

## Author Meets Critic:

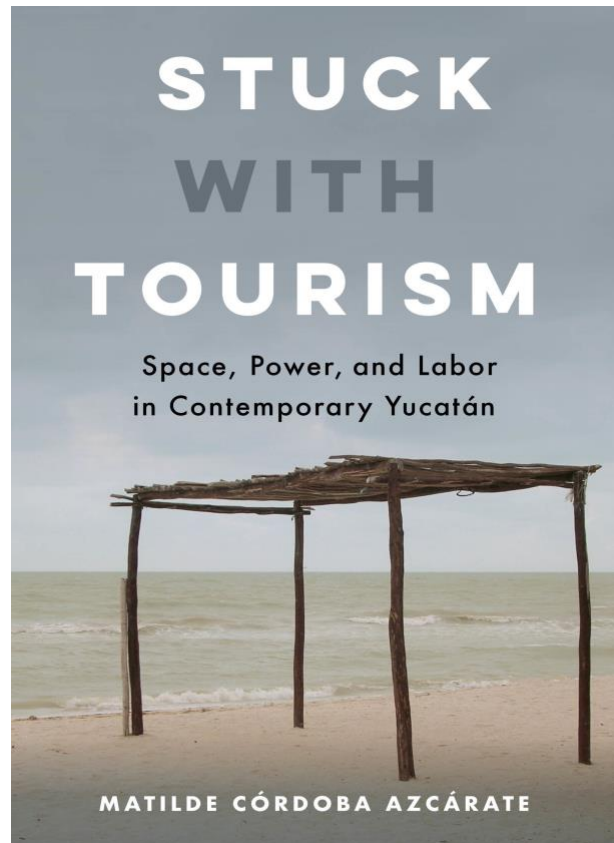
**A critical and timely exploration of Yucatán's *predatory* and *sticky* tourism.**

(Book Review of *Stuck with Tourism: Space, Power and Labor in Contemporary Yucatán*, Matilde Córdoba Azcárate, University of California Press, 2020, Oakland, 278 pp., ISBN: 978-0-520-34449-5)

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**CRITIC:** Matilde Córdoba Azcárate's compelling ethnography of tourism in the Yucatán Peninsula comes at a pertinent time as the Mexican government embarks on a mission to expand the reach and 'opportunities' of tourism through the *Tren Maya*, a regional development project spearheaded by the construction of a 1,500 km railway connecting towns and tourist destinations in the peninsula. *Stuck with Tourism* offers an in-depth, critical yet not cynical exploration of the drastic transformations fascinatingly brought by tourism development, making it a must-read not only for scholars but also for government officials, policymakers, and stakeholders involved in (re)shaping (and resisting) the present and future of the region.



A product of ethnographic work spanning fourteen years (2002-2016), *Stuck with Tourism* aims to make empirical sense of the tension between how tourism destroys as well as creates and to understand how the Yucatán's inhabitants 'get stuck' with tourism as their only way to improve the present, albeit precariously. It does so through four chapters in which the author explores "the livelihoods, contradictions, and sacrifices, the invisible and partial relations, the labor and sensorial landscapes that have created and sustained this region as a global tourist space since the mid-1970s".

The book offers a comparative and historically informed account of the relations between tourism, space, and capitalism looking at everyday lives and livelihoods in specific locations while keeping the regional scale as an important analytical lens, which is one of the key contributions of the book. In the author's words, "there has not yet been a comprehensive ethnographic account looking at how Yucatán's coasts, inland areas, cities, and rural areas have been differently scaled-up and re-spatialized for tourism consumption at a regional level".

Córdoba Azcárate's work on Yucatán stands out vis-à-vis studies that follow more established anthropological canons and opens interesting avenues for the study of the multi-scalar logics of tourism in other geographies.

The four chapters respectively exploring beach enclosures (Cancún), wild hotspots (Celestún), colonial enclaves (Hacienda Temozón Sur), and the domestic maquila in the tourist offstage (the city-village of Tekit), are enticingly introduced with four vignettes that also present some of the women and men whose lives Córdoba Azcárate followed over the years. Indeed, a key aspect of the author's study of this *predatory and sticky tourism geography* is an emphasis on the "gendered nature of political-economic and ecological processes as well as the centrality of both social reproduction and the body".

