

Introduction

OCHÚN AND YEMAYÁ

So many Cuban women—most of them, probably—are descendants of Ochún, the black Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre. They're good-natured, pretty, sweet, and loyal as long as they want to be, but they can be cruelly unfaithful, too. Sensual, lascivious. In time, you begin to recognize them.

Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, *Dirty Havana Trilogy*

There is a place in Centro Habana, just steps from the busy intersection of Infanta and San Lázaro, called el Callejón de Hamel. A *callejón* is a small street or an alleyway, but that does not begin to evoke this place. Walking down Calle San Lázaro, there are no signs to guide the way, but the sounds of riotous drumming and singing can be heard for blocks. It grows louder as I turn onto Aramburú, but it is not until I pass under the cobbled gateway that stands over the entrance that the atmosphere truly explodes into life. There are so many people—a great, thronging mass of moving bodies—that for a split second the place itself escapes me. But then it's all around me: vibrant murals dance up the walls to where urns, mannequins, and wrought-iron sculptures stand among the vines that crisscross overhead. In the mosaic of tiles underfoot, a black doll with straw-colored hair peers up through a pane of glass set into the ground. The drumming goes on and on, the divide between dancers and onlookers blurs, and the music reaches a fever pitch.

Every Sunday afternoon there is a rumba show like this one in the Callejón de Hamel, but today the party is especially raucous because the Callejón is marking its twentieth anniversary. Since 1990, the artist Salvador González Escalona has blanketed the broad alleyway with



Figure 1. Sculptures in the Callejón de Hamel, 25 July 2010. Photo by author.

murals, as well as sculptures made from found materials including scrap metal, toys, tools, and even bathtubs. He maintains a small studio in a room just off the main alleyway, where an assistant sells paintings to tourists for prices far beyond the reach of most Cubans. The people here say that this place was a hub for rumba music in the past, decades ago, but it is González who revived it from years of dormancy and gave it its current brilliant patina. The entire neighborhood became involved in González's project, donating scarce bits of house paint, oil paint, ink, and dye to the effort.

Alongside the art studio, there are elaborate windows through which cans of cold beer are sold. At times, there are also vendors selling fruit smoothies, pork scratchings, CDs of rumba music, and even herbs said to be endowed with magical properties. Indeed, the Callejón has become a hub for the practice of *santería*, a fact that is not unconnected to the Afro-Cuban artists and musicians who congregate here. A syncretic and idiosyncratically Cuban faith, *santería* is the result of the suppression of the

Later this same day, there will be what is called a *Changó tambor*, a drum session in honor of Changó, as part of the anniversary celebrations.

Wading into the throng of people, I steel myself for the hands that reach out from every direction, grasping at my wrists and snaking around my waist, trying to draw me in one direction or another. There are other foreigners here—sunburned European faces dotted here and there in the crowd, watching the proceedings hesitantly from the sidelines or awkwardly joining in the dancing—but not so many that I can blend into the background. This is a place where tourists and young Cubans come to meet each other. One of my Cuban friends once told me, on my first visit to this place, that the Callejón serves as a sort of cover story for some foreigners. “They come here to congratulate themselves on being so culturally inclined,” he said. “And to meet *mulaticos* and *negritos*, of course, but without having it look like that’s what they want.”

Over the past fifteen years, the Cuban state has taken an increasingly punitive approach to any kind of romantic or sexual liaison between Cubans and foreigners. In the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse, such encounters and relationships had emerged as viable means of accessing hard currency, consumer goods, travel, and emigration—of gaining admittance to a perceived better life. With the Soviet Union’s demise in the early 1990s, Cuba lost its principal source of financial and political support, plunging the country into a profound economic crisis that its government called *el Período especial en tiempo de paz*—the Special Period in Peacetime. Seemingly overnight, the Cuban economy collapsed by 40 percent.³ At the same time, the United States solidified its embargo on Cuba, which locals call *el bloqueo*, with the Toricelli Act of 1992 and the Helms-Burton Act of 1996. Thus, throughout the 1990s, and still today for many, Cubans experienced material shortages and grinding poverty that exceeded those seen during the Great Depression in the American Midwest.⁴

It was during this time that the government, as desperate as its citizens for access to hard currency and to the burgeoning underground dollar economy, began to open its doors to mass tourism from Europe and North America. The practice of pursuing relationships with foreign tourists has, since then, become part of a broader set of black- and gray-market activities known locally as *jineterismo*—or jockeying. It has created a tourist-oriented sexual-affective economy, an economy that is not purely *economic* but deals

also in affect, love, and solidarity.⁵ This is why many of these foreigners, though certainly not all of them, are here today in the Callejón de Hamel.

