From ethnographers to tourists and back again
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Résumé : Dans cet article, nous discutons de la question du positionnement des ethnographes dans la recherche anthropologique sur le tourisme, et des implications plus larges de celui-ci sur la collecte et l’interprétation des données de terrain. Nos réflexions proviennent de recherches menées dans deux contextes touristiques différents, à savoir à la fois d’une observation participante détaillée des rencontres informelles entre locaux et touristes à Cuba, et d’une recherche plus ponctuelle et intermittente portant sur un tournoi de football populaire qui se déroule sur deux jours chaque année au Royaume-Uni. Notre discussion porte d’abord sur la façon dont chacun de nous a d’abord été catégorisé par les personnes sur lesquelles portait notre recherche, et ensuite sur les dynamiques et les tensions qui ont émergé de nos tentatives pour négocier ces positions assignées. Nous analysons les sortes de relations que nous avons pu établir avec nos informateurs, et comment ces relations nous ont donné accès à des réalités et des interprétations différentes. Nous discutons enfin la façon dont ces questions ont influencé nos recherches, tout en signalant les questions éthiques soulevées par nos rencontres sur nos terrains respectifs.

Mots-clés : tourisme, ethnographie, positionnement, réciprocité, obligations concurrentes.

Abstract: In this article we discuss the positioning of ethnographers in anthropological research on tourism, and the wider implications in terms of meaningful collection and interpretation of fieldwork data. Our reflections emerge from researches in two different touristic contexts: from detailed, enduring participant observation of informal encounters between locals and tourists in Cuba, to the intermittent, snap-shot participant observation at a mass participation football game held over two days each year in the UK. The focus of our discussion will be on the ways in which we were both primarily framed by the subjects of our research, and on the dynamics and subsequent tensions arising out of attempts to breach and negotiate these tropes, to manoeuvre between shifting standpoints and subjectivities. We consider the kinds of relationships we could establish with our informants and how these (often transient) relationships give us access to differing realities and interpretations. We discuss how these issues restrained/enabled our research, while also raising some ethical dilemmas related to covertness/overtness, reciprocity, and competing obligations towards our informants.

Key words: tourism, ethnography, positioning, reciprocity, competing obligations.
Anthropological debates on reflexivity and the positioning of the researcher have highlighted the challenges that can arise during fieldwork in terms of interpretations of the researcher by the researched, competing obligations towards informants, and the various problematic negotiations involved in trying to shift perspectives and subjectivities (Hume and Mulcock 2004; Narayan 1993). In this respect, Narayan argues that: “The loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux” (Narayan 1993: 671). Accordingly, Narayan encourages us to acknowledge shifts in relationships rather than to present them as either dichotomously distant or close, and by doing so anthropological interpretations can more closely reflect the complexities of lived interaction. Following these suggestions, this article discusses various issues arising out of a comparative reflection on the shifting positions of ethnographers investigating tourism. There is a need within ethnographic research on tourism to engage with the potential challenges related to positioning issues, and we hope to give insights on these matters through the perspectives offered by our investigations in two very different ethnographic research contexts: a ‘tourist/ethnographer’ in Cuba and a ‘local returning as ethnographer’ to study a festival in his home town. These two research contexts appear initially to be diametrically opposed. In the case of Cuba, there are self-evident differences in culture and disposition between the local people and tourists, making a tourist-local encounter instantly visible, whereas in Ashbourne, during the context of a mass participation football game, cultural differences between local insiders, outsiders or tourists are far less clear. Notwithstanding these differences, the research contexts were found to be connected due to their focus on highly mobile subjects, interactions, and events which are characterised as relating to tourism. Thereby, we are able to illustrate some common themes and issues which affected both researchers in their reflections of positionalities in the field. Drawing out similarities and challenges in these two diverse contexts, our aim is to stimulate debates on the positioning of ethnographers and on the qualities of ethnographic relationships in tourism research. Also we aim to tease out complexities of interactions between researchers and their interlocutors within situated ethnographic contexts, to demonstrate how ethnographic research in tourism can be affected by positional issues and thus to contribute to wider methodological reflections in the anthropology of tourism.

Anthropology, tourism research, and the positioning of ethnographers

While reflecting on positioning issues and challenges in the realm of tourism research, among the first things to be considered is that these issues may become even more complex when dealing with encounters in ‘borderzones’, when confronted with

1. According to Bruner, the touristic borderzone, “a zone of interaction between natives, tourists, and ethnographers” (Bruner 1996: 177), “is a creative space, a site for the invention of culture on a massive scale, a festive liberated zone, one that anthropology should investigate, not denigrate” (Bruner 1996: 159).
very different roles (such as foreign tourist/member of the visited population), and when manipulations and subterfuges are daily at stake (as it is often the case in tourists’ encounters, see the Cuban case). Indeed, the shifting positioning of ethnographers might become increasingly necessary and striking while studying displacement, borderzones, or what Lavie and Swedenburg call ‘third time-space’ (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996: 13-18). As these authors put it: “Studying third time-spaces requires an ongoing negotiation and renegotiation of positionalities, rather than a one-time journey into a faraway wilderness” (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996: 20). But such (re)negotiations of positionalities can also present several challenges, as we show in this article, challenges that deserve our attention since they may help us in understanding our research subjects.