*Stuck with Tourism* goes beyond the obvious and behind the scenes. In its account of Cancún— a must for understanding Yucatán's contemporary changes, Córdoba Azcárate explores how 'paradise' was manufactured through designed segregation and how it is maintained through successive transformations after every major hurricane. She explores the range of actors, from the global to the local, involved in this disaster opportunism. The author then takes us to an unexpected site to find environmental conflict together with forms of opportunism and sacrifice on the part of the population: Celestún Biosphere Reserve. Here, she examines the arrival of the

state- and UNESCO-endorsed ecotourism and its impact on the lives of different social groups, going beyond dichotomies of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and revealing how victimizers in the appropriation of benefits are victims too.

The book then takes us to Hacienda Temozón Sur, most known to be where the US-backed Mérida initiative (to facilitate Mexico’s deadly ‘war on drugs’) was signed, to explore the colonial enclaves from the past that are repurposed for luxury tourism. This kind of tourism, where luxurious hotels are built upon former *henequen* (sisal) haciendas, consumes not only history through manufactured guilt-free experiences but also the lives and bodies of indigenous women and men, who make the most out of the opportunities brought to their otherwise neglected community while incurring in quotidian practices of resistance towards the new *patrones*.

In the final chapter, Córdoba Azcárate takes us to a much less evident space that, despite being far from tourist encounters, has been completely transformed by the industry: the city-village of Tekit. It is here where, through a web of interdependent households and workshops, most of the *guayaberas* (regional shirts) consumed in the region and exported are produced. She here explores how tourism’s predatory and sticky orderings work at a distance, pulling and transforming places, and entrapping people in shared sacrificial logics similar to those in consolidated tourism destinations.

The conclusion is rich in predicaments and questions for which there are no simple answers, due largely to the sticky nature of tourism Córdoba Azcárate superbly examines. Perhaps a valuable continuation of this work would be a deeper exploration of other possible alternatives that are “silenced, canceled, and destructed” by the way tourism works and experiences from below where communities harness tourism on their terms. Indeed, thinking about tourism and labor together – as this book does – is fundamental for working towards ways to disentangle from predation and into more inclusive tourism development. This also opens questions about the role of the state, particularly in post-2018 Mexico, where just as there are continuities vis-à-vis the region such as a ‘fixation with tourism’, there is an emphasis on privileging the most disadvantaged through a progressive political project the likes of which the country has not seen since the 1930s.

I agree with the author that tourism has been strangely and inadequately confined to a sub-disciplinary corner when its contemporary significance transcends disciplines. *Stuck with*

*Tourism* claims its centrality as “a major contemporary geographical force that shapes how capitalism, globalization, ecological deterioration, and indigenous oppression take place today”. This recognition opens further questions for the Yucatán peninsula and beyond: is tourism reformable? Is there any way in which tourism can be a force for more inclusive and sustainable development, particularly in the global South? If so, what institutions, policies, planning instruments, practices, and social action would this require?

While conceptually rich and sophisticated, Córdoba Azcárate’s work (which ought to be urgently translated into Spanish) is splendidly written in a way that is easy to read and captivating, as she is an outstanding chronicler of history, places, and of people’s experiences, hopes and predicaments. I highly recommend *Stuck with Tourism* to scholars from all disciplines and practitioners and policymakers working on tourism and development around the world.

**AUTHOR:** I very much appreciate this generous reading of *Stuck with Tourism*, especially the way von Bertrab captures what to me are some of the most significant theoretical contributions of the book –the inescapable tension between tourism’s predatory ways and the moral entanglements it generates; the need to explore labor and its gendered dynamics when doing tourism research; and the vindication of the regional scale as a unit of analysis.

The tension between predation and stickiness is most observable in tourism-dependent economies such as the Yucatán Peninsula where tourism’s contradictions between providing and depriving have become organizing principles of political, socio-cultural, family, and ecological life. In this particular case, we are also dealing with a social and environmental landscape historically acting as a resource frontier for the Mexican state through gum, henequen, and oil extraction. Tourism development is not neutral to these extractive legacies but it amplifies, re-scales, and re-spatializes them accordingly. The gendered nature of tourism labor practices, observable in every tourist space, served in my ethnography as a sharp reminder that not all bodies related to tourism are affected in the same way, and that the ethnographic lens had a responsibility to attune to these differences if it were to give a faithful account of tourism’s predatory entrapments. Tourism is above all, about labor –emotional labor, physical labor, the labor of representation, and so on. The regional scale, whilst a more abstract entry point for a tourism ethnography, became a powerful methodological and theoretical lens to situate observable everyday relations as part and parcel of larger historically informed and systemic

