

# Creating Something out of Nothing Food, Sex, and Housing in Havana's Underground Economies

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## Résumé de l'article

Bien qu'elles soient omniprésentes dans une grande partie de la société cubaine, les économies informelles revêtent une importance particulière au sein de la communauté LGBTQI+. Leur étude implique non seulement une contextualisation approfondie et une tentative de théorisation vernaculaire au sein de la vie quotidienne, mais il appert également de considérer les chronologies queer – les temporalités queer comme faisant partie de toute analyse, tout en abandonnant simultanément les catégories identitaires du Nord lorsqu'on se penche sur les performances du Sud. Ce texte s'inscrit dans un projet plus large, une ethnographie queer critique de la vie quotidienne cubaine. Il met l'accent sur les négociations éthiques, les relations sociales, et le rapport à la communauté comme moyen de survie pour des individus qui sont généralement invisibles dans la société au sens large. Bien qu'effacés, ignorés et dissimulés, ces individus partagent des caractéristiques universelles que nous ne devons pas exotiser par rapport à nos propres expériences: la nourriture, le sexe et le logement sont des éléments fondamentaux de la vie, quels que soient les conditions de privilège ou de légalité.

# CREATING SOMETHING OUT OF NOTHING

*Food, Sex, and Housing in Havana's Underground Economies*

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## **Laundry Soap and the intersectionalities of la lucha**

In 2009, I accidentally found myself taking part in *la lucha en la calle* (the struggle in the street)—a complex network of underground economies that is pervasive through much, if not all of Cuban everyday life. I had set out to understand what so many Cubans meant when they said “The government pretends to pay us, and we pretend to work,” framing it through a folklore-based critical queer ethnography, and centred on the lives of several gay men on a ranch in suburban Havana. On one of my exploratory visits, while I was still attempting to define this study, one of the men asked me to assist with a small favour.<sup>1</sup> His husband, a medical technician, was working as a security guard at a soap factory and he wanted me to meet him at work one night and to help bring home several bags of soap shavings—material that we would later use to create our own bars of soap and then sell in the underground markets. Looking back on this incident, I recognize my own naivety along with my friend’s charismatic charm in convincing me to take part. Was he asking me to help him steal from his employer? Or was he merely recycling a waste product and working to supplement his meagre salary? What might this small, seemingly insignificant but potentially illegal act tell us about everyday life in Cuba? Over the next several years while

1. To protect anonymity, I avoid using names where possible and/or use pseudonyms when necessary. Likewise, I follow an approach that was first suggested to me by Pravina Shukla and Henry Glassie: to use composite characters to better hide identities. All of the incidents given here are accurately documented and represented; however, I have blended examples in several instances so as to further protect individual identities. The resulting “characters” are no more or less exceptional than the individuals with whom I work; they are oicotypes of Cuban masculinity that are intended to evoke the *eidós* (experienced essence) of everyday life (Berger and Del Negro 2004: 25).

living part-time in Havana (2009-2019), I observed a variety of creative engagements in the underground economy, acts that are so pervasive and necessary that they form part of the everyday experience of life for many, if not most, Cuban individuals.

In examining the pervasive and creative acts that are grouped under the phrase *underground economy* or its Cuban manifestation *la lucha* (the fight/struggle), we must step back and consider its role in community and the ways in which it fits within folklore theory. This is a study of tradition, ritual, and *communitas* in response to economic sanctions, poverty, masculinities, sexualities, ethnicities, and everyday life. *La lucha* is not only a means of survival and/or personal profit, but it also requires and contributes to community. It requires trust, networking, and cooperation, as well as the development of unwritten knowledge and the negotiation of morality (when is it moral to steal or pilfer? when is it not?). It is an attempt to make things work while living within a broken system and it requires deep contextualization so as to understand it from Global North positioning. Looking into the social and cultural aspects of such activities should not be seen as a denial of the serious and stressful economic limitations that define everyday life for many/most individuals. Denial of its play-labour aspects, however, would be an etic and offensively paternalistic reading. Likewise, some might claim that these are stories about theft, prostitution, and victimhood. In doing so, they embrace stigmatizing terminology so as to maintain distance and deny voice to those most closely involved. Terms such as thief, prostitute, and victim help hide the complexities of life, while allowing voyeuristic audiences to remain comfortable in their xenophobia. As a neophyte, I was being tested, introduced, taught, and accepted into this community, being given access to and responsibility for translating these stories for larger-than-local audiences, while joining a family that continues to form a major part of my life.<sup>2</sup>

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2. My fieldwork began in 2009 and consisted of two sabbaticals plus multiple shorter trips over the next ten years. Likewise, it is now turning into a multi-sited ethnography as most of my initial friends have since found pathways to life in different parts of the world: Canada, Ecuador, France, Germany, Mexico, Russia, Spain, the United States, and Uruguay. I describe them as friends rather than informants, research subjects, or even collaborators so as to emphasize the depth of our relationships. I lived with them at the ranch and their stories, relationships, and means of survival have evolved alongside and in some cases in relation to my own. Deep ethnography and the decolonization of knowledge require critical and contextual questioning of subject/object as dichotomies. Their lives were affected by my presence. My life has been affected by them.

