherished the idea of “meeting the locals” and getting to know “ordinary people” with whom they could talk, for instance, about the realities of everyday life in Cuba, and develop relations that could help them move “backstage”, beyond the tautological connotations of the “tourist bubble”. Cubans could capitalize on these expectations by reminding tourists that they had come to Cuba to discover their country and its people, and therefore *had to* meet and make friends with locals who could tell them about the country’s reality and guide them around. The right attitude prescribed here was to *abrirse* (open up), *confiar* (trust), if one wished to gain access to the *Cuba de verdad* (the real Cuba), moving beyond the glossy images of tourism brochures. By bringing visitors’ attention to the limitations of the typical tourist role and its normative dimensions – for instance, in terms of being channelled into the routes and circuits prescribed by the industry – these narratives tended to strike the right note, triggering sympathetic and consensual reactions. Suggestions that opened up new fields of possibility were a com-

mon follow-up, alluding for instance to unforgettable and unique experiences “off the beaten track”, and evoking with complicity a sense of defiance of the monopolistic machinations of the state and the tourism industry. This was also when Cubans could try to take the lead in their relationship with visitors. Enacting the quintessential local and displaying their insider knowledge, they encouraged tourists to follow them as friends, listen to their stories about everyday Cuba and explore places that other tourists would never see. The power dimension of guiding comes clearly into relief here, with the guide capitalizing on his or her unique access to information and knowledge of the place and its asymmetry with the tourists’ ignorance of it (see McKean 1976; van den Berghe 1980). To signal this leading role, Cubans guiding tourists around could also emphasize the danger, for tourists, of exploring the “real” Cuba on their own, arguing that foreigners would not know where to go, that they could get lost and fall victim to ill-intentioned Cubans.

Once Cubans’ succeeded, be it only momentarily, to eschew the identification of the *jinetero/a* whose primary motive was to get hold of the foreigners’ money, their narratives on Cuba and on what it meant to live on the island would gain in credibility. The assessment of the relationship and of the person tourists were dealing with informed in this sense the value and validity of such person’s stories. Once they were recognized as legitimate speakers for the “real” Cuba, once their stories were seen as “genuinely” expressing “the voice” of “ordinary” Cubans – as opposed to the “ideologically tainted” narratives of state representatives or the “economically motivated” manipulations of tourist hustlers – then they were likely to gain much credit. At stake here is the issue of authenticity, in different but related dimensions; authenticity of the person that visitors were dealing with, of the relationship at stake, and of the stories that were told. Here is also where, drawing on Bruner (2005: 150), “the issue of authenticity merges into the notion of authority”, the “fundamental question” being “who has the authority to authenticate”, “who has the right to tell the story of the site”. Focusing on who has the power to authen-

ticate helps us foreground the conflicting nature of authenticity, and the “multiple competing voices” that may be making claims on what is authentic and how to access it.

In contrast to the case examined by Bruner (the historic site of Lincoln’s New Salem in central Illinois), the authority to authenticate, in this case, did not come from people’s official and professional status, but rather from being seen as a “lay”, “ordinary” Cuban. Once seen this way, Cubans found it easier to instruct tourists on what was more or less authentic, what was truly Cuban and what not. As I have shown elsewhere (Simoni 2008b), discourses on what was Cuban, in which way, and on how best to experience it, while also building on and reproducing long-standing stereotypes, could show great plasticity to suit the purpose at hand. Unlike official tourist guides (see Dahles 2002; Bunten 2008), Cubans interacting informally with tourists were not talking or acting on behalf of any institution, and this could grant them greater “creative licence”. Their relative independence could make them more ready to adapt both to tourists’ agendas and their own, and if this implied more possibilities for lying and manipulating, it could also translate into increasing scope for honest and sincere criticisms.