A number of Cuba's state institutions have gone to great lengths to condemn *jineterismo*—as sexual practice, classing all young women seen out dancing or in the company of foreigners as prostitutes. There have been frequent and repeated mass arrests, and thousands of young women have been sent to what the state calls rehabilitation centers in an attempt to repress what state bodies see as prostitution—a stance that has had profound political implications for young Cubans. As even those engaged in traditional, long-term relationships with non-Cubans are left with the burden of proving the legitimacy of their affection in the eyes of the state, and particularly of the police, in order to avoid arrest and possible imprisonment, an atmosphere of fear has descended, meaning that many are unwilling to speak openly about their experiences. What is more, the supposed prostitutes—*jineteras*, as they are called here—whom the state seeks to address are almost universally understood to be young, attractive, black and *mulata* women,⁶ and such a person seen in a heavily touristed zone of the island runs the risk of attracting police scrutiny, if not arrest, based on racist and sexist assumptions about their sexual promiscuity and moral depravity.

The Callejón de Hamel is not a safe haven from this sort of profiling, much as it might appear to be a glinting and euphoric oasis. Several uniformed police officers stand sentinel outside, entering now and then to select black and mulato people for identification checks, arrest, or other forms of surveillance. More than anything, the Callejón de Hamel is an indicator of the complexity of Cuban society in an era of rapid and often unsettling change. The cultural geographers John Finn and Chris Lukinbeal have called this place “essential to the accurate representation of Havana's vibrant Afro-Cuban scene.”⁷ In the wake of the economic crisis and Cuba's aperture to foreign tourism, Afro-Cuban culture is now studied and celebrated as it has never been before, drawing tourists to witness the appealing exoticism of rumba and santería—what the anthropologist Jafari Allen wryly calls “afro-kitsch.”⁸

The Callejón is a nucleus of entrepreneurship where dollars circulate liberally. Its vendors, and González himself, depend on the tourists who flock here to experience uniquely Cuban cultural production. The socialist state machinery, meanwhile, watches over this consumerist heresy and

permits it to continue in the name of allying itself with Afro-Cuban cultural expression⁹—and, one could easily argue, to keep the tourists happy and coming back. In this way, the Callejón reveals the impossible position of the Cuban state and its aperture to the foreign international tourism market: it rejects capitalism and consumerism on the one hand, while on the other it lays Cuba out for the delectation of the foreign tourist, making its own deal with the capitalist devil in the name of fiscal solvency.

The role of *santería* amid all of this commercial ingenuity is also sharply conflicted. Though it is the most popular form of religious expression in Cuba today, its exercise is normally highly secretive. Such a degree of mystery is due both to a history of repression, which gave rise to a tradition of underground observance, and to the perceived need to guard ritual knowledge from the eyes of nonbelievers.¹⁰ In a way, *santería* is everywhere and nowhere at once in Cuban society, an everyday presence that rarely announces itself too loudly. Thus, day to day in Cuban cities and towns, one sees *santeros* dressed all in white, makeshift shrines to ancestors with offerings of perfumed water in people's homes, caged doves destined for sacrifice, and strings of bright beads here and there whose colors evoke the individual *orichas*.

Over the course of my time in Cuba, the Callejón de Hamel and the conversations I had there meant that the yellow and gold beads of *Ochún* around a woman's wrist, or a friend beseeching *Yemayá* to calm the sea for our trip to the beach, made sense to me. Most Cubans, on opening a bottle of liquor, will always pour the first sip on the ground for the *orichas*; signs and symbols such as these are nearly ubiquitous. Meanwhile, however, the actual rituals and ceremonies of *santería*, by which people are initiated to and advance within the faith, are shrouded in secrecy.