By pilfering soap scraps, we were engaging in an activity that was firmly instilled in Cuban everyday life and which serves as a common example of *la lucha*. My friend was working as a security guard not because he couldn't find employment in a medical lab, but rather because he found better opportunities for *la lucha* by working night security for various government factories and warehouses. During the day, workers would sweep the shavings into large burlap bags, disguise them as garbage, and leave them next to a chain link fence on the edge of the property. At night, guards would collect the bags, move them through a house that boarded the compound, and then on to various destinations for processing and private resale or trade. For two nights, I parked my rented car outside and waited for my friend as he and a co-worker loaded bags into my trunk. Over the following days, we spread the shavings on our concrete patio, softening them in the intense sun, and pressing them into bars of soap which they then sold and traded among friends and neighbours. We were "creating something out of nothing." My friends were creating a means to survival in a community where the average government salary (\$25 per month) fails to cover basic necessities.

The 1962 U.S. embargo, locally known as "the blockade," was intended to spur a counter-revolution—an uprising of the citizens against the newly formed communist government. Until 1989, the blockade's effects were significantly reduced through increased trade with, and aid from, the Soviet Union. This trade was cultural as well as economic and continues to have remnants in contemporary Cuba. Many of my friends experienced it first-hand: being given Russian sounding names and studying Russian language, history, and culture in grade school.<sup>3</sup> The decline and dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991), however, marked the start of an era of exceptional economic hardship and food shortages for Cuba. Known as the *Período especial en tiempos de paz* (Special period in time of peace), it spurred creativity by necessity—including the development and intensification of underground economies in the quest for survival. Cuba has never fully recovered from this era, in part due to increased economic restrictions from the United States, via the 1992 Torricelli Law and the 1996 Helms Burton Act, as well as crop and infrastructure damage from multiple hurricanes. As the economic and political situation in Venezuela currently declines (Cuba's primary source of oil and economic support today), and as American sanctions re-intensify under the Trump regime and neo-populist global politics, there are increasing signs and fears of a

3. See Jacqueline Loss's *Dreaming in Russian: The Cuban Soviet Imaginary* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013) for details on the long-term social and cultural impact of this relationship.

second Special period. Most markets are increasingly empty, and everyday life is occupied with searching—searching for food, coffee, cooking oil, medicine, and building supplies.

According to Davidson and Krull (2011), the Special period/economic crisis and resulting food insecurity were felt particularly hard by women. Women were, and in many cases still are, responsible for obtaining food, something that was not only economically challenging, but also time consuming. The breakdown of food distribution meant/means searching multiple locations for food staples, traveling to different neighbourhoods when hearing of the availability of sought-after foods, and finding new and creative ways to invent new food sources. For instance, there are multiple examples from the special period of women creating meals from previously unconsumed foods and by-products (e.g. banana peels, citrus rinds, wild plants), sometimes based on ideas taught by the government through public health programs. These survival strategies also extended, unofficially, to personal rationing to feed more people (such as using one serving of meat to feed an entire family, or personally skipping meals so as to better feed children and the elderly), and various forms of home production (raising pigs and chickens on urban balconies and rooftops, growing fruits and vegetables between urban buildings). During this period, many Cubans faced malnutrition and were at risk for starvation:

...food shortages were especially acute following the collapse of the Soviet Union, when Cuba abruptly lost \$4 billion to \$6 billion annually in subsidized trade and when oil, fertilizer, and pesticide import practically ceased. In aggregate, these factors contributed to the reduction of domestic food production by more than half; at the same time, Cuban food imports decreased by approximately 30 percent. As a consequence, Cubans in the early to mid-1990s ultimately consumed 61 percent fewer proteins and 74 percent fewer calories than the daily minimum recommended for their basic needs. (Davidson and Krull 2011, 64-65)

While this crisis led to the rapid and pervasive growth of underground economies and the development of *la lucha* (the fight/struggle) tradition, the government attempted to use tourism as a means to increase foreign investment and regain stability. By developing tourist infrastructure (through cooperation and co-ownership with Canadian and European companies), and encouraging greater tourism from Canada and Europe, they helped counteract the losses suffered through the collapse of the Soviet Union and the increasingly restrictive U.S. embargo. Tourism, however, was recognized as a potential threat to the state: tourist/Cuban interactions

meant lessening control of state ideas/ideology, thus creating barriers to this revolutionary project. Tourism also created new opportunities for *la lucha* in both official and underground markets. The presence of tourists, as well as the import of food and construction materials for tourist infrastructure, meant that there were many new opportunities for *inventing* (finding, creating, scamming, or stealing items for use, sale, or trade in the underground markets).

