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Sex, Seduction, and Care for the Other in Touristic Cuba^{FO 2A}

Valerio Simoni

- 1 The title of Rosalie Schwartz's (1999) monograph on the historic development of tourism in Cuba, *Pleasure Island: Tourism and Temptation in Cuba*, is an evocative entry point to address the longstanding, century-old association of this Caribbean country with tourism pleasures and temptations, notably of the erotic and more overtly sexual sort. According to Schwartz (1999 : 15), "few travel magazine writers and brochure scribes of the 1920s failed to link Cuba to entertainment, excitement, recreation, romance, and indulgence," nourishing the image of a tropical sexual paradise for pleasure seekers. Seventy years later, after much political and socioeconomic change on the island, tourism imaginaries of Cuba still evoked the sensual and erotic pleasures that the country had to offer. By the mid-1990s, Cuba had in some tourism circles acquired the reputation of a "tourist paradise for sex," attracting visitors who revelled in the island's promise of sandy beaches, wild parties, and the alleged sensual, sexually liberated character of Cuban people (O'Connell Davidson, 1996; Fusco, 1997; Sanchez Taylor, 2000; Sheller, 2003). Making a visible entrance to the international tourism trade, with the number of foreign tourists skyrocketing from 275 000 in 1989 to more than one million in 1996 (Quintana *et al.*, 2005 : 113), Cuba also entered the regimes of value and critique associated with hedonistic forms of tourism that had both sex and pleasure as key ingredients. Its growing recognition as a "sex tourism" destination started capturing the attention of international media and scholars, raising much moral debates and controversies (see the analyses of Cabezas, 1998; Stout, 2007; and Daigle, 2015).
- 2 The focus on the phenomenon of "touristic prostitution" on this Caribbean island finds parallels in other tourism destinations, and must be placed in the broader international context that saw an increased mediatization of "sex tourism" leading to the framing of such phenomenon as a new social problem, a dysfunction of society calling for moral and political action (Roux, 2010 : 1). In Cuba, the debate on the explosion of sex tourism in the 1990s recalled daunting images of pre-revolutionary times, particularly of the 1950s, when the country's image was increasingly dominated by Havana's reputation as "the

brothel of the Caribbean,” with many foreign tourists traveling to the capital on “sin junkets” (Clancy, 2002 : 64). The establishment of continuities or ruptures between pre-revolutionary and contemporary Cuba became fertile ground for political instrumentalization, and is still today a bone of contention between supporters and detractors of the Cuban socialist regime that governs the country since 1959 (Kummels, 2005 : 23; Valle, 2006 : 230; Stout, 2007; Cabezas, 2009 : 5; Alcázar Campos, 2009; Daigle, 2015).¹

- 3 Writing on the relations between sex, tourism, and citizenship in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, Amalia Cabezas has done much to unpack the processes that lead to label people in these countries as “prostitutes” and “sex workers,” showing that “[t]he category of ‘sex worker’ . . . comes with its own disciplinary functions” (2004 : 1001-1002) and, more broadly, that “a recurring challenge to sex tourism researchers in the Caribbean, and one that has not been sufficiently addressed, is that tourists and locals do not self-identify as sex tourists or as sex workers” (*ibid.* : 1010). One way of confronting this challenge has been to dismiss tourists’ and locals’ claims as mere “fictions,” “illusions,” and “(self-)deception,” an approach taken for instance by Julia O’Connell Davidson (1996) and Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor (2000). Another perspective pays attention to how differences are articulated and the effects they have on the realities people experience, trying to grasp how different self-identifications are brought about and what they achieve in a given situation. The analysis presented in this article follows this second approach, and builds on a growing body of work that calls for subtler analyses of the way intimate encounters in tourism take place, of their power differentials, of the identifications that emerge from them, and of their potential ambiguities (see for instance the writings of Pruitt and LaFont, 1995; Cohen, 1996; Herold *et al.*, 2001; Brennan, 2004; Fosado, 2005; Frohlick, 2007; Piscitelli, 2007; Cabezas, 2009; and Daigle, 2015).
- 4 In their review of tourism literature on sex tourism, Edward Herold, Rafael Garcia and Tony DeMoya argue that “theoretical conceptualizations have generally been guided by one of two competing perspectives of sexuality with one group of researchers typically viewing prostitutes as sexual victims and another as empowered sexual actors” (2001 : 979). Debates on the power dimensions of (sexual) encounters in tourism have been the source of much controversy, with some anthropologists calling to move beyond the widespread “victim-oppressor” dualism (Bowman, 1996) to appreciate the more complex deployments and vectors of power in these relationships. In her review article on the commodification of intimacy, Nicole Constable remarks that “[w]hereas certain feminist scholars and activists argue that all sex workers are victims, other scholars and feminists can respond with endless examples of agency and choice”; and this leads her to conclude that “[t]he agent-victim binary has proven to be a dead end of sorts” (2009 : 57), and to encourage exploring alternative analytical pathways that can bring our understanding beyond such dichotomous readings.
- 5 While researchers tend to agree on the importance of structural conditions of inequality, the way these broaden or constrain people’s opportunities, and open possibilities for relatively richer tourists to engage sexually with poorer men and women in tourism destinations, there is less agreement on what difference gender makes. A key point of debate has been to ascertain whether women traveling to poorer countries, notably in the Caribbean, engage in commoditized sexual exchanges “the same way men do,” along the lines of what is commonly referred to as “sex tourism,”² or if the term “romance tourism” (Pruitt and LaFont, 2005) or “companionship tourism” (Herold *et al.*, 2001) would be more