So it was that, as I made my way down Calle San Francisco one morning in March, I felt my foot brush against something soft and looked down to find the severed head of a very young goat lying there on the pavement. There must have been a ceremony in that place the night before, under the cover of darkness, and likely in honor of *Elegguá*, the *oricha* who governs travelers and crossroads. Outsiders are not meant to witness ceremonies such as these. *Santería* has few public or permanent churches or temples, since it was practiced clandestinely for so many centuries, though its followers also pay their respects to the Catholic saints, each of which is linked

to a particular oricha. In the Callejón de Hamel, however, santería emerges from the shadows for the benefit of foreigners who come to observe ceremonies, partake in drum sessions, and have *babalaos*—the high priests of santería—divine their futures using cowrie shells. The spiritual practice and dogma of santería have become a part of Afro-Cuban folkloric performance.¹¹ While the santeros of the Callejón certainly do not reveal all their secrets, their complicity with the drive for dollars in places such as these creates santería as a kind of exotic tourist attraction.

This tension is mirrored by the role that sexuality has come to play, both inside and beyond the Callejón de Hamel. Young men and women flock there to mingle with *yumas*, or foreigners,¹² many of whom arrived in Cuba with their ideas about Cuban sexuality already well formed. It is true that desire and sensuality can at times seem to permeate everyday interactions among some Cubans, resulting in a sexualized street culture and a national reputation that extends far beyond the island itself. The Cuban sociologist Abel Sierra Madero describes the Cuban *ambiente* as follows:

Cuba is a country where people look at one another indiscreetly, impudently and constantly. It's enough just to walk down the sizzling streets at times to seem to feel a sensation of having ardent and libidinous eyes boring into one's back. Between the look and the passing of two bodies there exists a lapse of time, milliseconds in which some flattery or crude word can be spoken: a *piropo*, a sort of fleeting courtship in which desire and lust are given free rein. It's part of our daily life, our idiosyncrasy, and it's the men who traditionally have carried out this element of our culture.¹³

This street culture is mirrored in the Callejón by the courtship narrative of rumba dancing, and of course the presence of the *yumas* and their dates. This is not the world occupied by all Cubans by any stretch of the imagination, but in spaces of interaction with *yumas* such as this, it is a world very deliberately inhabited and lived by numerous young Cubans. Many of the young Cubans I encountered here are proud of their country's libidinous reputation; indeed, they would often express disbelief when confronted with a foreigner who might *not* have come to Cuba to take part in this sexual culture—that is, in search of sex with a Cuban.¹⁴ This production of the Cuban as both desirable and sexually energetic has become something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: foreigners come to Cuba for its

renowned sensuality, and the Cubans who seek them out become all the more sensual in the knowledge that it is expected of them.

This supposedly distinct Cuban sexuality is epitomized in the bodies of those women who fit an ideal of exoticized Caribbean beauty—the mulata. There is a recurring joke on the island that the beautiful and sensual mulata is Cuba's single greatest invention. This image of Cuban women's allure and availability was reflected on the international scene in 1991, at the very moment of economic crisis, by coverage in both *National Geographic* and *Playboy*, which—in their very different but nonetheless predictable ways—showed Cuba as “a land of dark, sensuous women.”¹⁵ These two publications set the tone for a spate of international news coverage that “buzzed with accounts of cheap, sexy, and brown Cuban bodies for sale” in the context of the economic hardship of the 1990s, with reports appearing in everything from the *New York Times* to *Glamour*.¹⁶ Amid devastating shortages, stories were beginning to emerge at home and abroad of attractive young Cubans taking trips to the tourist hubs of Havana, Varadero, and Santiago to meet tourists and returning to their homes in the countryside with cash, clothing, perfume, and even small appliances and building materials. Some women married foreign nationals and emigrated from Cuba entirely; in fact, one of the models who posed for *Playboy* wound up moving to France with the magazine's photographer.¹⁷ So-called jineteras also featured heavily in a new genre of fiction called Cuban Dirty Realism, reflecting both the scale of the sexual-affective economy and the media demand to hear more about it.¹⁸