While food procurement was/is often framed as a women's endeavor, *luchar* is often described as a male/masculine endeavor where men explore the neighbourhood and the city on a daily basis in search of opportunities. It can also be described as a form of play-labour:

Women and girls have less access to life *en la calle*, which is where money is made in the unofficial tourist economy. *La calle*, more productively thought of as the public sphere rather than the literal 'street', is where men are expected to provide for the family. Owing to principles of labor and leisure in the socialist context, underemployment, and culturally structured asymmetrical gender responsibilities in which all housework is 'women's work,' men's lives *en la calle* in Cuba are characterized by play-labor, at least as much as work. (Allen 2007: 189)

Play-labour may be expressed as a form of personal freedom ("being one's own boss"), and involves exploring the city, visiting friends, and watching for opportunities for economic benefit. It is a theme often encountered in urban ethnography and ethnographies of poverty, such as Duneier Mitchell's *Sidewalk* (2001) and Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (1967), and one which often confronts the intersections of Blackness, masculinity, and poverty. Borrowing from Robin Kelly's work on Black urban American working class (1997), and Coco Fusco's work with female sex workers in Havana (2001), Jafri Allen emphasizes its performative nature, describing it as the labour that goes into the pursuit of leisure, pleasure, and creativity. Play-labour is not work/productivity for the benefit of the state; it is not officially sanctioned or controlled. From the outside, it looks like leisure. For its participants, it is serious, dangerous, and exhausting, but it requires charisma and ritualistic performance—socializing as a means of production.

As if to mock the state's assertion of social and economic equality, the intersections of *la lucha* and tourism highlight unspoken inequalities as experienced through gender, ethnicity, geography, and sexuality. Not only do men have greater independence to explore the public sphere and to interact with the new tourist economies, but White men or those with

predominantly Spanish ancestry face fewer barriers to moving through urban and tourist spaces. Hypermasculine/machismo, heteronormative White men have the greatest freedom to interact with tourists without facing police harassment or control. Furthermore, hypermasculinity and heteronormativity do not necessarily equate to heterosexuality; as seen in much of Latin American masculinity, sexual actions do not necessarily define sexual identity—at least not in the ways it is imagined in Global North queer identity politics. The bulk of my friends in Havana are men who have sex with men (MSM), however only some of them identify as gay.

As I regularly experienced while walking through Havana, and as documented in the ethnographic work of Allen (2011), Forrest (2002), Hodge (2001) and Stout (2014), men of colour are more frequently stopped by police for random identification checks. Police target black men, especially those seen with tourists, and ask questions while radioing a central office to check their I.D. number for potential “problems”. At the start of my fieldwork, my friends were stopped and investigated multiple times a day, especially if we were seen together near 23<sup>rd</sup> Street in Vedado (Havana’s gay neighbourhood). The number of checks have since been reduced; they have not ended. In 2015, one of my friends (a school teacher whose father was from Angola), was stopped and investigated four times, by four different police officers, while we walked together through the Habana Vieja UNESCO/tourist district where he has lived his entire life. Men who were known to engage in MSM sex work were sometimes harassed in this way so as to hand over bribe money, contributing to *la lucha* of police officers.

This inequality likewise is experienced geographically: residents of Havana have more opportunities to interact with tourists than residents of the countryside. Because of this, many Cubans move to the city illegally (without official permission/residency permits for Havana). Designed to keep labourers on the farms where needed, and to reduce pressure on Havana’s overcrowded housing, such habitation restrictions led to the development of a community of undocumented residents, described in the pejorative vernacular as *palestinos*. They are “illegal” or undocumented migrants within their birth country. Because of their inability to work legally in Havana, the undocumented are fully dependent on underground economies. Because of their legal status, many do not have access to *la libreta* (government food rations), nor to legal housing. *La lucha* is pervasive across the country—in both rural and urban areas—however, undocumented migrants in Havana province are particularly reliant on the underground economy.

Undocumented migrants are attracted to the city by opportunity and

typically set out to find/create money to send to their families in rural Cuba. Some of them are pushed to the city because of personal circumstances. Because of the orientation of my project, I encountered multiple youths who were orphaned and/or were estranged from their families after coming out as gay, queer, or trans. They have been ostracized by their families and live without official housing, legal work, or government assistance. Many of my friends in Havana are or have been undocumented at some point in their lives, and as will be shown in my discussions of food, sex, and housing, there is a large community of young, *machismo*, heteronormative, MSM undocumented Habaneros who live almost entirely within the underground economy and who fully embody the concept of *la lucha en la calle* and sex-play-labour.

Being free and in control of decisions of daily life serves as a marker of masculinity. However, the blending of socialism and the Special period did alter attitudes for many individuals. In my community, *la lucha* evolved as both a way of creating or improving day-to-day sustenance, as well as for working on long-term goals of finding a relationship, improving housing, and securing a semi-regular income. Likewise, local networks that develop through this form of play-labour expand globally when we apply *la lucha* to tourism, tourist relationships, and migration. No longer is it limited to social interactions in neighbourhood streets while seeking food and money, but it is about meeting foreigners to gain access to tourist restaurants and night clubs, gaining access to foreign knowledge and media via tourist interactions—a sense of cosmopolitanism, and in some cases, establishing opportunities to live outside of Cuba.