We consider here that a discussion of our sticky/shifting positions and subjectivities, helps not only to situate our vantage point and qualify our data, but also give revealing insights on relational processes of categorization, typification and manipulation that are central for our study. A point of departure for our reflections, are the positions ascribed to us by the subjects of our research, and its implications for ethnography. Following Parkin, we recognise that “a society not only collaborates in the production of a particular type of ethnographic writing, it also shapes the possible movements through fieldwork which, at best, can only be negotiated by the fieldworker” (Parkin 2000: 267). Similarly, Malcolm Crick has pointed out how “the anthropological self is significantly shaped by the interests, attitudes and understandings of the other. Any question about the anthropological identity clearly needs to take into account this vulnerability of the self to the semantics of the other” (Crick 1995: 216). In this respect, anthropologists working on tourism such as Crick and Michel, have pointed out how encompassing and resilient the identification of any foreigner as tourist can become in some tourist destinations, making it very hard to overcome such a framing. Michel considers that an ethnologist, except denying its identity and being accepted with another, is first of all a visitor, a foreign tourist (Michel 1998). He can certainly be, or more likely become something else, but he remains first of all a passer by – with all the inconveniences that this supposes – and an individual that is courted, exploited, feared, informed, etc. (Michel 1998). As is shown in this article, this is not the case when one ‘goes back’ to do research ‘at home’. In such occasions, other positions may be ascribed and become available to researchers, and these positions – albeit not necessarily more privileged or less challenging for the ethnographer – are often deployed in direct opposition and against that of tourist/outside.

Such positions are also redefined within the spatial settings of the locales, as either tourist destination or through the transformation of everyday space into a festival site. MacCannell’s (1973) analysis of the arrangements of tourist settings – which he developed from the work of Goffman – is potentially useful here as it helps to understand how the scope of tourist-host interactions are limited and mediated by the arrangements of tourist sites which cast and define the roles and expectations of both sets of protagonists therein.

2. For an account of similar complexities while doing research on transnational spaces, see the reflections of Stoller on his fieldwork in Harlem, and how it required epistemological diversity and flexibility (Stoller 2002).

3. See also Waldren, 1996, on the deployments and uses of the notions of insider/outsider in the context of tourism in Mallorca, Spain.
Such arrangements of space thwart tourist’s abilities to break through the veneer of interaction possibilities to reach ‘truly’ meaningful and ‘authentic’ experiences. Although MacCannell’s early thesis has been refined and developed within the sociology of tourism by many researchers, it still resonates since the spatial settings remain crucial to defining the positionality issues we discuss, even in the context of Ashbourne where geographic knowledge of place-names and routes for the progression of play of the game shape and determine the roles of tourists (outsiders) and locals. Despite the arrangements of space, a further critical concept at work in our analysis is the fact that the situated interactions we describe are also fundamentally shaped by these roles.

Throughout this article, differences appear in the processes of positionings and of establishing relationships with informants which can be related to doing ethnographies of tourism ‘at home’ – the Ashbourne case – as opposed to ‘abroad’ – the Cuban case. But our aim is also to move beyond such reifying dichotomies, to show commonalities in the challenges we both faced. Narayan has argued “against the fixity of a distinction between “native” and “non-native” anthropologists” (Narayan 1993: 671). Here we build on this argument and develop it further. Indeed, while we question the taken for granted-ness of dichotomies such as native/non-native or insider/outside, we are also ready to recognise their emergence in the field, as the potential product of our identifications by informants. Furthermore, we also highlight our reciprocal efforts to negotiate and breach these positions, especially since we felt they could limit our insights. Goodman argues that “as an ambiguous and temporary outsider, the anthropologist is able to avoid total identification with any particular group and hence is free to move between them and to perceive the field setting from a variety of angles” (Goodman 2000: 162). This may be contrasted with ‘insiders’ getting ‘stuck’ in the groups they are/were part of, and thereby being unable to connect and reach out to a wider range of informants, to mobilize an ampler range of identifications and align with multiple others (Harrington 2003). But in this article we show how the ethnographer as ‘outsider’ can also ‘get stuck’ and be ‘totally identified’ with a pre-existing group – namely ‘tourists’ visiting Cuba. Once this is recognised, what is important to consider are the possibilities to manoeuvre and shift from such identifications. As we show, this in turn depends on their affective and instrumental implications both for ourselves and our informants, and on the availability of opportunities to redefine relationships. Regarding such opportunities, it appears that the highly mobile nature of our research subjects limits the possibilities to ‘transmute relationships’ (Narayan 1993: 679) and ‘invent new ones’ (Monsutti 2007: 34). Approached from this angle, the differences between doing ethnographic research on tourism ‘at home’ and ‘abroad’ subsume, and the similarities between our cases can be fruitfully highlighted and discussed. Among them, the fact that as much as our positions could be hard to renegotiate, so too were the ‘competing obligations’ (Grills 1998:13) we felt towards our research and our relationships with informants. As we show, it can be difficult when researching tourism to occupy those productive interstitial spaces which can be so useful once “the researcher is seeking to document and understand a configuration of conflicting perspectives” (Forsey 2004: 66). The feeling of being pulled between competing agendas

