Valerio Simoni

Tourism and Informal Encounters in Cuba. New York: Berghahn Books, 2016. xvi + 266 pp. (Cloth US\$130.00)

Valerio Simoni has articulated an important work on the relationship between tourists and a particular segment of the Cuban population that these tourists encounter. The discussion surrounding *jinetero/as* in Cuba has often led people to associate this word with the kind of prostitution for tourists found in many parts of the world, from Amsterdam to Thailand. However, Valerio has uncovered the true nature of Cuban *jineterismo* as centering more on street con artists or hustlers who sell tourists everything from cigars to friendship, although the prostitute version of *jinetero/a* also exists, with both female and male prostitutes called *pingueros*. Simoni methodically explores the informal encounters between tourists and locals, from the techniques Cuban *jinetero/as* use when they approach tourists and the ways they gain trust and friendship to the eventual outcomes of these encounters through the reformulation of “relational idioms” between them. He examines the issues of race, identity, and economic disparity and their respective impacts on the encounters, taking into account everything from economic motivations to feelings of friendship. Addressing the “trust, inequality and power dynamics” in the relationship, Simoni also investigates the relationships between locals who engage in different forms of *jineterismo*, as well as their relationships with the rest of the Cuban population. Finally, the book discusses different types of tourists, from the typical beach goer to the sex tourist, and shows how each one influences the relationship between Cuban locals and *jinetero/as*.

Tourism and Informal Encounters in Cuba offers useful material for academics such as ethnographers and sociologists and researchers in the business community, but also for politicians, tourists, and commercial enterprises to understand the nature and impact of the “Cuban hustler.” Well grounded in academic theory, it draws on prior investigations as well as the author’s own experiences over a ten-year period in Cuba. As Cubans say, “*No es fácil*” to gain the trust and delve into the lives of *jinetero/as*.

Although the Cuban *jinetero/a* phenomenon was born out of necessity during the Special Period in the early 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its support of the Cuban economy, Simoni’s research only began in 2005. Thus, he sees a polished version of *jineterismo*, built on experiences over 25 years, a period of rapid growth in tourism (from 340,000 in 1990 to 2.3 million in 1995 and now exceeding 3.5 million). The growth in tourism makes this book particularly relevant today, as the recent changes in U.S.-Cuban relations are opening up the prospect of increased encounters with American tourists and

businesses, who previously represented a largely untapped market for Cuban jinetero/as who previously dealt mainly with tourists from Canada and Europe.

This change in relationship dynamics between Cuba and the United States, combined with economic reforms in Cuba toward privatization and the establishment of small entrepreneurial ventures through the issuance of 250,000 small business licenses by the Cuban government, provides the circumstances for a potential growth in black market economies and will impact the tourist-jinetero/a relationship. Given these changes and the continued expansion of tourism in Cuba, understanding the dynamics of these relationships becomes more important for ethnographic research. Given the rapid pace of change since the Obama/Castro announcement to normalize relations in December 2014, Simoni's research is bound to take on heightened attention and awareness under this new dynamic, with the opportunity to explore the changing relationship of the Cuban jinetero/as with the American population. It will be interesting to see how this new changing tourist and business demographics compare with the research involving Canadian and European tourists represented in this book.

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