Thus, in the Callejón de Hamel, sexuality is like santería: something local, exotic, and fascinating on display for foreigners' enjoyment. It is present in the rumba dancing, certainly, but it is also inscribed on the very bodies of the young Cubans who come here. In the music, the art, the conversations, the lingering looks, and the “authentic” local experience, sexuality is rarely far from the surface in the Callejón. The alleyway is like a microcosm of Cuban street culture: loud, rhythmic, and boisterous, with a friendliness than can verge on the licentious or even, to the unaccustomed, the invasive. On the streets of Havana, old car engines roar, people shout to one another from balconies, and music pours from windows. As a young woman who could only occasionally be taken for Cuban, I never felt like I could fly under the radar; voices called out from every direction,

some looking to hawk their wares, but most offering compliments or propositions—the ubiquitous *piropo*. This culture—with its embedded contradictions of being simultaneously socialist and capitalist, sexually liberal and *machista*, and followers of Catholicism, socialist atheism, and *santería* all at once—is what makes Cuba a “lively” place to study political and sexual culture.¹⁹

The *jineteras* are very much a part of this world. The word itself can sometimes be used as a stand-in for beautiful, sassy, or stylish—both earnest and playfully tongue-in-cheek. More than once, I even heard men call out to female coworkers and friends with an affectionate, *iOye, jinetera!*—just as they might otherwise say *preciosa, bonita, mamá*. “From the salsa singers, the cab drivers’ quips and the bawdy folk art renderings of *jineteras* I encountered around Havana,” writes Coco Fusco, “I got the sense that on the street these women are perceived as heroic providers whose mythical sexual power is showing up the failures of an ailing macho regime.”²⁰ They also have their place in *santería*: there are those who class *jineteras*—and mulata women in general—as descendants of Ochún, the Yoruba incarnation of Cuba’s patron saint, the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre. Ochún is the river goddess who governs love, marriage, mirrors, honey, peacock feathers, and all other things of beauty. Others, however, see the *jinetera* as a daughter of the tempestuous mother goddess, Yemayá, who watches over women and rules the seas.²¹ The association of the *jinetera* with either of these figures, who permeate Cuban culture, is striking in itself.

DEBATING PROSTITUTION IN CUBA

My own position in this project is a complex one. I am a student of Cuban cultural and political life, and not least because of the government’s explicit humanist mission and its stated commitment to improve the lives of women, Afro-Cuban people, and, more recently, gay, lesbian, and transgender Cubans. At the same time, I am also invested in struggles against oppression and marginalization, and in modes of resistance that seek a more profound freedom, above and beyond what this—or any—state can offer. Naively, it was the contradictions that drew me to Cuba in the first

place: the idea of a self-consciously progressive regime seeking to intervene so forcefully into the sex lives of the very citizens it claimed to have liberated more than thirty years ago—women, and especially Afro-Cuban women. Cuba is certainly not unique as a destination for sex tourism, or even one where the lines between love, sex, and money are so blurry, but this ideological interplay certainly makes it remarkable.²²

Much has been written, in the media and in academia, about the “glaring ideological contradictions” of resurgent prostitution under socialism.²³ Most commentary seems preoccupied with ascertaining causes and apportioning blame for the phenomenon. Few accounts try to foreground the lived experiences of the young Cubans who are actually involved in sexual-affective economies of tourism, and virtually none depict what the sociologist Heidi Hoefinger calls “the other side of the story—the side which exists in the laughter among friends, in the little joys of daily accomplishments or in the personal satisfaction of helping loved ones.”²⁴ Noelle M. Stout surveys the debate on renewed prostitution in Cuba as follows:

Cuban scholars and women’s rights advocates, charged with the task of explaining the re-emergence of sex tourism, have suggested that *jineterismo* reflects a crisis in values, that sex workers are seduced by superficial desires for commodity goods, and they have supported mandatory rehabilitation for *jineteras*. In response, some analysts in the United States and Europe have characterised Cuban critics of *jineterismo* as unsympathetic to the plight of Cuban sex workers and the realities of poverty they face. More pointedly, a number of foreign analysts have described Cuban women’s advocates as stuck in a “Victorian past” by promoting repressive racist and elitist ideologies, defenders of the status quo who falsely claim to champion women’s rights, and towing the same party line as right wing Western politicians.²⁵