4. It may be useful to recall here how Goffman linked the ‘contextual’ (i.e. situated, located) nature of social life to the types of social roles, or ‘identities’ (Goffman 1959) which people developed.
could generate awkward moments, and lead to difficult decisions on ‘which side to take’ and ‘which interests to support’. We consider that being explicit and accounting for these situations of discomfort, unpacking their rationales and our lines of action, can in turn illuminate crucial tensions that characterize our research subject and practice. Such tensions may lead to discuss the more general issue of advocacy in studies of tourism. As to which side should ethnographers take when confronted with competing obligations, and the suggestion that we should support those with ‘least power’ (Sanders in Grills 1998: 14), we can follow Grills when he argues that: “The distinction between those with power and those without, those who are in the right or wrong, and those with whom we side and those whom we oppose, however, tells us more about the commitments and the obligations held by the researcher than about some necessary qualities found in the field setting” (Grills 1998:14). But we may also reformulate Grills’ remarks once we consider that such commitments and obligations contribute to shape, in a relational way, the ‘field setting’ itself, and can therefore become hardly distinguishable from it. This may be particularly significant in our cases, as testified by the resilience of our identifications – themselves crucial ingredients constitutive of the research contexts – and our limited opportunities to negotiate and achieve new ‘interstitial’ positionings.

In the following sections, after a brief presentation of our research contexts, we focus on the ways in which we were both primarily framed by the subjects of our investigation, and on the dynamics arising out of attempts to breach and negotiate these tropes, to manoeuvre between shifting standpoints and subjectivities. We consider the kinds of relationships we could establish with our informants and how these (often transient) relationships give us access to differing realities and interpretations. We discuss how these issues restrained/enabled our research, while also raising some ethical dilemmas related to covertness/overtness, reciprocity, and competing obligations towards our informants. In the conclusion, we develop on some of the crucial issues that emerge from the comparison of our different ethnographies of tourism.

Two research contexts described

Informal encounters in the realm of tourism in Cuba

The first research context (that of Valerio Simoni) is driven by a PhD investigation into informal encounters between foreign tourists and members of the local population in Cuba. Tourism has boomed in Cuba since the early 1990s, when – following the economic crises that resulted from the collapse of the Soviet Union – the Cuban government saw in the development of tourism a possibility to generate hard currency in relatively short time (Resolución económica del V congreso del PCC, 1997, quoted in Argyriadis 2005: 31). As tourists flock to Cuba (their numbers rose from 340 000 in 1990 to more than two millions in 2004), the Cuban authorities try to control and channel the flow of visitors, particularly by hindering, obstructing, and potentially penalizing non-
offi  cial contacts between Cubans and foreigners. Such policies constitute an attempt to regulate and frame interactions between tourists and members of the local population, and generate a divide between formal and informal social relations. The exploratory notion of ‘informal encounter’ (Simoni 2008) draws attention to the implications of such divide, and encourages researchers to study issues such as ‘tourism harassment’, ‘instrumental relationships’, or ‘disinterested friendship’ by following – from the perspectives of the various protagonists involved – the processes that lead to their emergence, negotiation and eventual crystallization. To illustrate with a few examples what may generate informal encounters, I can mention that in Cuba many people were bypassing the control of the authorities while actively trying to befriend tourists, offering their services as guides or as companions, selling sex, private ‘illegal’ taxis, accommodation and food. Tourists in Cuba also actively gave shape to these informal relations as they tried to get in touch with the locals and offer help to them, to buy things more cheaply, to follow alternative paths, to listen to narratives of Cubans everyday lives or to get access to products and services formally unavailable (sex and drugs mainly). Concerning the ways in which the notion of informal encounter translates in Cuba, the terms jinetero/a (from the Spanish jinete, literally horseman, rider) and jineterismo (the activities of the jinetero/a) become particularly signifi  cant, as they circulate widely when talking about encounters with tourists and evoke notions of tourists’ hustling and prostitution – of Cubans ‘riding’ the tourists. Nevertheless, disputes are frequent among Cubans and tourists concerning who is a jinetero/a, making it important to consider how this elusive, ambiguous terms and often stigmatizing categories can be deployed and contested in
different situations (Simoni 2008, forthcoming). The ethnographic data on which Valerio relies in the following sections are drawn from fieldwork carried out in Cuba in February, August-September 2005, and November-March 2006-2007, as part of his PhD. It was as a tourist and researcher, as a half-Swiss/half-Spanish outsider and potential ‘prey’ of jineteros/as, that Valerio first went to Cuba. During the time spent in the island, he gathered data through participant observation and conversations both with tourists and Cubans/jineteros in the tourist poles of Havana (the capital), Viñales (a rural village), and Playas del Este (a beach resort on the East of the capital).