appropriate to describe these relationships. For Sheila Jeffreys, much depends on whether researchers “privilege the oppressions of class and race over that of gender in their analyses” (2003 : 234), or vice versa. Pushing the debate further, Susan Frohlick argues that “[w]ithin the global economy, women from First World countries can and do exert their relative economic power over local lovers and others in the communities to which they travel in Third World countries, but power associated with masculinity complicates this schema” (2007 : 141). Focusing on the importance of masculinity constructs for the Cuban case, I have shown elsewhere (Simoni, 2015a) the fallacy of considering that Cuban men provided romance and intimacy (as opposed to “just sex”) simply because that is what tourist women wanted. The more complex picture brings us beyond such one-way causality, and takes into account how Cuban men’s moral stances, self-esteem, and masculinities also informed these relationships.

- 6 Building on this earlier work on masculinity and on the importance of recognizing Cuban men’s claims of love in their relationships with foreign tourist women (Simoni, 2013; 2015a; 2016b; 2018), this article aims to probe further into their enactments of sexual, seductive, loving, and caring subjectivities. According to Frohlick (2009 : 394):

Much has been said about how female tourists exert their economic and racial power to exploit Caribbean men they typecast in the imagery of hyper-sexual black masculinity; and also how, out of economic necessity, Caribbean men play up these images themselves to use their sexual labour in material-erotic exchanges with tourist women.

- 7 While identifying the merit of such researches, Frohlick calls for more attention to how people’s emotions and subjectivities are worked over in intimate touristic encounters, showing the importance of “looking at other forms of agency and desire that mobilise these relations, which are more than simply economic exchanges” (*ibid.*).
- 8 Several authors writing on local men in tourism destinations getting involved in intimate relations with wealthier tourist women have underscored the “entrepreneurial” qualities of their endeavours, and the way they are able to instrumentalize love and sentiment to extract resources from their foreign partners and improve their living conditions (see for example Brown, 1992; Dahles and Bras, 1999, Herold *et al.*, 2001; Phillips, 2002; Nyanzi *et al.*, 2005). This literature draws attention to the modalities, tactics, and strategies through which foreign women are seduced, highlighting the competences and resourcefulness that local men develop in engaging with tourists. Traversing most writings on such types of intimate encounter is the assumption that the men’s seduction enterprise is essentially deceptive, guided by economic rationales, and manipulative of tourists. My research (Simoni, 2013; 2015a; 2016b; 2018) shows that while instrumental dimensions were also present among my interlocutors in Cuba, Cuban men’s claims and aspirations for love need to be taken seriously into account in order to provide a more complete picture of the competing desires and demands that animated their relations with foreign tourists.³ The modes of engaging with tourists that I address in this article testify to Cuban men’s willingness to conquer their foreign partners and transform them from strangers into lovers in the little time they had at their disposal, which was often limited to the few days of a tourist’s stay. My focus is on processes of self-eroticization, of seduction, and of care for the other that, I argue, are revealing of the kind of competences, sensitivities, and modes of doing and being that these men developed through their intimate engagements with tourists.

- 9 The protagonists of the examples that appear in the following pages are young Cuban men (in their twenties and thirties) of humble origins, mostly formally unemployed, some of whom migrated to tourism centres from less privileged areas of the country with the explicit purpose of engaging with foreign tourists. I met them through my frequentation of tourist sites in the city of Havana, the rural town of Viñales (200 kilometres west of the capital), and the beach resort of Playas del Este (a half-hour drive east of Havana)—the places where I carried out fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2005 and 2016. During fieldwork I relied mainly on participant observation, the primary method of anthropological research (Hume and Mulcock, 2004), to generate data on “informal encounters” (Simoni, 2016a) in the realm of tourism, and this led me to engage in conversations with hundreds of foreign tourists and members of the Cuban population. While such exchanges varied greatly in their duration and scope, the examples used in this article come from extensive conversations with Cuban men with whom I established close ties, in most cases over several years. During the research, I was present on occasions in which these young men engaged with and tried to seduce foreign tourist women, and with them I also had the chance to comment and reflect upon such encounters *a posteriori*, assessing for instance their relative degree of success and the reasons for it. As I have clarified elsewhere (Simoni, 2016a), my research in Cuba was not based on any supposedly representative sample of tourists and members of the visited population making contact in this country. While referring to a limited number of cases, the findings presented in this article exemplify narratives and practices of seduction that I recurrently encountered during fieldwork, and which help shed light on the widespread range of skills, understandings, and moral attunements that intimate relationships between Cuban men and foreign tourist women brought into play.