Most of the existing writing on *jineterismo* fits comfortably into Stout’s taxonomy.²⁶ Socialist feminists, including the women’s advocates Celia Sarduy Sánchez and Ada Alfonso Rodríguez, the activist Jan Strout, and the journalists Rosa Miriam Elizalde and Mirta Rodríguez Calderón, are among the former group, concerned above all with the perceived moral crisis that is eroding the foundations of communitarian life in Cuba and replacing it with empty consumerism.²⁷ Strout argues that *jineteras* seek the ability to go where they want and purchase what they want, taking advantage of evolving social taboos to reject honest work and de-link love and sex. These

women are “unaware,” Strout asserts, of the risks of prostitution, in a critique that has been called one of “moral turpitude.”²⁸ The jineteras themselves are portrayed as empowered and able decision makers who have been encouraged to play an equal role in the family, the workplace, and the military for the past fifty years, and who have the benefit of state social resources to equip and assist them, but who choose to turn their backs in favor of shallow materialism.²⁹ Cuban women’s advocates and socialist feminists view the growth of jineterismo as a threat to the hard-won gains of Cuba’s women in the decades since the Revolution and in the face of economic hardship that endangers provision of social benefits for all.

This very economic dilemma is what drives Stout’s latter grouping. Liberal feminist academics such as Judy Whitehead, Hülya Demirdirek, and Cynthia Pope see Cubans as the victims of hard economic times. The rapidly diminishing value of salaries and systemic shortages of goods have truncated the available range of choices, forcing people to enter the black market in various ways in order to earn hard cash. For example, the anthropologists Whitehead and Demirdirek characterize the moral judgments made by socialists as “elite anxieties” that are “projected onto the bodies and lives of non-elite Afro-Cuban women.”³⁰ While they studiously avoid judging the jineteras for accepting money for sex, Stout observes, they simultaneously chalk those same activities up to the women’s helpless victimhood and seem to want to rescue Cuban women from their exploitation.³¹

Amid these competing voices, it is difficult to discern what space remains for the jineteras themselves to define their own position in Cuban society. They do not go far enough in questioning the dominant discourses that frame so-called prostitutes as deviants who either *fail* to be acceptable subjects in their own right—and by *subjectivity*, I mean simply being in the world as the possessor of perspectives, experiences, feelings, beliefs, and desires—or are driven to perversion by circumstances and are thus *failed by* the system. What is at stake, then, is not how certain women come to be labeled as prostitutes or jineteras, or what that labeling does, but rather who is to blame for the rise of jineterismo. Thus most of what has been written about jineterismo functions within the same assumptions as the coverage that has appeared in the media. Amalia L. Cabezas goes much further in her book, *Economies of Desire: Sex and Tourism in Cuba and the Dominican Republic*, questioning the opposition between

love and money that is set up by received knowledge on prostitution.³² In an as yet unpublished thesis titled “(Re)covering Women: The State, Morality, and Cultural Discourses of Sex-Work in Cuba,” the anthropologist Alyssa García also explores the historical underpinning of jineterismo as a sexual practice but without in-depth engagement with jineteras themselves.³³

What is missing seems to be an exploration of jineterismo-as-sexual-practice that acts not just at the level of individual women’s lives, but as a potentially political act, starting from the perspectives and identities of the jineteras themselves. Over the course of my time in Cuba, I came to believe that viewing this phenomenon through an explicitly political lens, but *not* one that begins and ends with the state and the Revolution, offers something new to the conversation. Discussions of Cuba and international politics are usually dominated by its fraught relationship with the United States—and, by extension, with underlying commitments to either support or undermine the Revolution or socialism itself. Political life and subjectivity in Cuba are far more complex than this polarized debate will allow. Likewise, histories of Cuba tend to enumerate a list of eras punctuated by an accepted list of nation-building events, whereas I am more interested in subtler processes of articulation and constitution by which Cubans—and especially Cuban women—have been produced as political and sexual subjects. As threads that run through the history of *cubanidad*, these processes predate the Revolution and transcend the successive regimes of the past five centuries. In that light, jineterismo is not a barometer of the strength or weakness of Cuba’s model, or of its moral veracity, but a kind of identity formation and ethics of self-creation that goes far deeper than ideology.