Ashbourne Royal Shrovetide Football game

The second research context (that of Scott McCabe) is an investigation into how tourism and modernity impacts on an historic sporting football festival in Ashbourne, Derbyshire in the UK. Ashbourne is a small town nestled in a valley and which is divided into two by a small river, the Henmore. It forms what is called the ‘Gateway to the Peaks’ due to its position on one of the main link roads in the Peak District National Park, which is one of the most visited National Parks in the world with around 26 million visitors each year (McCabe 2000). The town has developed and modernised over the last 30 years into an economy which thrives on tourism. Despite the game itself being played outside the main tourist season, it is still a popular tourist attraction due to the unique characteristics of the game and widespread international media coverage (McCabe 2006). The game is played on Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday, dates which are tied to the Christian Calendar of Easter, and it is thought that the game has been in existence for at least 300 years. Players born on either side of the river traditionally form the two sides, the Upp’ards are born North of the river and Down’ards consisting of people born on the Southern side. The game is a ‘mass participation’ game, whereby there are few rules, it is played in the streets and fields around the town, and as such, people move freely through the town, into and out of the play of the game even though for long periods of time the play is static in and around the streets and lanes of the town. The ‘goals’ consist of two mill-posts which are embedded into the river bank near the site of two mills at either end of the town, three miles apart and so the ‘field’ of the game is widespread. Since the game is played in winter, and since it provides the focal point of festivity for the people of the town and surrounding villages, there is also a great amount of socialising in all the town’s many pubs, bars, Hotels and restaurants. Thus, the research context is extremely fluid and so informal ethnographic methods always seemed the most appropriate way to get a better understanding of the perspectives of ordinary people, both locals and tourists. Scott’s interest in this game stems from the fact that he was born and raised in Ashbourne and grew up following the game, playing it for a while until his work prevented it, and after he moved out of the town he always made a point of returning for the game each year, and so his interest in it is more than ‘strictly anthropological’. He began making ethnographic reflections of the games in 2001 and has continued every year to collect historical details, brief interviews with key players and field notes and diaries (apart from in 2003 when he was travelling abroad).

9. To try translate the ambiguities and controversies surrounding the term jinetero/a, without straightforwardly imposing this label to people, I use in this article the expression Cuban/jinetero – the sign ‘/’ indicating both a potential identification and a disjuncture.
Situating researchers and shaping relationships in tourism ethnographies

Positioning frames

During the fieldwork in Cuba, Valerio usually got access to new situations from the vague position of tourist. That is, both Cubans/jineteros and tourists with whom he interacted, at their first encounter – and before he had any chance to inform them about the research purpose of his stay – would generally start by considering him a tourist. In this respect, Cubans/jineteros in particular, manifested great skills in decoding and profiling tourists (Simoni 2008). The way tourists dressed, the locations they frequented, their movements and bodily language, and most importantly the language they spoke (including intonations and accents) were among the key elements that Cubans/jineteros considered while identifying and classifying tourists. Most of the times, Valerio would be initially included in this category – becoming for his interlocutors one of the many foreigners visiting Cuba. A significant consequence of this was that after about seven months spent on the island, he could easily retrace and recognise Cubans/jineteros’ ways of approaching tourists of his kind – their ‘opening’ (entrada) as they called it. The recollection of this kind of information constitutes a valuable part of his data – that he could gather under the umbrella ‘what happened to me-tourists’. In spite of their potential diversity, and of the interest they had for his research, Cubans/jineteros initial (and easily accessible) ‘tourist oriented’ talks and performances limited Valerio’s access to other modes of conversation, where other subject could be discussed and reflected upon. Therefore, he often felt there was a need to negotiate and shift his position, ‘back again’ to ethnographer, to singularize his persona and distinguish himself from tourists, to reformulate his connections and attachments with Cubans/jineteros. Apart from Valerio’s interest in shifting position in order to gather other kinds of information, he also wished to talk openly with people about the purpose of his stay in Cuba, namely ethnographic fieldwork for his research, and therefore the need to specify and achieve a non – at least non only – tourist subjectivity. In spite of his explanations, these positional shifts were most often far from being smooth, straightforward, or long lasting. Notably, his efforts to change his identification from tourist to researcher, seemed often to get unnoticed and completely neglected, or easily forgotten by many Cubans/jineteros, to whom Valerio thinks he remained essentially a foreign visitor spending some time in their country (see Crick 1995 and Michel 1998) – a yuma (as foreigners could be called in Cuba).

