Tourism, Migration, and Back in Cuba

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CONTRADICTORY OPENINGS

Working in Cuba and on Cuban migrants to Spain for a number of years, I realize that thought of Cuba tends to be overdetermined by the location from which one sees the island. Polarizing views often prevail, notably due to the political profiling of the country by mainstream media and governments. For example, seen from the leftist circles I frequented in the Swiss Italian canton where I grew up, Cuba gripped the imagination because of its peculiar socioeconomic and political system, and its associated narratives of resistance to imperialist and capitalist forces. So before going there for the first time in February 2005, I spoke to one of the leaders of a local Cuba solidarity association, seeking advice and potential contacts on the island. He discouraged me from researching the world of *jineterismo* (a neologism from the Spanish for "riding"), a milieu commonly associated with the "riding of tourists" for instrumental purposes, evoking hustling, prostitution, commercialized forms of relationality, and exploitation. I remember him saying, "This is not the real Cuba; these people [i.e., *jineteros* and *jineteras*] are not the Cubans you should meet!" *Jineterismo* was a rather embarrassing and marginal phenomenon that would tarnish the positive image of revolutionary Cuba he promoted, countering what he saw as misinformation orchestrated by mainstream media, particularly from the United States. So location mattered.

In my subsequent stays on the island, I was repeatedly confronted with the typical tourism trope of seeking and accessing a "real" Cuba but realized that authenticity could be associated with very different, competing, and often opposing realities of social life in the country. People gave me advice—everything from avoiding official tourist circuits to keeping at bay ubiquitous hustlers, recognizing signs of revolutionary achievements, and even reaching beyond governmental propaganda. My own goals were to understand and uncover the moral and epistemological underpinnings and consequences of such narratives, which flourished in the tourism realms I frequented (Simoni 2018a). Later, and in my repeated stays on the island (eighteen months up to February 2019), I became acquainted with a heterogeneous mix of foreign tourists and Cuban men and women actively trying to engage visitors, giving life to what I termed "informal touristic encounters" (Simoni 2016a). Among the promises of this informal realm of interactions was for tourists to get "off the beaten track," to enter tourism's "backstage," as MacCannell (1976) would put it, and to discover the "real" Cuba of "ordinary" Cubans, often said to be cheaper and more authentic than official tourism paths could provide.

EMBRACING TOURISM AND LONGING FOR ABROAD

As I advanced in my research, particularly from 2010 onwards, my closest research collaborators were predominantly middle-aged Cuban men from disadvantaged sectors of the population. I could discuss with them at length the desires and aspirations guiding their engagements with tourists. Most of my research partners did not favor transient and mercenary relations with tourists, preferring longer term connections. They spoke of love and friendship and of developing intimate bonds that could enable them to partake and get deeply involved in the life of tourists (see also Cabezas 2009; Daigle 2015; De Sousa e Santos 2009; Simoni 2018a). This way, they also resisted the authorities' profiling of their intentions as ineluctably strategic, cunning, and deceptive, a view that reduced their motives to illegitimate economic predation, a desire for tourist "high life," and a lust for capitalist consumption (see Berg 2004; Daigle 2015; Garcia 2010). I saw that many aspired to travel to and live in the visitors' countries. As I elaborate elsewhere (Simoni 2018a, 2018b), their aspirations resonated with what Ferguson (2006) has conceptualized as claims

for “membership” of a “global society,” something from which many of my research participants felt excluded. Repeatedly, I heard them criticize Cuba’s exceptionalism, pointing to enduring crisis and isolation, and complaining of how social relationships on the island were increasingly mediated by economic necessities and interests, with material considerations determining the choice of a friend or a partner, and “true love” becoming ever more elusive (see Daigle 2015; Fosado 2005; Lundgren 2011; Stout 2014; Simoni 2018a, 2018b). In contrast to the bleak prospects projected on life in Cuba, life “abroad” appeared as having some measure of “normality”: a normal life, a normal job, a normal family, a normal friendship, and love. Many among my Cuban interlocutors spent their days trying to interact with tourists, and it was also in relation to this foreign world that they constantly measured each other— judging, comparing, and assessing one another’s ability to understand and engage with foreigners on the same moral grounds, and with similar ideas about relationships. Given the dissatisfaction many expressed with everything Cuban, and the obsession with “abroad,” an assertion I sometimes heard was that a person was already—in terms of mind-set, at least—more “there” than “here.” Clearly, I had to take all of this into account.