From the Land of Pleasure and Sensuality to “Sex Tourism”

- 10 As Franck Michel’s (1998 : 276-277) review of the subject makes clear, by the mid-1990s tourism promotional materials praised the special “character” of Cuban people, emphasizing their hospitality, kindness, and joyfulness and describing them as “amiable and warm,” as “living out of smiles, dances, and music,” displaying “a lascivious and languorous joy” and a “passion for life.”⁴ Prolonging these remarks was the emphasis on the exuberant, passionate, sensual nature of Cuban men and women, as well as the recognition of the importance of “love” in this Caribbean country, with some publications claiming that “Cubans have nothing but love” (newspaper *Le Monde*, see Michel, 1998 : 275). Contemporary tourist guidebooks reiterate this association between Cubans and “love,” with for instance *Le Guide du Routard* (a very popular French guidebook) writing that love in Cuba is a “national sport,” “an almost vital activity for Cubans,” and a “leisure conjugated in all its forms” (Gloaguen, 2007 : 36). Cuba is thus made out to be “probably the most sensual country on earth, not to say sexual” (*ibid.*). For the *Time Out Havana* guide (2004 : 27), “[b]odies are a free source of fun; sexual activity starts young and goes on to a full and interesting (often promiscuous) adult sex life.” As several researches have shown, sensuality and sexual exuberance have become key features of the image that Cuba has acquired on the international tourism stage (O’Connell Davidson, 1996; Fusco, 1997; Sanchez Taylor, 2000; Sheller, 2003).

- 11 Reflecting on these stereotypes, scholars writing on tourism in Cuba have underlined their continuities with the slave and colonial past of the island (Fusco, 1997; Sanchez Taylor, 2000; Sheller, 2003; Kummels, 2005), exemplified by the persistent image of the “mulatta woman” (*la mulata*) as the “daughter of love” and illicit lover of white men (Fusco, 1997 : 57). These considerations converge with the broader assessments of Kamala Kempadoo (1999; 2004), Julia O’Connell Davidson and Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor (1999), and Sanchez Taylor (2000) on the links between racist and colonial constructions of black women as “naturally hot” and promiscuous, and contemporary developments of sex tourism in the Caribbean. The reproduction of racial stereotypes explains here the attraction of the Caribbean as a tourist destination where sex is deemed easy and even a natural ingredient of the holiday experience. Besides the eroticization of *mulatas* and black women, “white stereotypes of primitive black male potency” (de Albuquerque, 1998 : 50) and colonial, sexualized racist fantasies of “the big black dick” (Sanchez Taylor, 2000 : 49) are likewise said to lure female (sex) tourists to Caribbean countries like Jamaica, Barbados, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic (de Albuquerque, 1998; Sanchez Taylor, 2000; Kempadoo, 2004).⁵
- 12 While scholars are certainly right in emphasizing continuities in the persistence of racial stereotypes from colonial times to the present, the thorough understanding of the conditions under which such representations emerge and the specific uses to which they are put remain important avenues for research, and Margaret Jolly and Lenore Manderson (1997) observe in this regard that similar representations of sexuality may also give rise to different interpretations and effects, depending on the contexts in which they take shape. In her research on the negotiation of intimacy between tourist women and local men in Caribbean Costa Rica, Frohlick shows how “racial stereotypes and ethnosexual dynamics of mutual desire (that is, the desire for black men by white foreign women and desire for white foreign women by black men) play out such that the men imagine themselves as hypersexual black men because in part this is how they are imagined by the tourists” (2007 : 150). “Men’s sexual subjectivities,” continues Frohlick, are in this sense “forged through encounters with foreign women.” In this article, I am also interested in the way representations of sexuality are appropriated and worked over by Cubans in their relationships with tourists, shaping at the same time the way they see themselves as subjects in such encounters.
- 13 In this respect, a first observation is that whereas there certainly were continuities in the racialization of sexuality in present-day Cuba—notably in the (hyper)sexualization of Afro-Cubans (see Fernandez, 1999; 2010; Allen, 2007; Roland, 2011)—the stereotype of the “hot” Cuban was also re-actualized in a more culturalist/nationalist vein in interactions with tourists, and could apply to all Cubans regardless of racial attribution (see Simoni, 2011; 2013). In her study of interracial couples in contemporary Cuba, Nadine Fernandez (2010 : 126) also notes that “notions of potent sexuality were not exclusively associated with black and mulatto Cubans.” Instead, “perceptions of Cubanness, in general, were closely linked with sexuality, and there was a sort of national pride about Cuban’s mythical sexuality and ardency” whereby “Cuban men and women were seen to possess an uncontrollable ‘Latino passion,’ particularly in comparison to Europeans and North Americans” (Forrest, 1999, quoted in Fernandez, 2010 : 126). Such comparison and relational opposition became particularly salient in the tourism contexts where I worked, and helps explain the overarching characterization of Cuban people as *calientes*, “hot,” or at least “hotter” than the foreigners visiting the tropical island.⁶