As opposed to Cuba, Ashbourne is not an international tourist destination where foreigners or outsiders are easily distinguishable, and the positioning issues are quite distinct and yet some similarities are evident. During the game it was easy for Scott to stop and chat to people who are following proceedings. The spectacle of the game and the corruption of spatial norms, what Bahktin called a ‘Chronotope’ (1981) facilitated the emergence of informal interactions, particularly as talking about the game and what had happened previously or what was currently happening is accepted and the occasion of the game allowed for an openness of possibilities of encounter. Similarly, in the pubs and bars, people are in expectant mood, appearing free from normal social constraints and thus open and friendly. In these circumstances it is not clear how people would position Scott since the research at these points of interaction was covert, fleeting and sporadic and he was likely to appear as just another visitor to the games. It was not necessary or incumbent on him to reveal his position as researcher in these contexts. However,
as an ex-Ashbournian, Scott was recognised by many people who, like him returned to Ashbourne every year for the games, or who have remained living in and around the town and are ‘local’ people and so in these occasions it was necessary to position himself accordingly. A great many of the encounters made during the research would include these interactions. Many of the more meaningful encounters with old friends would result in Scott revealing the ‘other’ position as ethnographer, and the other purpose of his visit to the game and would normally result in useful data, informing reflections on the changing character of the game and how people perceived their identities. But this created a series of tensions for him in how he felt he was being positioned by his old friends and local acquaintances and led to an adjustment in how he positioned himself in some interaction circumstances.

In Cuba, Valerio’s exchanges with Cubans/jineteros could also sometimes lead to a reformulation of their relation as being distinct from a ‘typical’ tourist-Cuban one. In this respect, it is important to consider how in the course of informal encounters the terms ‘tourist’ or ‘touristy’ often assumed a rather negative connotation (see again MacCannell 1973), according to which ‘typical tourists’ were doomed to see only the surface of Cuba, the Goffmanian ‘front-stage’ (1959), the Cuba of tourism brochures and governmental propaganda. As opposed to this, Cubans/jineteros would promise tourists guidance and information that would grant them access to the ‘real’ Cuba, the ‘back-stage’, and encouraged visitors to follow them in order to get ‘off the beaten track’ (Simoni 2008, 2008a). The predisposition to create a ‘unique’ relationship and adapt to various tourists’ agendas manifested by some Cubans/jineteros, allowed Valerio in few occasions to get them interested in his research. By granting him researchers’ status – at least for a while – these Cubans/jineteros would tell him some stories about tourism and their encounters with tourists. In these cases, their rationale seemed to be the following: ‘we can give foreigners what they want, so if you want stories related to tourist-Cuban encounters, we can provide you that’. Albeit this fruitful dynamic was generated only in certain occasion, and often only for a certain lapse of time, it led in few cases to a further opening up, disclosure of interests, and reformulation of relationships, and to the establishment of particular friendships characterized by feelings of reciprocal trust and mutuality. Alternatively, a more standardized tourist-Cuban/jinetero relation could take over again, one in which suspects of hidden agendas, instrumentality, and deceptive self-presentation would come to the fore. Among the other positions that Valerio could achieve while engaging with Cubans/jineteros (at least ironically) was that of hustler, of jinetero, which further reveals the strength of jineterismo as prevalent frame in which Cubans/ jineteros viewed relationships with tourist10. Some of his Cuban/jinetero acquaintances for instance, as he told them he would go around and try to meet some tourists, do some fieldwork, joked about him being a jinetero, mobilizing a script according to which ‘once you actively try to meet tourists, then you must be a jinetero’. In an even smarter way, someone referred to his activities as jineterismo informacional, that is, doing jineterismo in order to gather information.

10. A parallel is here possible with Venkatesh remarks on the importance of ‘hustling’ as a governing principle shaping and mediating social relations in an American ghetto (Venkatesh 2002: 96).
In Ashbourne, the research never intended to uncover the informal organisation of the game itself and Scott felt positioning barriers in attempting to interview players in a more formal way. Information about the game structures, its ‘serious’ local players who ensure the game is played out and constructed as ‘our’ local game by many insiders, was an important topic with informants. However, this also reveals how difficult it was for him to engage with those people playing the game in a ‘serious’ way and as he is known to many of them meant that he was potentially positioned as an ‘insider’ local person (and therefore also an ‘outsider’ – person belonging to the other team – by certain members who were able to position him as a member of the opposing team, an ‘Upp’ard’). Here, in a manner comparable to how the positions of tourists or jinetero were ascribed to Valerio, it is the roles of ‘insider’, and more precisely of ‘Upp’ard’, that show their immediacy and resilience, and that could limit other forms of engagements and interstitial positionings. In more recent years, new constraints have impacted on Scott’s research, which similarly tend to get him stuck in certain positions and rise challenges for his research. More formal networks of old friends made around the universal availability of mobile phones, who reliably establish contact prior to the game which formalises and adds structure to an intended free-flowing attempt to engage with as wide a range of people as possible. This limits the amount of independence felt and impacts upon the available time to produce further probing reflections. The informal way in which Scott sometimes position what he is doing openly as research and at other times, less openly, and yet ostensibly not doing anything differently in the perspectives of the ‘friends/informants’ was clearly an issue which created guilt and a difficulty in making a legitimate claim as a ‘researcher’. Of course, these reflections continue, and add to the accumulation of interpretations on the game and increasingly on Scott’s ephemeral position as a researcher, local, and tourist all in one. His experience of a ‘trouble’ differentiating his position in some encounters, working through serendipitous interactions with different people over many years within a very concentrated time and a spatial context which is difficult to manage, organise and ‘arrange’. But also, Scott is aware that potentially at least he is being positioned by them, as Scott, the person they knew from school, or the husband or the father or the friend of someone, or the researcher, or lecturer, or the guy that used to work in the local bar. These frames may be more precisely defined than ‘tourist’ or ‘ethnographer’ which might limit the possibilities for deep insights from informants.