Drawing on the Indonesian case she studied, Forsee argues that “those least ‘absorbed’ in their own societies are perhaps the most able (or at least the most motivated) to slip between the margins with other people, entering a new region in which they might function as critical agents” (1999: 302). According to several of my Cuban interlocutors, it was precisely their honesty in criticizing the Cuban government that made their narratives more authentic than those of a formal guide, and which also explained the authorities’ repressive stance on their informal interactions with tourists: “they [the authorities] don’t want us to speak with you and tell you the truth [about life and the situation here in Cuba]”. In contrast to official guides who may worry and compartmentalize “what is and is not appropriate to share on tour” (Bunten 2008: 389), the informal interactions I observed in Cuba and the stories that emerged from them could easily be couched in a

valued register of revelation. Revealing the “secrets” of the “real” Cuba, leading tourists to the “genuine” sites of Cuban life – as opposed to “touristy” locations – confiding stories “no other tourist” would hear. These narrative plots helped cast the tourist-Cuban relationship as special, unique, and based on unmatched levels of openness and disclosure, as reflecting, for instance, a genuine friendship that had a bright future ahead. As I have shown elsewhere (Simoni 2014b, 2016a), such conjuring of a unique relationship, be it a special friendship or an intense romance, also worked to entangle tourists in the moral imperatives that came with these relational idioms of intimacy. Themselves “ethical demands” (Zigon 2009, 2013), friendship and love called for commitment and continuity in relationships, evoking a range of responsibilities, and inviting connections that had emerged in what could be seen as the rather playful, superficial, and transient tourism context, to be carried on and strengthened beyond the time of the holiday, so as to become more serious, profound, and durable social ties. What should also be recalled here, is that any responsibility tourists felt towards their Cuban friends and partners, could ultimately help the latter to realize other socio-economic aspirations as well, diminishing for instance their anxiety towards a possible lack of support when having to face hardship in the future, or perhaps even being able to travel abroad thanks to a foreign connection.

Conclusion

Social science research on guiding advances our understanding of tourism, its cross-cultural dimensions, and the way tourism shapes the imagination of those it brings into contact. Paying attention to tourist guides helps highlight the mediated nature of tourism, and shows the limits of conceptualizations that foreground encounters between “hosts” and “guest”, between “tourists” and “locals” as an essentially dyadic affair. Tourism is not only a mediated activity, but such mediation is said to be on the rise (Chambers 1997), making it all the more important to understand the different vehicles and expressions that mediation takes. This article wished to draw attention to the strong connotations that “mediation”,

and the role of the “tourist guide”, can acquire in certain tourism contexts. The context at stake was one of tightly regulated tourism development, where boundaries between formal and informal encounters exist, and where (im)mediacy and (in)formality acquire a value of their own, affecting, among other things, the way authenticity and relationships are constructed and experienced. In the realm of informal touristic encounters in Cuba, defining what counts as “mediation” and who counts as a “guide” ceases to be a matter of analytical acuity or theoretical dispute alone, and becomes an ethical, political, and epistemologically fraught act when it confronts the resistance of research subjects that wish to avoid univocal identifications as “guides” and “mediators”. Allusions to “work”, to “commodification”, to “filtering” and “domesticating” the reality that tourists experience are contested and problematized, notably as they threaten to limit the scope of relationships that foreign visitors and members of the Cuban population may achieve. In this context, and in other similar ones (Adams 1992; Tucker 2003), to be recognized as a “local” or a “host” as opposed to a professional service provider is charged with implications, and can open up unforeseen paths and experiences with “guests”, which stand in opposition to the provision of a commoditized service.

Highlighting the ambivalence and contentious character of what counts as commerce and as guiding service in certain tourism contexts, the notion of the informal encounter (Simoni 2016a) can help us draw attention to shifting boundaries between “work” and “leisure”, sharpening our analytical grasp of situations that confound clear cut notions of commodification and the worker–customer binary. This approach ensures that people’s own understandings and definitions of encounters and relationships, and of their roles and identifications, take precedence over the researcher’s assumptions, and helps re-discuss recent literature emphasizing the role of “mediators” in tourism (Chambers 1997; Cheong & Miller 2000; Werner 2003; Zorn & Farthing 2007). My research in Cuba shows that the question of determining whether tourists are dealing with tourism “brokers”, “entrepreneurs”