- 14 During fieldwork, I was repeatedly confronted with Cuban people praising their amazing sexual skills to foreign visitors. “What? You’ve never tried [sex with] a Cuban? You don’t know what you’re missing . . .” was among the most frequent remarks. Tourists were encouraged to “let go” and indulge in the exceptional sensuality and sexuality of Cuban people. If they had really come to Cuba to discover another country and another culture—as normative tourism discourses prescribed—then they had to experience first-hand such typicality. “No one fucks like Cubans!” maintained Manuel,⁷ a white Cuban in his late twenties, when comparing the sexual abilities of Cuban people to those of foreigners. Women in Europe, so the story went, were disappointed by their “cold” European partners, men that, after a day at work, came home and fell asleep watching TV on the sofa, failing to pay attention to the woman’s need for sex, and for intimacy more at large. In contrast to this scenario, my interlocutors maintained that a Cuban man would never fail to satisfy his woman sexually, giving her “what she wanted” every day, even several times a day. In Manuel’s quote, what mattered was not so much the physical size of the penis—as the “big black dick” myth would have it (Sanchez Taylor, 2000 : 49)—but one’s sexual prowess, which was deemed exceptional, unique, and beyond comparison.
- 15 Among the Cuban men I worked with, Viagra pills and other sexual stimulants were also circulating. As I was told, their use was to impress the tourist woman in question: no matter if she was “young and beautiful” and sex with her would have been mutually enjoyable also without any chemical supplement. With the help of Viagra one was sure to make an even stronger impression, giving her “the fuck of her life,” something she would not forget, which would leave a mark and ideally influence her decision to continue the relationship. As Herold and his colleagues (2001) put it for the case of the Dominican “beach boys,” here too the provision of “pleasurable sexual experiences” was seen “as another means of encouraging the women to fall in love with them” (*ibid.* : 989). While boasting of one’s sexual exploits, people also emphasized how they did not need to rely on any Viagra to make tourist women happy, how their natural sexual potency could guarantee their partners several sexual intercourses during the same night. Seven was the number Rodrigo liked to boast about, a young Cuban man in his late twenties who’s witty, playful, and daring attitude had much success among foreign women. Proud of his seductive power, Rodrigo told me that whenever he went out in tourist venues at night, he was almost certain to end up with some foreign girl, in a way that was almost beyond his control. Tired of these one-night stands, however, he was now looking for a stable relationship, a love story that would materialize in marriage and family life with a foreign girlfriend. Which would be the one with whom he would realize this aspiration he still didn’t know, and that is why he felt compelled not to neglect any of his tourist girlfriends for the moment. A couple of years after I had this conversation with him, Rodrigo was finally able to fulfil his vision, becoming father to a baby he had with a woman from Spain, and then moving there to live as a family. To make this happen, he had spent almost ten years of his life doing his best to seduce and entertain long-term love relationships with foreign women. This brings me to discuss the importance of moving from sex to seduction and romance when discussing such relationships and accounting for the competences and sensibilities that Cuban men developed to overcome reductive views of them as simple “sex machines,” a position in which most of my interlocutors did not want to get stuck (Simoni, 2015a).