Valerio’s potential identification with jineteros raises the question of his relationships with tourists, and notably the sort of access he had to them. First of all, as a foreigner, Valerio was granted a far more advantageous proximity to other tourists that most Cubans could have, since he had easy access to tourism installations and had not to worry about police questionings or accusations of jineterismo while engaging with other foreigners. Nevertheless, in spite of these crucial advantages, he often felt he was lacking Cubans’ know-how, experiences, sociability, or economic needs that so often constituted a pretext and legitimized their approaches to tourists and the building of relations with them. That was not the case for Scott, who could rely on and display his insiders’ status to get in touch with tourists in order to give them some information and advice on the game. More generally, this raises the issue of the reciprocity circulating in the relationships between ethnographer and informants.
Negotiating engagement and reciprocity

In the Ashbourne case, people are continually moving into and out of the scene of the play, and thus a difficulty arises in extending and developing long and meaningful interaction with people within the context of the game. Their focus is on the game not on the researcher, the frame conditions, make it almost impossible to follow some lines of inquiry but open up other, more fluid and flexible means of interpretation and reflection. Whilst ostensibly ‘just following’ the play of the game Scott was often asked what was happening, who was winning, where the ball was currently and indeed many of the more informal and chance interaction opportunities arise through such openings. Similarly, in these circumstances there are endless possible fleeting encounters some of which could lead to fruitful conversations but these are limited to the context of watching the game which is always on the move. In these interactions, Scott felt no sense of guilt and indeed could often find an opportunity to position himself as an ‘insider’ local person with specific local knowledge about the game and the spatial configuration of the town and its lanes, alley, paths and fields. In these circumstances it was easy to ask questions about these people, who they were and where they were from and what they thought about the game and some other aspects of their being here at the game. This led to similar benefits emerging out of a sense of reciprocity with research informants.

In the case of Valerio’s research, Cubans/jineteros also tended to be very mobile subjects, whose sites and times of activity could constantly change as they followed diverse agendas and tactics to engage with tourists. Tourists in Cuba were busy too – from visiting places to ‘total relaxation’ on the beach – and their presence in any given place tended to be very transient. Given the transience of tourists and the potentially instrumental character of Cubans/jineteros engagements with foreigners, a crucial question that arose for Valerio was how to make his presence pleasant and interesting enough for them to be willing to spend some time in his company, and not perceive him as an annoyance, and indiscriminate presence hampering or distracting them from their daily business (particularly for Cubans/jineteros), and their time-constrained activities (especially for tourists).

In the contexts of Scott’s conversations with old friends and ex-Ashburnian interlopers like himself, his feelings were more complex than when dealing with tourists. Initially since they could all share certain tacit knowledge and understandings about the game and the issues surrounding how it has impacted on them as people and our perceptions of the town and the community identity, the conversations were free from any feelings of obligation, but subsequently, over the years, there are different relationships emerging and a risk in being positioned as an annoyance. This risk, or fear on Scott’s part has impacted upon many interactions and the ability for him to press and push the research into new areas with these informants. Scott feels as though there is little he is bringing to them in terms of reciprocity which marks these interactions as different that those of Valerio, where pecuniary or other resources can mitigate to formalise the relationships better. People coming into the dialogue with long-held assumptions and characterisations about the identification of the researcher and the purpose of the meeting/interaction may seriously impact upon the ability of the researcher to develop reciprocal measures.