### **Rag soup, condom pizzas and other food inventions**

Cuban food legends are often presented as stories of desperation. Simultaneously, however, they reveal the social aspects of *la lucha*—that is, the importance of networking, sharing knowledge, and forming relationships so as to protect supplies and guarantee safety. Some of my first encounters with *la lucha* and foodways came in the form of contemporary legends such as stories of rag patties /rag soup and condom pizzas. Both are narratives that can be traced to the Special period (if not before), but which are still in active circulation. They parallel North American examples that deal with fast food franchises and the anxieties that develop from the separation between food preparation and consumer, stories about inattentive employees and unsanitary kitchens (the Kentucky Fried Rat) and disgruntled, underpaid, and poorly treated workers (the teenager who



spits or ejaculates in a hamburger so as to seek revenge on a rude or disliked customer) (Fine 1980, Whatley 2000).

The food legends that I encountered, however, centred more on the invention of cheap food and/or attempts to create products for the underground economy. As shown by Río Parra (2000), food counterfeiting has historical antecedents that have continuously evolved to skirt regulation. They have likewise evolved into contemporary legends when the tolerance for invention is tested or surpassed. They are akin to the American legend of mealworms in McDonald's hamburgers, where a product is consumable but believed to be grotesque and falsely represented to enhance profits. Iconistic fast food franchises are a rarity in Cuba (state-run *Di Tú Pollo* and *El Rápido* are the exception, and are only found in a few larger towns and cities). The pilfering, repackaging, and redistribution of food products, however, create a similar anxiety as to origins and intentions. As demonstrated by Hanna Garth (2014), access to the underground economy and trust in the safety of pilfered food, depend on social networks. While stressful, exhausting, and dangerous, negotiating this system creates a form of *communitas* as well as increasing food diversity and supply well beyond what is available in state markets.

Rag patties and rag soup is a legend about women who add old cleaning or dish cloths to their soups and stews, simmering them until the fibers break down and/or boiling the rags with onions and straining them to create a purée that would then be mixed with a serving of protein. It was said to be a way to take the protein ration from the *libreta* (the ration book)—a small patty of ground chicken, pork, or soy protein that had already been diluted with fillers, so as to further increase its volume and satiate a family of several individuals. It is told as an act of desperation, but in my experience, never in the first person—it happened to neighbours or schoolmates, normally a friend of a friend.

I was first told this story by a friend who spent his teenage years (the 1990s) guarding the family farm. Along with his brothers, he would sleep in the fields and set up noise traps in order to protect their immature yucca from theft. Their father spent his time guarding their two cows—a constant source of anxiety as loss of the cows would surely create trouble between him and the state, which officially owned the cows and closely monitored milk production. In my friend's description of farm life in the 1990s, he says that they considered themselves lucky. Unlike their neighbours, they "never had to resort to rag soup." Rag soup "was for people who didn't own land," such as families in central Havana, or those living in Soviet-block public

housing projects (situated throughout Cuba—in urban and rural centres). I heard a close variation involving rag patties from a friend who confided in me that his stepfather joined the *intelligensia* during the Special period (he reported activities of neighbours to the local CDR—Committee for the Defence of the Revolution), so that they would receive extra rations and avoid consuming rag patties. While all of my friends told stories of struggle during the 1990s, none admitted to consuming rag soup/ rag patties themselves.

As with any legend, the question of truth is central to the telling of these stories. Foreign reporters often repeat them without adequate contextualization. For instance, a Vice.com article in 2014 reported that women prepared croquettes “filled with bits of rags they’d used to mop floors” (Leith Gollner). When I presented this story to the above friends, they expressed disbelief, noting that if it did happen, it was in the context of a scam. Stories continue to circulate of street vendors selling rag-filled croquettes and “chicken” patty sandwiches to strangers on the street, and then disappearing with their profits. The story is used to warn friends and family about consuming food from strangers. I was told the story in 2010 when, after I developed an unusual rash on my forearms, my friends blamed it on a hot dog that I bought from a small kiosk (I’m confident that it was related to the heat and humidity).

Condom pizza is a similar legend that is also referenced in the same Vice story. A condom pizza is a small individually sized pizza, sold by street vendors, that is topped with melted condoms. It originated during the special period when cheese (and other dairy products) were “lost” from Havana, but condoms were widely available because of the government’s efforts to combat the spread of HIV. The legend references FOAF, and operates on two levels. First, it refers to food contamination by street vendors working in the underground economy. Second, however, it is often told as a food scam that targets Habaneros who were taking the train to the countryside while seeking illegal food direct from farmers. When the train stopped in various towns along the way, passengers would hop off to purchase a pizza and then immediately jump back on board taking it with them. They would initially be excited by the cheese (a food that was rarely found in the city), but once the train was moving they would discover that they had been scammed. While the condom pizza itself is an example of *la lucha*, so is the act of Habaneros taking the train into the countryside in search of food which they could then resell in the cities at a profit. As I have personally witnessed, this form of *la lucha* is still active. In 2011, a

friend requested that I help smuggle coffee from his family's plantation in eastern Cuba into Havana. I had been living in Havana for several weeks, and we couldn't find coffee in any of our local stores. We found ourselves, once again, in an opportunistic position to make money while assisting our friends and neighbours.