From Sex to Seduction and Romance

- 16 Discussing her notion of “embodied hustling,” Sanchez Taylor (2000: 49) gives the example of a young black Cuban man who, on a beach in Varadero, played on tourist women’s racist stereotype of the “big black dick” to capture their attention: “His hard sell would start from the moment he lay down beside tourist women on the beach, in his brief trunks, giving them a full centrefold pose. This pose exposed his unique selling-point which played on and ‘confirmed’ the myth of Black male sexuality, and tapped into these women’s ‘racialized’ sexual fantasies.” Moving beyond Sanchez Taylor’s (*ibid.*: 49) somewhat reductive remarks on the body as a “unique selling-point,” I wish to highlight here the broader nature of the skills that the Cuban men I encountered mobilized to seduce foreign women. In his ground-breaking work on street guides in Sri Lanka, Malcolm Crick (1992: 138) acknowledges their “insightful, if essentially pragmatic, understanding of human nature,” and the guides’ “ability to read a social situation.” Similar abilities were foregrounded by the Cuban men I interacted with in Cuba, who reflexively valued their talent at charming tourists.
- 17 From the Gambia (Nyanzi *et al.*, 2005), to Indonesia (Dahles and Bras, 1999) to the Dominican Republic (Herold *et al.*, 2001), scholars have provided examples of local men openly discussing and weighing each other’s skills in seducing foreign tourist women. Similar comparing and criticizing took place in Cuba: “*El está mareado* (he is confused), *no va a hacer nada* (he is not going to do anything [with the girl]), *no sabe* (he doesn’t know)!”—told me for instance Umberto, a young Cuban man I accompanied one night to a disco in Havana, as he closely scrutinized one of his colleagues’ clumsy attempts to seduce a young Norwegian girl that he himself coveted. To bring relationships beyond the “sex machine” trope and its one-night stands, the kind of “personality traits” that Valene Smith (1978: 69) ascribed to cultural brokers and “marginal men” in tourism—“charisma, charm, wit, gregariousness”—also seemed to play a key role in Cuba. In the course of several lengthy conversations about ways of relating with tourists, Juan, a young Afro-Cuban man in his twenties, told me about the importance of one’s ability to “vibrate” (*vibrar*), to “have a good vibration,” one that would lead tourists to enjoy your company and follow you. This meant knowing how to talk (*saber hablar*), how to capture a woman’s attention and keep her motivated to continue the relationships. Juan’s *saber hablar* was not just about speaking languages—in itself a very praised quality among my interlocutors⁸—but about how to communicate with tourists, how to awaken their interest and fascination by bringing about positive feelings and emotions, suggesting enticing possibilities for continuing the relationships.
- 18 For Ernesto, an Afro-Cuban man in his mid-twenties with whom I spent many days and nights hanging around in tourism spots in Havana, what mattered most in relating to 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. The problem, according to Ernesto, and the source of many of his colleagues’ mistakes in dealing with tourists, notably female 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 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 fully fledged humanity and individuality of every tourist, whose inclinations and interests had to be nourished and cultivated. His immersion in the world of tourism had heightened his awareness of people's differential responsiveness to tourists, their potential desires, and the possible ways of moving relationships forward. The kind of intellectual dispositions, emotional attunements, and moral sensibilities evoked here resulted from one's life experience, as Ernesto argued, and more specifically from the experience of interacting with tourists.

- 19 Criticizing other Cubans who had no idea how to treat tourist women, who bored them with dull stories or annoyed them with excessive pressure and harassing behaviours, Yoanni—another Afro-Cuban man in his early twenties—told me that the secret was to pay attention to details, to stay hyper-attuned to their needs, their peculiarities as persons and the demands of the situation, so as to sense for instance when it was good to entertain them with a conversation or better to stay quiet and let them rest and relax. What he tried to do when talking to foreign women was to say things that could touch them deeply, in their most intimate feelings, surprising them with profound remarks and compliments they had never heard before. This, according to Yoanni, was also a way to show his maturity and caring personality, particularly important points when dealing with women who were older than one was, and who could be weary of engaging with *muchachos*, inexperienced youngsters. The idea, as Yoanni put it, was to find the keys to “unlock” the woman, touch her weak spot, the detail that “killed” (*la mata*) and ultimately conquered her. Based on the time I spent with him and saw him interacting with foreign women, Yoanni was extremely well versed in relating to them along the precepts he had described to me. He left me the impression of being a master in human relations, in sensing other people's feelings and inclinations, and in responding constructively to them while avoiding being overly deferential or subservient.
- 20 A further point that must be stressed here is that the time my Cuban interlocutors had to cultivate a relationship with tourist women was generally rather limited. Such limitation called for increased levels of skilfulness. How could one, in the space of just a few days, get a woman to spend all the time with you and think of continuing the relationships beyond the holiday affair? And how to spend all the time together and reach a profound level of intimacy, but at the same time avoid any hint of harassment and pressure? A fine and subtle balancing was required. More generally, lack of time was a constant obstacle to the establishment of strong connections between tourists and Cuban people, as it breached normative assumptions about the “proper” development of relationships, raising questions about the kind of engagements and agendas at stake (Simoni, 2016a). To overcome the disruptive effect that such transience could have on the possibility of bringing about ideal scenarios of love, couple-hood, or even the fantasy of a future life together, the Cuban men I worked with strived to augment the intensity of the moments they spent with their tourist partners, trying hard to give a few days' romance the feel of a transformative, life-changing experience, one after which things could no longer be the same again—a view that may resonate well with theorizations of tourism as “*rite de passage*” (Graburn, 1978).
- 21 Two French women I met, impressed by Cubans' eagerness to relate, were equally stunned by the way one could quickly get very deep into incredibly intense and intimate relationships (*ça va très vite, très profond !*). When possible, my Cuban interlocutors tried to create a sort of bubble of intimacy to cultivate the bond with their tourist partner, avoiding for instance usual friends and places that could distract them from the