Some people did get “there” after all, notably via marriage with a foreign partner met in tourism encounters, thus materializing what scholars have referred to as marriage migration (Fernandez 2013), sentiment-driven migration (García-Moreno 2011), or love migration (Roca Girona 2013). Each time I went back to Cuba, there was always someone who had left. People would say “se fué,” “està allá,” “en España . . . en Italia . . . en Holanda . . . en Inglaterra . . . en Canada” (“he/she is gone,” “he/she is there,” “In Spain . . . in Italy . . . in Holland . . . in England . . . in Canada”). To put it somewhat provocatively, my field site was partially emptying itself. Those left behind tended to talk with admiration, if a bit enviously, of the friends and acquaintances that had managed to leave. But with it also came speculation. Were they ready and prepared for living abroad? Was their partner a good match for them to build the life of which they had dreamed? What about finding a job and being able to send some help to family in Cuba? Were they coming back for visits, and what did this say of their life abroad? My interest in following up on these and other questions gradually led me to devise a new research project to explore the vicissitudes of some of these migratory trajectories.

Fieldwork in Spain enabled me to explore the tourism–migration nexus and to shed light on how international tourism and migration reconfigure, and are in turn reconfigured by, the intimate and economic lives of people crossing North–South divides. Frequenting Cuban migrants in the Spanish city of Barcelona for a total of four months since 2012, my research gradually morphed into a broader exploration of their experience and comparison of life in Spain and in Cuba. The anthropological fieldwork done in Cuba thus called for follow-up research outside Cuba.

SPAIN, *LA CRISIS*, AND THE REASSESSMENT OFMIGRATORY TRAJECTORIES

Spain became a favorite site for these migrations, and the statistics show it. Between 1990 and 2015, the Cuban population in Spain saw a steep increase, rising from 2,637 to more than 125,000 (García-Moreno 2011; Krull and Stubbs 2018a; Sánchez-Fuarros 2012). By the mid-2000s, Spain had become the most important destination for Cubans wanting to improve their lives and their economic conditions without losing the possibility of entering and exiting Cuba, as was the case for Cuban migrants to the United States (Martín 2008). Berg’s (2011, 40) groundbreaking work on Cuban migration to Spain and her insightful notion of “diasporic generation” distinguish three main “historically situated trajectories” linked to different experiences of leaving Cuba. She categorizes these as “the exiles,” “the children of the revolution,” and “the migrants” (40–41). The latter’s migration to Spain, Berg argues, dates mainly from the mid-1990s onward, and it is relatively diverse in terms of class and racial background, more akin to that of other Latina American “economic migrants” and resembling the category of “new Cubans” identified by Eckstein (2009) in Miami. Both Berg (2011) and Eckstein (2009; Eckstein and Berg 2009) point to a shift from a political to an economically driven migration after the 1990s crisis that struck Cuba after the collapse of the Soviet

Union. Krull and Stubbs (2018a, 2018b) have found similar patterns in Cuban migratory experience and diaspora formation in Canada and four Western European countries (Spain, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom), and this has compelled the researchers to call for "de-centering the study of Cuban migration" (2018a, 172) beyond the Cuban diaspora in the United States.