While the roots of *la lucha* and foodways are based in the Special period, they are still active—and are reflective of the fact that Cuba has never fully recovered. Some contemporary examples stem from the *libreta*, and the question of how to take advantage of a meagre but essential form of government support. For instance, in 2016 I witnessed a friend's mother preparing for a medical checkup. Instead of fasting as directed, she was eating candy. She explained that if she could skew the blood test and get a false diagnosis for diabetes, her *libreta* would be adjusted to provide additional protein. While the *libreta* is seen as an essential tool in building food security, it is experienced as unreliable and inadequate. It can only be used at government shops, where food quality is poor, and the shelves are frequently empty:

One of the longest standing measures [to address food insecurity] is the ration distribution system, the *libreta de abastecimiento*, in place since 1962. Despite substantially reduced allocations in the early 1990s, the *libreta* system continued to provide citizens with approximately half of their daily caloric intake at heavily subsidized prices. Although various formal mechanisms have been put in place, the distribution of products is frequently inefficient, and foods are often unavailable when expected or in quantities promised. The ensuing gap has been left primarily for women to fill. (Davidson and Krull 2011, 66)

In response, family members often “forget” to report when a family member moves, so that the family can continue to collect an individual's ration in their absence. For instance, when young people move from the countryside to Havana, their families gain both from the prospect of their remittances (money earned through Havana's underground economies), from continuing to collect their rations, and while feeding a smaller family. A friend in Germany reported to me that his mother still collected his rations, even though he had been living in Germany for several years.

I also encountered this practice during the 2010 rice shortage. At the time, Cuba was dealing with another layer of crisis: because of poor sugar harvests, lost tourist revenue, and global rice shortages, the country was forced to reduce its imports by 37 percent (Davidson and Krull 2011: 74). Because of the shortage of rice—the core staple in the Cuban diet—local

officials were distributing rice based on the physical presence of people. Normally rations are based on the number of family members documented in the *libreta*, but because of the shortage and allegations of corruption of this system, all bodies needed to be present to maximize the size of the ration. A neighbour asked me to come with her one morning and stand in line in place of her nephew (and to keep my eyes low and not say a word). Having an extra body in the line meant that the family received an extra ration of rice.

There are many forms of food scams/food inventions. While not all refer directly to the underground economy, all deal with aspects of *la lucha*. Food stories sometimes refer to the absence of beef (a victim of wheat shortages following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its wheat / cattle feed subsidies). When beef is found, it is rumoured to be of low grade (American imported “D-grade utility meat” that is commonly used for dog food), or to be made from or blended with cat, dog, or rabbit. This has even led to dark jokes about how you can measure food security and the level of poverty by the number of cats found in a neighbourhood (the more cats present, the stronger the economy and food supply). Rumours continuously circulate about farmers pushing their cattle onto train tracks or onto the highway at night, hoping that they will get hit so that they can then take the meat, and claim that the cow died by accident. Such stories have a secondary function: to assert the absurdity of Cuba’s approach to human rights and the multi-generational experience of food insecurity. Such stories frequently end with the reminder: the sentence for killing a man in Cuba is 15 years; for killing a cow it is 30.

The procurement of food among my friends in Havana was often linked to tourist spaces. Young men would meet tourists on the street and warn them of street vendors selling rag-filled croquettes, condom pizzas, or generally unsanitary conditions. Taking on the role of tour guide, they would then encourage the tourist to accompany them to specific restaurants or *paladars* (small family restaurants) where they would attempt to join the tourist for drinks or for a meal. Whether directly agreed to or not, restaurant owners would bill the tourist for any Cubans that accompanied them. Likewise, at the end of the meal, the guide would slip away momentarily to the back of the restaurant where the owner would present them with a small commission for bringing in guests. It was also common for bills to be “accidentally” inflated, or for change to be incorrectly counted, all of which meant that the Cuban men received various forms of hidden payment in addition to receiving a free meal from a new foreign friend. During such

meals, they might mention the food shortages—ways of creating sympathy, often citing the need to help support one's mother and a younger sibling, thus guilt-tripping tourists into even greater generosity. Because many of these men were living in Havana without residency permits, they lacked access to the *libreta*. For some of them, this form of play-labour was their primary source of sustenance. Hanging out, eating, and drinking beer with tourists, while telling tales of rag patties and condom pizzas, was the first step toward broader goals of obtaining money, housing, and security.