relationship, or bring unwanted attention and even competition. This allowed them to focus solely on their newfound girlfriend, making her their absolute priority, enchanting her, and helping bring about exceptionally intense, intimate, and all-absorbing moments, in which the breadth and quality of the time spent together felt amplified. “It’s been only four days but it felt more like a month!” could be the sign of a promising relationship in the making. A way to nurture the sense of an intimate, special relation was also to go on what could resemble a sort of honeymoon, taking the form of an excursion or even a tour of the island, during which full attention and dedication could be given to the tourist partner, treating her like no one had done before, and making her feel that.

- 22 The idea I want to evoke here, is that many of my Cuban interlocutors were ready to, and competent in investing an incredible amount of time and effort in a relationship with a tourist woman, and that their experience in this field could turn them into extremely sociable, seductive, and charming persons, in ways that went well beyond any superficial image of the “hot” Cuban as just another tourist fantasy. This may also help explain why several foreign women I met, who had come to Cuba with no intention of getting in a relationship with a Cuban man, and had even been warned of the risks and complications of any such intimacy, ended up surrendering to Cuban men’s charms. Put simply, it could be said that there is more than a superficial sexual stereotype at play here, in the form of a reservoir of skills, competences, sensitivities, vitalities, and attunement that Cuban men cultivated in their relations with tourist women. Some of these attributes may find continuity with longstanding idioms of seduction, romance, and gender relations in Cuba (Lundgren, 2011), in ways that resonate with what Pruitt and LaFont (1995) argue for the Jamaican case, where “[a]rdent declarations of love, praises of beauty, and the like, which are a common part of a Jamaican man’s repertoire, are seen as refreshing or passionate by the foreign woman who does not understand the culture” (1995 : 427). But rather than reducing such skills, competences, and sensitivities to the reiteration of a well-established, cultural gender script for romancing, it seems more accurate to view the Cuban men I engaged with as working over any such pre-existing scripts, adapting and transforming them to suit the specificities of their relationships with tourist women.
- 23 Recognizing tourism as a field of cultural creativity and innovation, and giving due analytical attention to the time and effort that people invested in this realm, it could therefore be argued that the modes of seducing and romancing emerging in touristic encounters both mobilize enduring cultural repertoires and generate new forms of intimate relationality. A fruitful parallel can be drawn here with Susan Frohlick’s (2009) reflections on the emotional dimensions of female tourists’ love stories with local men in Caribbean Costa Rica, and the way emotions are worked over in such encounters. Subtly teasing out cultural continuities and innovations, this author similarly concludes that “[l]ove is being remade through the women’s mobilities and intimate encounters, but not under conditions entirely of their own making” (*ibid.* : 403). Rather, these women “bring cultural scripts of love with them to Puerto Viejo and they encounter and negotiate cross-cultural scripts of love within this border zone” (*ibid.*).
- 24 People like Juan, Ernesto, and Yoanni explicitly recognized the importance of social, communicative, emotional competences and sensitivities in their relations with tourists, and actively worked to improve these qualities. Grasping multiple points of views, understanding different approaches to tourism and tourists, attending to the subtleties of relating to people who differed in terms of their origins, background, age, socioeconomic 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, in this case of love and romance. There was, in other words, recognition that the skills one cultivated by interacting with tourists constituted a positive body of knowledge about human beings and human relationships, notably relations of the intimate kind.