My Cuban interlocutors in Barcelona fit the "migrant" generation identified by Berg (2011). The question was how to do the fieldwork. Frequenting Cuban bars and restaurants there, I was progressively integrated into a loose group of Cuban migrants, but I knew that the group was not representative of the Cuban migrant population in all its diversity: middle-aged Cuban men who had migrated to Spain in the last ten to twenty years prevailed, many of whom frequented those spaces of "cubaneo" that Sánchez-Fuarros (2012) so aptly describes in *Cubaneando en Barcelona*. According to Sánchez-Fuarros, it is difficult to talk of a "Cuban community" in the Catalan capital, given its highly dispersed, fragmented, and barely cohesive nature (17). It was during festive and leisure events—such as a night out in a Cuban bar, a birthday celebration in someone's house, a festive happening for Christmas or New Year, or the commemoration of a *santo*—that I found lively conversations emerging on life in Spain, travel to Cuba, and changes in living conditions in the two countries.

My fieldwork among Cuban migrants in Barcelona took place at a time when migrants were feeling the effects of the 2008 financial crisis particularly hard. Between 2008 and 2013, unemployment in Spain went from 11 percent to 26 percent, but rates among immigrants reached 36.5 percent, to go by Valero-Matas, Coca, and Valero-Oteo's (2014) work. Several of my Cuban interlocutors were jobless or only working part time, often in precarious and badly paid positions. As I have argued elsewhere (Simoni 2016b), this specific political-economic conjuncture led to moral-economic critiques and arguments. Conversations focused quite easily on comparing Cuba and Spain, and current changes in both countries, countries often contrasted as *capitalismo* (Spain) versus *comunismo* (Cuba). My friend Saúl, who had lived for about ten years in Spain, summarized the situation of Cuban migrants there this way: "You know, it seems to me, anthropologically speaking, that many Cubans came to Spain to improve their material conditions [*mejorar su economía*], but then with the crisis, as the economy got screwed [*se jodió*], people are kind of rediscovering and seeking sentiments, they look for other Cubans, for things they are familiar with, for their stuff [*lo suyo*]."1 Saúl also complained about friends and acquaintances increasingly soliciting him, rather shamelessly he seemed to think, for inordinate favors and services. "There are people who no longer know how to separate business from friendship," he added, "who are confusing everything," and unduly mixing sentiment with interest and economic calculations. "Everything has a price: this is what capitalism has taught me," maintained Saúl. His critique of mixing "social" and "economic" relations operated both when informal social relationships threatened to corrupt "proper" economic functioning and when economic rationalities unduly interfered with friendship, love, and other intimate forms of relationality (see Simoni 2016b; Zelizer 2005). His critique resonated with the utopian ideals I had heard back in Cuba, cultivated among Cubans involved in relations with tourists who were seeking to leave the island and embraced the prospect of a more "normal" life abroad.

Manuel, a Cuban man in his late thirties I met briefly in Barcelona, also spoke of having learned and evolved, in economic terms, during his five years in Spain. After what he saw as a sort of apprenticeship in "capitalist economics," he now felt ready for "the next step"—by which he meant moving to Miami, where part of his family lived.2 For Manuel, exhausted by the climate of crisis in Spain, the jump from Cuba to Spain, and then to the United States, seemed the best one could do. In contrast was the ill-fated destiny of other Cubans who had been overcome by too radical a change when moving directly from Cuba to the United States—like his uncle, who had simply "melted" (*se fundió*) and ruined himself in Miami, and had to come back to Cuba empty-handed after a few months of ineptly chasing the American dream. Manuel saw Spain as a good middle ground. It was, in his eyes, a sort of capitalist periphery in which novices from Cuba could get their first taste of capitalist life, learning of its challenges and ruthlessness, and readying

themselves for its more radical incarnations in the United States. "Now I have seen other things [i.e., Spain], I know that other things exist besides Cuba and the US." Manuel admitted that he did not really like US "culture" and "values," but having learned "how to move" (*sé como moverme*), he felt ready to skillfully turn such values to his favor without succumbing to the illusions of easy riches in the land of plenty. Resonating with Manuel's narrative of economic "skilling" were other cases of remigration to so-called more-developed countries, or what Saúl called the "true Europe" (in contrast to Spain), such as Germany, the United Kingdom, or the Netherlands.