### **Queer-Erotic-Economies and Sex-Play-Labour**

Discussion of underground economies and tourism often focuses on tourist scams, such as selling cigars on the street (fake or factory seconds with counterfeit labels), inflating restaurant bills (switching menus for tourists), inflated taxi fares and car rental costs, and changing money on the street (attempting to confuse tourists by switching between the two local currencies (Convertible/CUC and National/CUP pesos—a 24/1 difference in value). Though localized, variations exist in tourist spaces throughout the world. Cuba's uniqueness, however, is attested through Noelle Stout's description of "queer-erotic economies" (Stout 2014; 2015), and Jafari Allen's analysis of "sex-play-labour" (Allen 2007; 2011)—both dealing with a form of MSM sex work and sex tourism, but one which is embedded in everyday life, family, and kinship, and where sex workers claim a high level of agency. As frequently argued (Clancy 2002, Marrero 2003, Forrest 2002, Sierra Madero 2013, and Hodge 2001 and 2005), MSM sex work in Cuba is directly emergent from the Special period (though it also has historical antecedents) and involves a queering of identities while protecting masculinity and negotiating revolutionary and capitalistic ideologies.

While the issue of sex work has been extensively analyzed by Global North scholars, it is frequently through the lens of male-female relationships, and/or it perpetuates Global North structures of feeling—heteronormative, homonormative, and moralistic assumptions that fail to adequately address the realities of everyday life from the experience of non-Global North citizens. Heidi Härkönen (2019) and Elise Andaya (2013) address the impact of Post-Soviet economic struggles to heterosexual intimacy, a factor that I observed among some MSM sex workers—tourist encounters were sometimes used as a means of obtaining items that could be re-gifted to female partners, and thus a means of securing traditional heterosexual relationships. Valerio Simoni (2019) takes on Cuban male performances

in the seduction of female tourists—patterns that sometimes parallel my own examples, but which are divergent when addressing queerness. Alyssa Garcia (2010) details the history of *jineterismo* (female sex work) in relation to the policing and the state, however MSM sex workers are frequently hidden, ignored, and erased from such discourses. Ironically, becoming a member of the subaltern has certain benefits; invisibility becomes a form of freedom.

When we incorporate notions such as queer temporalities and escape the reproductive futurities of Global North heteronormativity (Halberstam 2005; Dinshaw et al 2007, Freeman 2019), we begin to recognize the limitations imposed by such framings. By queering our approaches and focusing on vernacular theory as expressed by MSM Cubans, we recognize alternate forms of relationships, values, and lifelines, ideas that I see best exemplified by Allen's approach to sex-play-labour and Stout's work on queer-erotic economies. The quest for leisure and pleasure, a key element of play-labour, represents rupture of reproductive futurities, a realization of queer time where the social and institutional structures have weakened and relationships get re-imagined without a focus on reproduction. A future may no longer be the primary goal for each individual. The fear of never-ending poverty and lack of opportunity make the imagined future less desirable. Furthermore, working hard will not create advancement or stability within this system. Work has little direction. Seeking immediate pleasure and leisure through sex-play-labour becomes the most rational option.

Most concentrated in Havana, and particularly within the MSM community, Cuba's queer-erotic economy is a major source of income, fashion, and worldly knowledge for young men and their families. Cuban men who associate with tourists have greater access not only to money and clothing, but also to cosmopolitanism: knowledge of the world through the eyes of tourists, access to news and perspectives beyond what is reported by state media, and the chance to dream of travel. Many participants note that while they expect to make money through tourist relationships, such relationships also give them access to spaces and experiences within Cuba that are beyond their class positions: the ability to eat at tourist or elite restaurants, to go to parties at expensive clubs, to purchase smart phones and wifi/phone cards, to wear brand name and fashionable clothing, to travel across the island with tourists, and, thanks to recent regulatory changes, to stay in tourist accommodations.

Stout demonstrates the ways in which tourism and the underground

economy have combined into a queering of kinship, noting that: “By offering Cubans excluded from global economies a lifeline to various forms of mobility and capital, kinship imaginaries allowed them to inspire long-term financial patronage that kept their families afloat” (2015, 666). She explains this through the documentary *Habana Muda* (Brach 2012), and the example of Chino, “a deaf Cuban farmer who is married with children, and José, a gay Mexican tourist who has fallen in love with him” (666). José not only contributes to the family’s finances in exchange for a relationship with Chino, but he also assists Chino’s wife in starting a manicure business and takes part in family meals and activities. Chino (a common nickname for Cubans with Asian features), is an oicotype of a *pinguero*, a term for MSM sex workers that implies hypermasculinity and an active sexual position.

Chino’s story is not unusual in any way. Queer relationships complicate our understandings of kinship; trans-national queer relationships implode our assumptions of desire. While some scholars struggle to categorize such patterns in relation to our own, MSM friends in Havana refused to shy away from the economic aspects of love, arguing that all relationships involve a level of dependency, regardless of citizenship or sexuality. Everyone seeks to find a partner (or partners) who will improve one’s economic position and security. When Northern scholars struggle with the definitions of sex work and with the issues of agency and denial in Cuba, they are ignoring vernacular perspectives, the diversity of ways of being within queer partnerships, and the unspoken understandings that likewise apply in Northern spaces. When you are queer, poor, and subaltern, you have already broken institutionalized and heteronormative codes and are now free to re-imagine the intersections of relationships, desire, and ways of being.