Epilogue: Sex, Love, and Care into the Future

- 25 When talking with Yoanni about his ways of dealing with tourist women, his thoughts also wandered toward the future and his aspirations and prospects of a life out of Cuba. Here too, this young man liked to contrast his attitude to that of other Cubans who had migrated after marrying a tourist woman. Among them, Yoanni told me, many failed miserably once they made it to Europe, as they ended up spending the day on the sofa, doing nothing, and were ultimately destined to be deported back to Cuba, empty handed. He, on the contrary, said he knew how one had to behave to succeed “out there” (*allá*). Firm in his determination to marry and settle in Europe, Yoanni told me that he would not waste his chance once he got there. He was prepared for the life one had to lead. For instance, he would do all he could to get a job and work hard, and also do his part in the household. He knew that men and women were supposed to be equal in Europe, and share work and domestic chores in equal measure. While waiting to find a job in such imagined country (he was thinking of Sweden that time, where he already had some connections), he would keep busy learning the language and taking care of the house, preparing meals for his working wife, without neglecting to give her all the intimacy, love, and sex she needed once she came back from work every evening.
- 26 The “normative intimacies” (Berlant, 2011; Simoni, 2015b) expressed in the discourses of Yoanni and others like him emphasized their ability to take good and proper care of the tourist partner in all life’s domains, “from the bed to the table” (*de la cama a la mesa*). The problem, told me Yoanni, expressing a rather widespread view, was that tourist women were full of doubts about the real intentions of Cuban men, and that many of them ended up enjoying only the sex part of the relationship, thus failing to appreciate the smooth and necessary continuities, which the men strived to bring about, between sex, romance, and care in its broadest possible sense. In Cuba—so the critique went—these women would get wild, a profusion of “*te quiero*” (I like you), of “*mi amor*” (my love), of promises of coming back as soon as possible to the island, even getting married. But once their plane took off, they went back to a life of respectability, following the advice of friends and family that would dissuade them to continue indulging in unrealistic fantasies, and quickly forgot about what had happened in Cuba. Then came the typical phone call back to the lover in Cuba, as mimicked by Yoanni: “*Estoy confusa* [I’m confused], I’m not sure it can work.”
- 27 “Because of the faults of a few,” that is the Cuban migrants who misbehaved in Europe, “we all have to pay!” complained Yoanni, referring to how stereotypes about Cubans’ infidelity impacted all Cuban men’s chances to maintain a serious, long-lasting relationship. These changes of attitude in tourists—madly in love in Cuba but easy to cool off once abroad—made it all the more important to establish the deepest possible bonds and ensure their commitment when they were on the island, sealing the union, so to speak, as much as possible in the course of their holiday. While waiting for “the one,” the one relationship that would work till the end, and help them fulfil their aspiration to

marry a foreign woman, Yoanni and others like him kept cultivating and deploying their sexual, romantic, and caring abilities in their seduction of foreign women—reactivating gendered geographies of seductive power and a global image of Cuba as a place charged with sensuality and eroticism, but also trying to bring this image beyond the confines of the sexual and toward a more encompassing gendered ethics of love and care.

- 28 Failing to see the connections and continuities between narratives of sexual prowess and these men's wider drives to love and care, and reducing their activities and the relationships with tourist women to "sex work" and "sex tourism," would be to misrecognize their self-definitions, the scope of their claims and aspirations, and their efforts to fulfil them. "Sex work" and "sex tourism" were themselves targets of my Cuban interlocutors' criticism, when they complained for instance about their disappointing experiences with "wild" tourists that did not take their relational claims and prospects seriously—"bandoleras" (literally bandits) that credited them for amazing sex, but not much more. The risk, in following such narrow readings of these touristic encounters and what was at stake in them, is to leave out of the analytical gaze the broader range of competences and creative endeavors these men deployed in relating with tourists, the skills and sensitivities they consciously cultivated to seduce them, and their remarkable efforts to enact and substantiate "hot," erotic, and caring selves. While building on a long history of derogatory colonial-era sexual stereotypes and related century-old tourist images of Cuba and Cubans, their efforts meant recasting their alleged difference as value, actualize it, and turn it into an asset to link up with the tourists' fantasies and desires, to bring about forms of intimacy that could ensure them a more permanent foothold in the visitors' lives and ultimately become a pathway to fulfil their aspirations for a better future.

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NOTES

✉. 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, Jean-François Staszak, Maria Gravari-Barbas, and Nelson H. Graburn, and to two anonymous reviewers, for their useful suggestions and critiques on an earlier version of the texts. Finally, the article would not have been possible without the collaboration of the many Cuban and tourist men and women I worked with in Cuba, and my deepest gratitude goes to them.

1. As Valle (2006 : 230) remarks, critics of the Cuban government tend to put the responsibility for the “resurgence of prostitution” and the explosion of “sex tourism” squarely on the socialist state. Striving for a more balanced position on the matter, this author notes that albeit the government has certainly shown signs of indolence and blindness toward the phenomenon, it is going a step too far to argue that the Cuban state has directly promoted and fomented “sex tourism” and “prostitution” on the island (*ibid.* : 231), as maintained for instance by US President George W. Bush’s administration (Cabezas, 2009 : 5).