GOING BACK?

As I contemplate all this, I wonder what this has to do with contemporary Cuba and specifically with anthropology in or of Cuba. One could argue that it has little to do with Cuba, but I beg to differ. Faced with the hardship of living in Spain, some of the Cubans I met in Barcelona also reassessed and reevaluated the lives they had left back in Cuba and seriously contemplated the possibility of going back. For Wilson, a Cuban man in his early forties employed part time in the security sector in Barcelona, Spain was downright "useless" (*no sirve*) at the moment. With the crisis, he explained, things had gotten very bad, and he saw no prospect for improvement. Wilson had arrived in Spain twelve years earlier, following his Spanish lover, but they were now divorced. Back then, "life was good," he explained, but now one had to worry constantly about how to pay bills and earn a living. "You go to sleep at night and you are worried about what will happen tomorrow," he complained. "No way! I cannot cope with this [*Yo no puedo con eso*]." He then contrasted the situation with Cuba: "You see, because in Cuba, obviously you have many limits and shortages there, but well . . . the people, the friends, the family. I mean, you have security [*seguridad*]. Here, if you have a job it's okay, but otherwise what do you do? Here there is no safety. In what concerns Europe [*Lo que es Europa*], it's a big insecurity." Echoing Wilson's concerns was Yusniel, another Cuban man in his late twenties recently arrived from Cuba, who summed it up with irony: "Cuba is the best country in the world to be poor!" Yusniel's observation entailed a contrast between "poverty" in a capitalist context and in a communist context. It spoke to the impact of different redistributive economic systems and their implications for making a living.

Visits to the island were very important for the Cuban migrants I met in Barcelona. They assessed how things were evolving in Cuba, and it helped them determine whether going back was something worth considering. Hopes on this matter, in general, were not too high. Skeptical and cynical postures prevailed, the widespread assumption being that the Cuban "system" remained largely dysfunctional, and that in spite of highly mediatized narratives of change, things remained marred by the usual bureaucratic complications, arbitrariness, unaccountability, and corruption. One man told me, "The problem with Cuba is that one day you wake up, and they tell you that the law 'XYZ' has changed," making it very hazardous, for instance, to think of any serious investment. "Cuba is good, but just for a holiday," many argued when they spoke to me. In the last decade, the number of return visits to this Caribbean country has been growing steadily (Espino 2013; Perelló Cabrera 2012; 2016), so much so that Cuban migrants accounted in 2015 for more than 10 percent of the total of international visitors to Cuba (Perelló Cabrera 2016), second only to Canadian tourists. But even narratives of holiday experiences could easily give rise to heated debates and complaints, and were often marked by tragicomic tales emphasizing Cuba's exceptionalism and incongruities. Traveling back to Cuba was said to be much more expensive than going to other neighboring destinations, both because tourism services were more expensive (and worse) and because of the huge expectations of family and friends, including often distant acquaintances. This meant that returning empty handed was not an option. Another frequently raised complaint was that they got unfair and discriminatory treatment as a "Cuban living abroad" (*el Cubano que vive en el extranjero*). This made it impossible to be received as just "a tourist" or "an ordinary Cuban" (see Simoni 2015, 2019). This has implications for anthropological research. Whether one thinks of it as tourism, as return, or as "circular migration," as Krull

and Stubbs (2018a, 2018b) put it, we are talking about a level of mobility that matters and affects contemporary life in Cuba.

