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Re-politicizing Tourism

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

Matilde Córdoba Azcárate's *Stuck with Tourism* powerfully details the predatory nature of tourism industry development. Through a careful examination of four interrelated case histories from Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, the author relates how "tourism works according to a typical extractive logic, by which it invades, plunders, and exhausts places, bodies, and resources in order to satisfy short-term consumer demands" (12-13).

Drawing inspiration from the pioneering work of British sociologist John Urry while also deeply engaged with an impressive array of contemporary scholarship, the author writes that "the tourist gaze…has become one of the most powerful orderings, defining and reifying patterns of inclusion and exclusion, gender and racial ideologies, and understandings about nature, culture, and society at large" (11). At the center of Córdoba Azcárate's ethnographic research is a clear understanding of capitalism's incessant drive for profit which "creates subservient classes of workers, especially among ethnic and indigenous minorities" while at the same time "intensify[ing] the extraction of land as well as natural and cultural resources for the enjoyment of a few" (11). In this impeccably crafted study, the author carefully analyzes how industry practices in the Yucatán Peninsula manifest new social and environmental geographies shaped by what she terms a "predatory and sticky tourism [that] naturalizes [these] processes of extraction…and entraps people in contradictory situations" (12).

Chapter 1, titled "Beach Enclosures: Manufacturing a Caribbean Paradise," critically considers how Cancún was transformed "into an elite 'sun, sea and sand' international resort destination"

(36). Created by government fiat and opened in 1974, the establishment of Cancún soon set the stage for widespread regional change. Córdoba Azcárate describes Cancún as a "frontier enclave development" uniquely designed and situated to incorporate the region's indigenous people into a state-led modernization project. Cancún was divided into an exclusive Hotel Zone servicing international visitors and a neighboring Cancún City which grew rapidly to accommodate laborers (many of them indigenous) from across the peninsula and elsewhere in Mexico.

Following just more than a decade of profitable operation, two record breaking storms notably hit Cancún: Hurricane Gilbert in September 1988 and Wilma in October 2005. Both wrought major destruction and dealt travel industry stakeholders major losses. Yet tempest was quickly turned into opportunity as "federal and municipal governments as well as tourism corporations …viewed hurricane destruction as a creative occasion to accumulate capital" (42). Cancún's tourist infrastructure was immediately identified as a vital national economic priority by President Carlos Salinas who quickly ushered in a massive influx of international money through a rewriting of foreign investment laws. In what followed, post-disaster reconstruction served to advance an accelerated privatization "of land and public resources, especially the beach, for the exclusive use of the global tourism industry" (42). Only three months after Gilbert, roughly 80 percent of Hotel Zone guest room availability had been restored. Two years later, feverish construction efforts had produced a total of twenty-one new hotels with no apparent end to the building in sight (43). Whereas Cancún had initially operated as a low-density site for elite tourism, disaster capitalism afforded by Gilbert prompted the transformation of the Hotel Zone into a high density, all-inclusive tourism destination.

Then on October 20-21, 2005, Hurricane Wilma, the most powerful storm in North Atlantic history to date, "brought Cancún, once again, to its knees" (48). This time, President Fox declared a national emergency and allocated two billion dollars to again rebuild the Hotel Zone. Motivated by a desire for "shorter cycles of investment recovery," insurance compensation, along with undisclosed amounts of money poured in from the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank to significantly remake Cancún into high-rise condominium zone (50-51). Post Wilma, the new financial strategy attracted a wider array of investors well beyond the former collection of North American, Spanish and Mexican hotel chains as the ensuing wave of largely

unregulated condominium construction only further intensified privatization of land and natural resources.

Through it all, many looking for employment arrived, like Córdoba Azcárate's informants Ata and Ana, a young married couple from Veracruz and Mérida who figured they could come to Cancún "to sacrifice a few years of [their lives] to make money faster and then move out" (60). Many pursuing this strategy, however, "have become so dependent upon tourism, their everyday work and living spaces so monopolized by the industry's designs, that they have become stuck to its inequitable ways and have normalized its predatory relations" (60). The author identifies the difficult bind those who labor in the tourism industry find themselves in as one that engenders a "sacrificial logic" which "has done more than entrap individuals into ambivalent moral regimes…[i]t has also weakened social bonds and created a generalized sense of detachment and disengagement" (59).

Córdoba Azcárate regularly assesses the damaging environmental impact of tourism. In Cancún, for example, she relates that a shocking 80 percent of untreated sewage is dumped directly into the ocean. Consequences of this include the proliferation of floating brown algae (Sargassum) and a rapid killing of coral reefs. And without live reefs to protect local beaches, "sand just washes away" (64). Keenly aware of these and other ecological costs, some have sought out a more sustainable "ecotourist" alternative. Yet as evidenced in Córdoba Azcárate's second chapter focused on the Celestún estuary along Yucatán's Gulf Coast, ecotourism's lofty promise to pave a greener path for industry growth has unfortunately too often been effectively undermined by the tourism's seemingly insatiable quest for profit.

Identified in the late 1970s by the Mexican National Tourism Secretary (SECTUR) as a site for the development of "low environmental impact" visitation, Celestún's boosters were quick to single out the area's pink flamingo population as a leading attraction. First visiting the area in the mid-1990s, Córdoba Azcárate observed that Celestún "was still outside the region's tourist circuits" (67). Yet as regional tourism development advanced, Celestún would not remain a small, relatively isolated fishing village. In 2000, the United Nations reclassified Celestún as part of a vast stretch of northwest Yucatán's and neighboring Campeche's Gulf of Mexico coast as a

biosphere reserve—a determination that, however ironically, was accompanied by accelerated development.