geopolitical forces. These forces often transcended, yet effusively permeated the local, household, and body scales. They came in the form of a new land use policy, a novel garment fashion, a restored tradition, a new building a few miles away, or an unexpected bird migration. Today, tourism's intensely spatial and politicized nature reverberates well beyond Yucatán. Attuning to these reverberations, to their spatialities and contingent politics, sometimes demands zooming into the most personal spaces, others it invites zooming out, farther away in space and time to account for learned forms of oppression and resistance –to the state, to international corporations, to family members, to other forms of predation. Von Bertrab eloquently asks, is tourism reformable? How to work toward disentangling the activity from its predatory nature in the region and beyond? And what is the role of the state in this process? Whilst the queries stem directly from an interest in the particular Mexican historical conjuncture –with a state discursively championing redistributive politics yet pragmatically embracing neoliberal developmental projects and further militarization– displacing the question beyond the immediate context, and its usual suspects might offer some answers.

The logic of reformism anchors changes in the legal system and the promises present in already existing institutional configurations. Institutions that often embrace the language of reform sustain however colonial, uneven, and extractive practices that perpetuate institutionalized violence against particular bodies and spaces– Indigenous, Black, Women, South– dwelling in precarious presents. As Dylan Rodriguez (2020, np) puts it, “reformism isn't liberation, its counter-insurgency (...) you can't abolish systemic anti-blackness and racial-colonial violence by protecting the system itself”. This is what happens, he and others argue, with many Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) courses at North American universities for example, when syllabi attentive to DEI principles proliferate yet without changes in the larger structures of students' admission, retention or policing on campuses that keep disproportionately affecting minorities. I similarly think about tourism and reform here and thank von Bertrab for the provocation.

When tourism is employed as a state development tool there are institutional actors, narratives, and mechanisms that need to be challenged, changed, and/or abolished. Among others, the equation between tourism and growth–economic growth, socio-cultural growth, personal growth–is popular amongst government officials and those in the business, travel, and hospitality industries. This equation is rooted in colonial legacies and Western-centric ideas about what it

means to have leisure time, what it means to work, to play and to grow, or to grow by playing in spaces purposefully engineered to that end –dredging coral reefs for sandy beaches, displacing human and animal populations, reinventing traditions–, whilst keeping labor invisible. This equation and its modus operandi sustain affective and material uneven geographies of leisure that are rooted in violence, grief, and contradictions. These are tourist geographies made of fences, gates, and walls, racialized labor dynamics, and naturalized extractive logic for the enjoyment of a few. These geographies insist on their affordances–of an ameliorated present, education, housing, work, or recognition– and they lure workers in blinding many with their benefits in the short term. These tourist geographies, archetypical of late capitalism, stuck people and places in them because the dominant narrative and praxis when thinking and doing tourism have not yet changed: tourism is growth hence it is good. But good for whom and how? Good for how long? To disentangle tourism from this learned grammar of positive growth and its naturalized predation, there needs to be a refusal to acknowledge that tourism *is* good growth. This refusal is not just a transgression or a rejection of tourism’s colonial legacies and its extractive presents. It is also an opportunity- epistemological and practical- as Audra Simpson (2014) puts it, to manufacture more inclusive futures. Academics are well positioned to enact this refusal in their conversations with state agents, tourism policymakers, development organizations, local actors, and amongst themselves. In Yucatán, they are already doing it with regional universities deeply engaged in Maya community-based tourism initiatives, and so are they in Hawaii, Puerto Rico, or Palestine. These are places where academics such as Aikau and González (2019) have taken an ethical lead, a detour, to decolonize tourism through their resolutely decolonial writing practices. To what extent these, thus far localized decolonial experimentations, can contribute to the formation of a larger hub of hemispheric tourist consciousness and activism, and hence, socio-cultural and political change is yet to be seen. *Stuck with Tourism*, written pre-Covid, in the crevices of a newly launched tourist mega-infrastructure in the region, adds to this path of change offering I hope, a solid step further in the recognition of the things that must change for tourism to work–not just for a few, but for all and on the long term.

## References

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