Since 2009, I have encountered several Cuban men (and was told about many more) who were open with their Cuban partners (male and female) about their relationships with foreign men. Some of these men self-identified as *pingueros* or used the term to describe similar activities among friends. Sometimes they debated this term, arguing that a *pinguero* is a true sex worker whereas they are more selective and/or are focused primarily on sex-play-labour. Some of these families transformed and moved over time, in ways that might seem surreal to Global North readers. For instance, I will briefly summarize the life of one of my closest friends/informants, Yuneski, and his queer transnational family.

When I first met Yuneski, in 2009, he was living with his boyfriend and his ex-boyfriend, in a relationship with both but also a marriage of convenience: Boyfriend #1 (B1) owned a house, and thus they negotiated



a 3-way relationship in order to maintain a place to live after their breakup (Havana's housing crisis and the restrictions of residency permits force many couples to stay together after divorce). Yuneski is an ex-police officer and has an ex-wife, and first met B1 while patrolling in a tourist area of Havana (conducting ID checks, and arresting individuals who are in Havana without residency permits or who are suspected of sex work). After a couple of years, he ended his sexual relationship with B1, but both depended on and continued to depend on each other as family. Yuneski then met B2, who moved in with him and B1. B2 was from rural Cuba, did not have a residency permit for Havana, and was therefore dependent on B1 for a place to live.

The three men lived together as a family for several years until B2 met a German man who sponsored him for a tourist visa to visit Europe. This relationship dissolved, but he continues to live in Europe (without immigration papers). Yuneski then moved to Spain, sponsored for a tourist visa by his uncle. He married a Spanish woman, thus securing his immigration status, and then extended the chain to B1, sponsoring B1 for a Spanish tourist visa. Yuneski now lives with B1 and his Spanish wife. Yuneski, B1, and B2 regularly send money to their families in Cuba. Through a combination of sex tourism, sex work, and family relationships (biological, by convenience, and by choice), all three Cubans have gained financial success for themselves and for their families in Cuba. Together, they embody the term *queer-erotic economy* and the ultimate dream of leveraging sex work for long-term financial stability and the freedom to travel/live outside of Cuba.

As noted by Jafari Allen: "He [Fidel Castro] held that to embark on tourism as a development strategy was, in fact, like making a pact with the devil.... The re-emergence of tourism and related sex work harkens back to pre-revolutionary structures of feeling. This includes contending with a tourist gaze that casts people of the South, especially blacks, as objects of their pleasure." (2007: 185). Castro recognized the dangers of tourism to the ideals of communism. The poverty and restrictions of the Special period, combined with the challenges of supply as imposed by the U.S. embargo, and the Cuban government's mismanagement of meagre resources, are the core causes of the pervasiveness of Cuba's underground economies. These economies are likewise shaped, however, by tourist interactions, the tourist gaze, and the queering of kinship. Few of my friends, however, would openly consider themselves to be victims of this tourist gaze, but rather claimed



power over tourists through their objectified bodies.

The Cuban vernacular term of MSM sex workers is *pinguero*. The root of the word means *penis*, and the suffix (-ero) connotes working-class trade or occupation. To understand the term, however, we must look beyond queer identity politics and consider traditional Latin American understandings of masculinity/*machismoism*. Machismo means that a man must be in the active/insertive sexual position, and that the gender of their sexual partner, while preferably a cis woman, is not fully dependent on sexual identity. A “real man” needs a partner to penetrate, and he is so virile that finding any “object” to penetrate (be it female, male, trans, or even animal or plant) can be read as evidence of his masculinity. Forrest explains this position, noting that options must be created when women are unavailable, and that this is thought to be a more common experience among rural Cuban men—those who form the core of Havana’s *pinguero* community (2002: 91). Gay/straight/bi categories do not sufficiently explain sexual practice or sexual identity. While there are documented historical categories dealing with MSM labour in Cuba (such as *bugarrón*), the term *pinguero* is most associated with the sex-play-labour underground economy that emerged via the Special period and expansion of tourism.

As noted by Allen (2007: 188), and as I often heard among my own Cuban friends, *pingueros* are not prostitutes but rather are individuals seeking relationships, connections, and knowledge in a system of work-play. Some Cuban friends lament how even sex between Cuban men frequently involves requests for money and/or material goods, how relationships are often formed around the need for access to housing, or how all relationships are based in part on *la lucha*. One of my research participants, a cis male who frequently dressed as a woman at night, described his approach to sex-play-labour, noting his attraction to police officers and claiming agency over his actions. He occasionally hosted underground gay parties at his home and developed a sexual relationship (as a trans woman) with numerous “heterosexual” married police officers. His sex-play-labour with the police was in exchange for permission for the parties and for protection on the street. Because he often dressed as a woman in public, he needed extra security. Because his relations were primarily with other Cubans, there was little money involved. My friend explained his choices as primarily a form of sexual fetish. He also noted that for him, the term *pinguero* only applied when he was seeking out tourists and in more serious need of money and/or food (and that during these encounters, he always dressed as a man). He also noted that seeking out tourists does not necessarily equate to sex

work—not if one is selective and in control. It is about leisure, and because of the severity of economic imbalance, it is understood that the foreigner will pay all costs and give economic gifts of support to aid one's family.