2. Elsewhere I have also shown the importance of recognizing the diversity of tourist men’s sexual engagements with Cuban women and the implications this can have for our understanding of such relationships and what is at stake, an approach that further problematizes reductive views of “sex tourism” (see Simoni, 2014; 2016a). Focusing more specifically on the perspectives of Cuban women, the writings of Cabezas (2004, see above), De Sousa e Santos (2009), and Daigle (2015) highlight the limits of the notions of “sex work” and “prostitution” to comprehend the intimate relationships that emerge between tourist men and Cuban women, and also call on researches to take more seriously Cuban women’s aspirations and claims of love and romance that contrast dominant readings emphasizing the commoditized nature of their relations with tourist men. A more complete picture of current debates on “sex tourism” and its gender dimensions would also need to include the growing body of scholarship that helps us move beyond the prevailing focus on heterosexual relationships, some of which has also focused on the Cuban case (see in particular Hodge, 2001; Fosado, 2005; Couceiro Rodríguez, 2006; Allen, 2007; Sierra Madero, 2013; and Stout, 2014).

3. See Pruitt and LaFont for an early recognition of the importance of considering “the potential for emotional intimacy in relationships with foreign women” (1995 : 428) in the case of Jamaican men. As clarified in recent writings (Simoni, 2016b; 2018), my analysis also problematizes widespread theorizations of these relationships as featuring a mix of “love” and “money,” of “interest” and “affect”—a “hybridity” move that often stems from a willingness to criticize western idealizations of “pure” relationships, or what Zelizer (2005) calls “hostile worlds perspective.” Such hybridity take, I argue, does not accurately account for the efforts that my research participants devoted in trying to keep “interest” and “affect” apart, in purifying their relationships, and fails to consider the moral underpinnings that explained such purifications, as well as their affordances. Rather than being “mixed,” “interest” and “sentiment” appeared more often in different moments and situations of my participants’ lives, reflecting the competing moral demands to which they had to respond as they moved in and out of the realm of tourism.

4. When not originally in English, all direct quotations in the text have been translated by the author.

5. While in this article I am unable to address the perspectives of tourist women engaging in intimate relationships with Cuban men, it is worth noting that their socio-demographic profiles, countries of origin, and tourism practices varied greatly, as did the nature of their engagements with Cuban partners. In general terms, my findings converge with those of Pruitt and LaFont (1995) and Frohlick (2007), which indicate that tourist women engaging with local men in the Caribbean tend to be appreciative of and are looking for more than “just sex”—namely romance and intimacy.

6. An interesting parallel may also be drawn here with Piscitelli’s work on sex travel in Fortaleza (in Brazil’s northeastern coast), and her reflections on “the production of the idea of a ‘Brazilian sexual culture’” (2006 : 4). Narratives that are very similar to the ones analyzed here are also reported by Pruitt and LaFont (1995) for Jamaica and by Herold and his colleagues (2001) for the Dominican Republic.

7. All personal names and some details in the examples presented in this article have been changed to protect the anonymity of research participants. The quotes presented have been translated into English by the author and are based on recollection after the events took place.

8. Knowledge of foreign languages varied a great deal amongst my Cuban research participants, and was often fairly limited. Most of them understood a little of several languages, rather than being proficient in one in particular. Such knowledge was often the fruit of very practice-oriented learning processes, including practice with foreign tourists. Some of my interlocutors were also studying languages at schools, listening to educational tapes, CDs, TV programmes, etc., and their efforts were generally geared at facilitating interactions with non-Spanish speaking tourists. In regard to tourist women engaging with Cuban men, even those who did not speak Spanish well tended to have at least some knowledge of this language and tried to put it into practice. The relationship with a Cuban boyfriend could itself be seen a good opportunity to improve one’s language skills. Non-verbal communication also played a key role in the development of meaningful interactions, showing that beyond sharing a common language, what was often paramount was people’s willingness and determination to establish a relationship (Simoni, 2016a).

ABSTRACTS

In continuity with stereotypes that can be traced back to colonial times, present-day tourism images of Cuba tend to emphasize the sensual nature of this Caribbean destination, highlighting the cheerfulness and amiability of its inhabitants as well as their alleged “hotness” and exuberant sexuality. Based on fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Cuba between 2005 and 2016, the article discusses Cuban men’s narratives and practices of seduction of foreign tourist women. The focus is on gendered processes of self-definition that reproduce a global image of Cuba as a place charged with sensuality and eroticism while highlighting these men’s sexual, loving, and caring abilities. By moving beyond reductive readings of sex tourism and sex work, the article highlights the broader range of competences, sensitivities, and moral attunements that these intimate relationships bring into play, and the way they inform Cuban men’s subjectivities, their seduction practices, and their hopes and possibilities to establish long-term relationships with their tourist partners.

INDEX

Keywords: seduction, sex, romance, care, Cuba, tourism.

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