When the author returned in 2002, she was immediately struck by the fact that "[t]his was not the laid-back, off-the-beaten-path community I had remembered" (68). As would soon become all too apparent, Celestún was not only equipped with all the trappings of modern tourism but had entered into a new era where limited opportunity, increased migration and a struggle for continued access to natural resources had led to intensified social conflict, lawlessness and violence. Rather than mitigating social inequality and environmental despoliation, internationally sanctioned ecotourism seemingly had exacerbated these same problems.

Córdoba Azcárate details how the build-up of Celestún has largely profited powerful local players who have utilized existing patronage networks to monopolize commercial operations and dominate the fierce competition for jobs and economic opportunity. Skewed ecotourism development has benefitted this privileged minority while exacerbating problems for many others in Celestún who suffer not only from underemployment and poverty-level wages but also from the fact that the city has neither a hospital, a local doctor, birth services or even an ambulance. Sadly, the author is led to conclude that, "[r]ather than delivering the promised sustainable and inclusive economic growth for the local population, this scaling up has produced in Celestún an unequal geography of capitalist accumulation that has profoundly shaped the spatial and social fabric of the community, benefited only a few, and fueled social and ecological conflicts" (103). Enrique, a resident biologist from Mexico City succinctly put it this way: "What they did in Celestún…[was] to see biosphere reserves…and the extracting of natural resources with a business mentality" (75).

Stuck with Tourism's next chapter focuses on high-end tourism taking place at a collection of five rebuilt historic hacienda hotels financed by Banamex head Roberto Hernández and the Fundación Haciendas del Mundo Maya (FHMM). Drawing on the role the Mexican hacienda has served as a historic institution for the region's powerful landowning elite, Córdoba Azcárate insightfully analyzes the process by which these sites have been remade for the depoliticized consumption of "heritage," "luxury," and "taste." Here again, the author brilliantly demonstrates how elite tourism largely compounds existing problems while also creating newfound "inequalities and privileges

[as it] coloniz[es] imagined regional geographies of the past and re-creat[es] them for value extraction" (146).

The situation, however, is a "sticky" one as Córdoba Azcárate reveals in talking with individuals employed as landscapers, craftswomen, restaurant servers or providing Maya massage (*sobadadas*). What workers here again testify to is the fact that working at the hacienda hotel "entraps people in a sacrificial logic that jeopardizes their futures" (146). But given that the Yucatán countryside has been a landscape "desolated after the henequen demise, depleted by migration and where women have limited opportunities in strongly patriarchal societies, the hacienda hotel [nevertheless] offers a source of income to some…but at great cost" (141).

Stuck with Tourism's final Chapter 4 explores the burgeoning inland town of Tekit which in recent decades has assumed a dynamic, "tourism backstage" service role as supplier of guayabera shirts and blouses. Iconic and highly regarded as a prized souvenir by visitors to the region, Tekit claims the title of "guayabera capital of the world" and in so doing points to a complex process of "organically scal[ing] up to satisfy the [growing] demands of the tourist industry" (152).

As before, Córdoba Azcárate's research in Tekit pays close attention to shifting economic, geographic, social and cultural changes brought on through increased supply-chain demand from nearby tourist centers. Talking with those who do the hard work of sewing guayaberas, the author finds that producing clothing for the tourist market leads to both opportunity and hardship. Informants share satisfaction about the benefits of living and working in Tekit given that they are able to enjoy a relatively stable income and are able to keep their families together rather than having to migrate either to Cancún or the United States. At the same time, however, they also reveal the physically demanding nature of the work which takes place both in home workshops and also in highly compromised, poorly ventilated and dimly-lit larger workshops. Many suffer asthma, skin rashes, loss of sight and chronic pain. As an integral part of the regional tourism industry, Tekit, in contrast to other inland towns, is a bustling place. Sadly though, industry work appears to have captured the imagination of most of the younger town residents appear who have mortgaged their futures by choosing to earn a paycheck rather than go to school to get an education. It is a difficult bargain struck over and over again as many reckon that "sewing for tourism [is] a

worthwhile livelihood despite the sacrificial logic that it entails" (179). Some even figure that "after centuries of slave work on haciendas," manufacturing guayaberas "is the region's lesser of two evils" given the greater freedom it affords (179).

Matilde Córdoba Azcárate's razor-sharp critique concludes with a brief discussion of the planned Train Maya project—a regional high-speed rail infrastructure thought by many to deliver "development" and "progress" to the Yucatán Peninsula. Here, the author argues that the proposed enterprise should be vigorously challenged for it engenders yet another hollow discourse of how it is that tourism will supposedly "save the day" and bring about positive change for Mexico's southeastern region. Astoundingly, the way that politicians and so many others have uncritically envisioned the Train Maya project reminds Córdoba Azcárate how "[t]ourism has this capacity to endlessly renew itself despite its [many] failures" (186). Yet there is a clear explanation for our selective memory when it comes to tourism history: "[it is] because we—as citizens, workers, tourists, researchers and politicians—have contributed to emptying tourism of any political meaning or praxis" (186). Instead, we need to do more than think of tourism as simply "a set of recreational activities" or "just another sector in the economy" (186). In contrast, it should be evident that tourism is profoundly "about moral and ethical questions" (187). In closing, Córdoba Azcárate insists that a broad public discussion take place that identifies tourism's "centrality as a major contemporary geographical force that shapes how capitalism, globalization, ecological deterioration, and indigenous oppression take place today" (193). Such an endeavor would involve not so much a call for the complete cancelation but instead a committed *repoliticization of tourism* so as—in at least some modest way--to slow deepening global inequality and the wholesale destruction of the planet.

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