Because *la lucha en la calle* is frequently framed as a masculine endeavor, and because *machismoism* places greater emphasis on sexual acts than sexual identities, Cuban men who have sex with men have greater access to tourists and the material objects and ideas that they leave behind. In tourist interactions, *pingueros* are often framed as *macho* and thus are expected to be in the active sexual position/penetrator, displaying a form of hyper-masculinity that allows them to rationalize MSM behaviour while publicly maintaining heterosexual identities. Because *pingueros* are *macho*, and because *la lucha* is framed as a masculine endeavour, MSM sex-play-labour achieves greater leeway with police than other forms of sex work: Cuban women are consumed by foreign tourists and thus are seen as victims requiring protection. Male sex workers are hyper-masculine individuals who victimize foreign tourists—tricking them into giving money while performing the ultimate act of masculine control: sexual penetration. Regardless of this, Black men, though positioned through the tourist gaze as the pinnacle of hyper-masculinity, face greater police harassment than their Spanish/white colleagues (see Allen 2011). They are fetishized by tourists while being racialized and disempowered by the police, the government, and the justice system.

Gender differences are embedded in the language. *Jinetero* references a man who acts as a scam artist, who is particularly adept at *la lucha*, and who frequently targets tourists. *Jineteros* often assist tourists in finding restaurants, cigars, or accommodations (for a hidden fee—business owners give them commissions when the tourist isn't watching). They also help tourists find sex workers, but they do not normally engage in sex with male tourists. In line with Allen's claim that underground economies are gendered as masculine, and *machismo's* claim that penetrative sex workers have greater agency, the feminine version of the word, *jinetera*, connotes both female sex worker and female scam artist. There is no term equivalent to *pinguero* for female sex workers. Women who interact in public with male tourists are categorized as lower in status through vernacular terminology.

### **Conclusion: ethics, communitas, and everyday life**

Just as *pingueros* argue agency in terms of gender, sexuality, and relationships, individuals who “find” and “create” material products and

economic opportunities are not necessarily stealing nor breaking society's ethical codes. There is a greater stigma against stealing from friends, family, or individuals; theft from the government, especially when masked as a subtle form of vernacular resistance is broadly seen as creative opportunity. Such activities, however, should be read in relation to *communitas* and community sensibilities.

As demonstrated by Berger and Del Negro, the concept of "everyday life" needs to be more critically analyzed in folklore studies. As we move further and further from genre as the core analytical framework within folklore studies, and frame our studies as "the aesthetics of everyday life" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1985), we need to turn to critical analysis of who, what, where, and when is included in such an elusive concept. Many studies labeled as "everyday life" fail to acknowledge who has/does not have access to the version of everyday life that is envisioned.

When I claim that underground economies and *la lucha en la calle* are a part of Cuban everyday life, I am referring to both the pervasiveness and routine of struggle as they exist across many identities and socio-economic classes. There is an understanding that most individuals are continuously watching, seeking, and ready to identify opportunities to invent/create food, money, relationships, and housing. Such activities are documented in a variety of forms of formal and informal narratives. One's daily movement through the street is not only play-labour, but it is an act of resistance as a means to survival. Reflecting on De Certeau's classic work on resistance and transformation of power relations through seemingly mundane and repetitive acts of resistance (1984), we see that the *luchador* is the Cuban equivalent of De Certeau's *flâneur*. How one moves through the city—what one sees, what one thinks of, and how one acts... how one pretends to support and work within the system, seemingly resigning to the hegemonic forces of the communist system, is contrasted with a sense of personal empowerment and resilience, while gaining an intimate knowledge of Havana's geography.

The examples of *la lucha* /underground economies that I have presented here are a small sampling of a variety of activities that compromise everyday life in Cuba. If we delve further into these examples, we may identify additional patterns based on gender, education, sexuality, and ethnicity. More importantly, however, Cuba's underground economies operate through a heightened sense of community. Recognizing that everyone is in a similar predicament, individuals find ways to share knowledge of inventions so as to best gain access to food, housing, money, and security.

They embrace the ideas of communism in terms of equality and cooperation, but they support it through capitalism in the underground markets.

My friend who taught me how to invent soap—how to find, move, and create a product for the underground economy—is now living in Europe. He was sponsored for a tourist visa by an older German man whom he met on the street in Havana. After six months in Germany, he left to join some friends in Spain, where he is now undocumented but earning a living in Spain's underground economies. When a hurricane destroyed his family's home in 2017, he was able to help his mother, grand-mother, brother, and sister-in-law to rebuild. Government support was inadequate and state-run stores lacked sufficient building supplies. With his remittances, however, they were able to obtain supplies on the underground market, overcome a crisis, and continue taking part in a cycle that officially does not exist.

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