In terms of the things that Valerio had to offer to tourists, and in spite of not being a ‘local’ himself, they mainly got translated in his knowledge of Cuba and tourism in this country, in tips and advice that he could give assuming the advantageous position of a researcher, someone who had spent much time there, an expert (similar to Scott
here), or at least an experienced traveller. In this respect, not being a Cuban could even turn to his favour with those tourists who got sceptical about Cubans/jineteros efforts to socialize, as they thought they were essentially motivated by economic interests – a major difference here with Scott’s research context, in which economic asymmetries play a much less important role. People in this tourist mood – scepticism, tiredness of Cubans/jineteros’ advances – could get far more open and relaxed while talking with Valerio, a tourist fellow/researcher. In the case of Valerio’s reciprocity towards Cubans/jineteros, the possession of hard currency remained probably for most of them one of his salient features and resources. Many of the relationships Valerio had with Cubans who lived in close contact with the world of jineterismo were ridden with this ambiguity. Besides immediate economic considerations, relationships with a yuma could also be interesting for Cubans/jineteros for other reasons. Among these: the fact of practicing other languages; of learning new things and mastering new topics for discussion (and therefore also crafting new resources that would be useful when dealing with other tourists); or the use of tourists to facilitate access and relationships with other tourists. In the latter case, the task Valerio and other foreigners could then accomplish (and someone explicitly told him about the reflexive use of this tactic) was similar to that of a guarantor, ‘the very good foreign friend they knew from long ago’, and which could reassure sceptical tourists about the good reputation and intentions of the Cubans/jineteros at stake. Another way Valerio could reciprocate Cubans/jineteros was through a more active involvement in their own activities, acting explicitly as a collaborator, as someone who could direct other tourists towards them, helping them to get to know other foreigners, and even arranging some deals on their behalf. But here comes another crucial question, related to Valerio’s positioning and its’ potential implications: that of the limits of his engagement and his involvement in Cubans/jineteros’ agendas and in tourists’ ones – what we might also refer to as competing obligations.

Competing Obligations

Concerning Valerio’s involvement in Cubans/jineteros agendas, he always tried not to reach the limit of being perceived as a jinetero himself, as his aim was not to make money taking advantage of tourists, and he didn’t want to enter in a kind of competition for tourists with other Cuban/jineteros, nor give them this impression. When wanting to collaborate with Cubans/jineteros, Valerio was in the uncomfortable position of having to decide with whom, since many of the people he got to know were engaged in similar kinds of activities. In this respect, he often tried to share the benefits of his collaboration with a wide range of Cuban/jinetero acquaintances, promoting the idea that things should be redistributed among many, and not monopolized by one (‘hay que repartir’, ‘there must be sharing’, was a typically Cuban expression that he adopted for this purpose several times). Little was confronted with similar dilemmas in the course of his fieldwork in Guatemala, as he perceived the risks involved in being affiliated “with only a few families”, as “others would have shut me out of their homes and lives” (Little 2004: 30). A parallel can also be traced with Kelly’s considerations on her fieldwork among prostitutes in Mexico, as she rises some challenges of doing research “in a highly conflictual environment with extreme factionalism and shifting loyalties among and between Zone workers (the name of the brothel) and staff” (Kelly 2004: 3-4). For Kelly “Fieldwork in the zone required delicacy and a balance of neutrality and engagement” (Kelly 2004: 4). Researching the world of
jineterismo, Valerio could also perceive factionalisms and a sense of competitiveness in the struggle to get tourists and establish exclusive relationships with them. Occasionally, he himself became the object of controversy as two Cubans/jineteros argued about each other’s privileged right to stay with him. Controversies over ‘property rights’ on yumas – and Cubans/jineteros could use expressions such as ‘el es mio, esos son mios’ ‘he is mine, those are mine’ – became a serious issue in several occasions, revealing tensions, competitiveness, and factionalisms, and putting tourists and Valerio in an awkward position, as they tried to re-define and clarify their attachments. Besides these challenges of his relationships with Cubans/jineteros, there was also the issue of the obligations Valerio felt towards his tourist fellows. How should he react for instance, if he thought that the cigar deal suggested by a Cuban/jinetero to tourists in his company was not good? Whose side should he have taken? Advocacy loomed upon Valerio in these cases, while he hoped that the protagonists of the deal would understand his reluctance to clearly take any side, accepting his tentative interstitial positioning, and granting him at least a sort of ‘balanced mediator’ status. Decisions on how he should manage and position himself in these awkward situations were made on the spot, as he was torn between the responsibility he felt towards tourists and his relationship with Cubans/jineteros. Valerio was often afraid of saying something that would possibly ruin Cubans/jineteros agenda, as he thought that later – when tourists left, while he stayed – he could have to face negative consequences of this. His reputation among Cubans/jineteros was at stake, and rumours could quickly spread about him impeaching their business by giving tourists bad advice, and even trying to set his own business with them. These were among the challenges and competing obligations he had to face while doing ethnography among and between potentially conflicting actors.