and “mediators”, with “hustlers” and “prostitutes”, with “ordinary Cubans”, “friends” and “partners”, or with “tourist guides” is one that occupies and informs much of their engagement with Cuban people. In this context, rather than reflecting a superseded lack or void of something (i.e. mediators) that does not stand the test of contemporary tourism complexity and mediations, “immediacy” appears as a situated achievement, as a construct that may require a range of efforts, skills and competences to come about and be upheld. In the light of recent developments of tourism in Cuba, which foreground the risk of being deceived either by official propaganda or by experienced hustlers, the “authenticity” of encounters with Cubans has become an important matter of concern, one that absorbed tourists’ talk and deliberation on the country and its people, and in which the perceived (un)mediated character of experiences and relationships played a key discriminating role. The notion of mediation and what it signified – notably in terms of “filtering”, “distancing”, “domesticating” and “distorting” reality – had in this sense “gone native”, and a lot of effort could be invested in trying to reach beyond it and achieve a sense of immediacy and related authenticity.

Once the mediated character of tourism is ascertained, and mediation becomes part of our analytical “infra-language” (Latour 2005: 49), we must still be ready to recognize when, how, and with which consequences “mediation” takes on a life of its own for the people we work with, becoming part of their “meta-language” (ibid.), and the centre of controversies that inform the very nature of what they experience.⁶ To neglect this is to indulge in a deconstructive endeavour that imposes its language and categories and is unable to acknowledge that the reality it seeks to uncover talks back in analogous terms, questioning and problematizing these same processes of categorizations. In touristic Cuba, the possibility of moving between different forms of relationality and identification explains the vitality, unpredictability, and also the fragility of informal encounters (Simoni 2016a). If, as analysts accounting for these phenomena, we take it as our task to define and determine, once and for all, which relation

is at stake and which identification corresponds to whom, we only risk losing all the interplay, relational negotiations, and interpretative struggles that give these situations their meaning and liveliness, as well as their imaginative and transformative potential.

Notes

- 1 This article draws and expands on sections of the book *Tourism and Informal Encounters in Cuba* (Simoni 2016a). I would like to thank the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (Post-Doctoral Grant SFRH/BPD/66483/2009) and the Swiss National Science Foundation (*Ambizione* Fellowship, PZ00P1_147946) for supporting my research and writing. I am indebted to the guest editors of this special issue, Jackie Feldman and Jonathan Skinner, and to the article’s anonymous reviewers, for their useful suggestions and critiques on earlier versions of the text. This article would not have been possible without the collaboration of the many tourists and Cuban men and women I worked with in Cuba, and my deepest gratitude goes to them.
- 2 Several authors discussing *jineterismo* in Cuba have emphasized how this ambiguous phenomenon, whose identification brings issues of morality, nation, race, class and gender into play (Berg 2004; Cabezas 2004; Fernandez 1999; Kummels 2005; Palmié 2004; Simoni 2008a), can be hard to pin down, define, and circumscribe.
- 3 All the personal names appearing in this article are fictional.
- 4 Considering the purposefulness of this kind of narratives and the way in which discrediting the work of official guides also served to differentiate and accrue the value of the informal interactions at hand, we should be weary of analytically reifying the opposition between formal and informal guiding and their respective qualities and biases. In an interesting account of a formal guided tour she took in Havana, Babb (2011: 34) highlights for instance the official guide’s facility in “conveying a sense that we were getting an inside story”. What matters here is the value-generating potential of this distinction between formal and informal, upsetting established hierarchies between “professional” and “amateur”, and the greater scope for creativity it could grant in defining what was “real” and “authentic” and what was not (see [section 4](#)).
- 5 As argued also by Feldman when discussing the growing importance of the “communicative guiding role”, “[i]ncreasingly, the successful tour guide is one who masters the art of storytelling” (2007: 357).
- 6 According to Latour, “[w]e have to resist pretending that actors have only a language while the analyst pos-

esses the *meta*-language in which the first is ‘embedded’” (2005: 49). For him, “analysts are allowed to possess only some *infra*-language whose role is simply to help them become attentive to the actors’ own fully developed meta-language, a reflexive account of what they are saying” (ibid.).

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