Such emerging forms of transnationalism are also highlighted by Bastian (2018, 141), who singles out "circular migrants" as one of "three new social groups that have gained importance in Havana as a result of recent policy changes," alongside "employers and employees" and "(satisfied) consumer-citizens." Economic reforms encouraging private enterprise and the new migratory law3 facilitating exits and returns (Mart′ınez-Perez and Zaldivar-Valdes 2015) are among the key elements said to explain the increase in migrants' returns and their circulation. Some of my interlocutors in Spain were eager to test the potential of such transformations, exploring business opportunities, for instance, that could help them have a "good life" in Cuba or at least a better one than they had in Spain. My latest research project, started in February 2018,4 looks at such movements back to Cuba.

My preliminary findings hint at the varied nature of these trajectories: from the more desperate ones driven by material destitution and suffering in Spain to the more privileged economic investments in a country deemed "still virgin" and where "everything still needs to be done"—as some put it—in terms of developing and capitalizing on private enterprise. For Oskar, a Cuban migrant in his mid-fifties, Spain was the image of an old country in decline. Having married and lived there for more than twenty years, he now saw Cuba as the up-and-coming place to be, to invest in, and to start something. The activities I saw Cuban returnees like him focus on were mainly in the tourism and leisure sectors, notably the restaurant and hospitality industries, with bed and breakfasts (*casas particulares*) and restaurants (*paladares*) as key business ventures.

In many cases, it was the assessment of the "economic" situation in Spain as grim that mattered the most, combined with a more "cultural" and "societal" critique. Cuba, by contrast, was seen as the place of family, friends, social solidarity, warmth, cheerfulness, and good parties—a place where no one would leave you derelict and alone on the street, unlike what some Cuban migrants reported had happened to them or others in Barcelona. Wilson and others like him had lost faith in any idea of economic recovery and success. For them, no economic "normal" appeared on the horizon. Criticizing "the economy" at large, whether "communist" or "capitalist," they emphasized instead the importance of "social" and "cultural" values and pursuits, in which they themselves allegedly excelled, as exemplified by an idealized "Cuban way" of upbeat, supportive, and fun-loving people. "What's important is not business or entrepreneurship, what matters is life, is love," a Cuban migrant in his fifties told me. Disillusioned with Spain, he was considering going back to live in Cuba, and he eventually did the following year.

What happened once he was there, and how initial hopes and aspirations compare with the everyday realities of return, are things that deserve further anthropological exploration. My current research addresses this. Attentive to the dialectics between moral and political economies (Narotzky and Besnier 2014; Simoni 2016b), I seek to uncover changes in people's values and aspirations as a result of their migratory trajectories and the transformations in their living conditions. Moving beyond taken-for-granted views of crisis, migration, and their effects, it is the occurrences, specificities, and directionalities of such changes, including their broader societal effects on both sides of the Atlantic, that become matters of empirical investigation and renewed anthropological theorizing.

NOTES

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1. All the direct quotes from research participants have been translated into English by the author. Their personal names and certain details of their narratives have been changed to protect their anonymity.
2. Bastian (2018, 149) has recently written of Cuban-turned-Spanish citizens using their Spanish passports to move to the United States.
3. Decreto-Ley No. 302. *Gaceta Oficial de la Republica de Cuba* 44, 16.10.2012.
4. The project, sponsored by the European Research Council (ERC) and titled "Returning to a Better Place: The (Re)assessment of the 'Good Life' in Times of Crisis," is empirically grounded in the comparative study of imaginaries and experiences of return of Ecuadorian and Cuban men and women who migrated to Spain and envisage/carry out the project of going back to their countries of origin (Ecuador and Cuba respectively, see graduateinstitute.ch/research-centres/global-migration-centre/returning-better-place-reassessment-good-life-times-crisis). In this project, I am partnering with Jérémie Voirol, who is focusing on Ecuadorian returnees, and Elise Hjalmarson, whose research explores the aspirations and return projects of Ecuadorian and Cuban migrants in Spain. The results presented here reflect my views only, and the ERC is not responsible for any use that may be made of them.

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