For Scott, albeit he is not dealing with such factionalisms or conflicting actors (besides perhaps the divide between Upp’ards and Down’ards), there are also competing obligations which arise mainly from being framed as an insider. As such, he is someone whom should be interested in the family news, go and visit some friends, meet a new wife or girlfriend and take part in distracted chit-chat, or other extra-familial social obligations which means that there are times when there are more limited opportunities for actually engaging directly with the game and the research. Being sometimes also positioned as an ‘ex-Ashburnian’, colleague, friend or associate also creates competing obligations in such fluid and transient environments in many ways. Scott sometimes feels that he is obliged to come to the ‘right conclusions’ about how the town and the game has changed, to represent and reflect opinions – in an advocatory mode – that he might not really feel he own himself. Scott is assumed to know certain things, understandings of ‘what is going on’ during the play of the game, and yet he is no longer a local person, he hasn’t lived in the town for twenty years, and so a new generation of members remains almost beyond his research reach. As such he feels he is not developing a balanced view of the broad constituency of possible informants as much as he could.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that even in diverse ethnographic field research contexts in tourism, there are some common issues which can arise. Some of these issues relate to the challenges of doing research in highly mobile fields of study. In spite of the very different nature of the two sites, a festival and an international tourism destination, it was
possible to highlight similarities both in the ways the researchers approached encounters and in the positioning challenges of participant observation. Both contexts threw open both opportunities and limitations for different interactions, opening up possibilities for chance encounters and meaningful observations and interactions. They shaped access to respondents and relationships between researchers and participants. The ease with which access to and encounters with people could be achieved from our taken-for-granted positions and resources, also imposed limitations in terms of depth and the qualities of the interactions made. The situated nature of human interaction meant that we were always aware of the extra-ordinariness of the space and time within which our interactions took place, and were careful to make too bold knowledge claims on this basis. In these cases, it was noted that the researchers were shifting between different situated encounters in mobile spatial and social arrangements, taking up salient roles in different situations, each giving access to different views, perspectives, and knowledge.

The consequences and issues arising out of positionalities were also explored in the paper. In some interactions covert positioning was inevitable, and in both cases in different contexts a more open position was called for, which created further challenges. Some of these issues arose out of a relational positioning of ourselves as insiders or outsiders. As noted in the analysis, some of these positionings were fruitful and allowed for deeper insights. However there are also challenges. In the case of Ashbourne, Scott felt uneasy about re-positioning himself, as if this could be taken as a denial of the position they attributed him – a position such as ‘the person they knew from school’ an affiliation to which one would be strongly attached, and which differs strikingly with the more generalized and rather anonymous position of ‘tourist’ that could be attributed to Valerio in the Cuban case. This shows how certain positions may be more layered, sedimented, consolidated, and crystallized, making them difficult to circumvent, while others seem more transparent, flimsier and easier to unpack, adapt, and reformulate – lending themselves more willingly to distancing and manipulation. Again, what seems important here is to be able to grasp the relational processes of positioning which inform the qualities of ethnographic relationships and thereby generate specific practices and discourses.

Within each context, there was also an issue of credibility. It may be particularly the case with research on tourism that the unobtrusiveness of participant observation doesn’t help remind informers what ethnographers are doing. Little argues that: “The interviewing/surveying that I did with them (vendors) and with tourists was also academic work with which they were familiar. Merely spending the day with them, conversing and observing, seemed too much as if I were goofing off” (2004: 28). Similarly, Causey remarks that, for the travellers he met during fieldwork: “I was not a real traveller, but “researcher” did not seem believable either. After all, who ever heard of studying Western tourists?” (2003: 18). In our case, we both felt the awkwardness and insecurity of engaging ambiguously with our informants, as we struggled to find suitable occasions to reframe and reaffirm our positions as ethnographers.

We are continually making sense of the situations we find ourselves in, and yet in the case of the ethnographic research context in which we place ourselves, we add different dimensions to these contexts. By relating with the subjects of our investigation, we mobilize categories and try to shape layers of new identifications, which in turn may give rise to tensions and generate frictions with previously assumed and taken for granted categorizations. Understanding people’s positions and their directed attention,
brings about ideas of reciprocity and competing obligations. In the different cases each researcher was able to identify mutual benefits from certain interaction contexts, whether that was knowledge of the game or cash and gifts in Cuba. These reciprocal arrangements also highlighted some competing obligations which created difficulties in other contexts. These issues can lead us into the terrain of advocacy in ethnographic research on tourism, something which is increasingly complicated in these research contexts where there is no clearly bounded group with a clearly defined agenda, nor any common line of action. As we both tried to shift roles, redefine relationships, and negotiate interstitial positionings, we felt we were being anchored in well established frames of action, which also informed the expectations placed on us. Thus, in both contexts the researchers felt competing obligations towards the informants and the various protagonists involved in the research process, and obligations to the research itself. Reproducing such competing obligations was the scarcity of opportunities to achieve satisfactory ‘middle grounds’ and reformulate obligations, mainly due to the mobility of the research subjects. In spite of these obstacles and difficulties, we both made attempts to modulate our engagements, trying to navigate the shifting balances of participation/observation, of attachment/detachment. Instead of downplaying or avoiding these varied and interrelated positioning challenges, we consider that by accounting for them, and by unpacking their rationales, we can fruitfully contribute to further our understanding both of tourism and the practice of ethnography.

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From ethnographers to tourists and back again

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