The central question that I am seeking to address in this book is, as it turns out, fairly simple: How are bodies governed in Cuba? Or rather, why are *these* bodies—mostly young black or mixed-race women—governed differently and made available for state intervention? This question, together with my own politics, has taken me down a particular path: intersectional, feminist, postcolonial, queer. I am interested in “deconstructing a specific category of woman,” in Marysia Zalewski’s words, and revealing the ways in which identities are (re)produced, in discourse and in practice, over time.³⁴ In practice, I have had to be flexible and malleable

to circumstances, a choice that I think is reasonable, even essential, when it comes to doing sensitive research like this. Conducting interviews and field research in Cuba presents a special set of difficulties, and these difficulties are magnified a hundred times over when one is concerned with an area of research that the Cuban government finds highly objectionable, as I was.

“ETHICS BOARD” ETHICS VERSUS A PERSONAL ETHICS OF RESEARCH

Moving from these ideas into the “fieldwork, textwork and headwork”³⁵ of the project proved far from straightforward. *Jineterismo* was and remains a very sensitive subject for Cuban government institutions. Immediately upon arrival in Havana, in early February 2010, I went to the University of Havana to be registered as a visiting researcher, which was necessary to get my visa. I had been cautioned to be vague about the details of my project—a helpful graduate student in the waiting area had even given me added pointers on ways to frame my work—but I was still not prepared for what happened next: in my meeting, pointing fingers just inches from my nose, I was sternly instructed to abandon all pretense of fieldwork. I could go to libraries and archives, and I could speak to academics, they said, but no one else. I was to do no fieldwork of any kind while in Cuba. “Nada en la calle”—nothing in the street.

Thoroughly chastised, I left the university offices and called the one contact I had in Cuba, a writer who had published several books and had been a visiting scholar at universities in the United States and United Kingdom. At the time, he was a total stranger to me, but over coffee the following day on a hotel terrace near the university, he told me that this is how it always is in Cuba for researchers: you arrive, you swear up and down that you will do no such thing, and then you do it.

So began an uninterrupted six months of observation, archival research, and interviewing in Cuba (but of course, no fieldwork) on the governance of bodies in post-Soviet Cuba. The Biblioteca Nacional José Martí, the library of the Casa de las Américas, and the university libraries furnished me with historical texts and accounts inaccessible outside of Cuba. The archives of

the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC) and the Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual (CENESEX) held more recent policy documents, articles, studies, and congress minutes. Far more of my time, though, was spent observing, listening, talking, and laughing with young Cubans in and around popular nightspots and tourist attractions. I spent my days watching and learning how interactions unfolded among young Cubans, yumas, and the police. By the time I left Cuba, I had conducted over fifty interviews with Cubans who had, or sought to have, relationships with foreigners.

My informants were mostly young women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, some (but not all) of whom fit the generally accepted profile of a *jinetera*. Not all embraced the title of *jinetera*, but each one had either had or sought sexual-affective liaisons with tourists. I also interviewed a number of young men, self-proclaimed *jineteros* who dated foreign women, whose stories demonstrate how constructions of gender affect the ways in which *jineterismo* is understood and confronted. The people I interviewed were overwhelmingly heterosexual and cisgendered people who sought foreign partners of the opposite sex. That fact is not intended to diminish or erase the experience of gay, lesbian, transgendered, and queer Cubans, or to define *jineterismo* “in relation to the sexual preferences of the clients,” as Carrie Hamilton cautions.³⁶ It is rather a reflection of some of the realities of fieldwork and of the evolving direction of the project. First and foremost, though I set out to interview Cubans who engaged in any kind of sexual relations with yumas, I found with time that *pingueros* (young men who date male tourists) rarely appeared in my network. They are, after all, far less numerous than the so-called *jineteras* and *jineteros* by virtually all accounts on the ground. Female same-sex desire represents an almost total silence in Cuba’s sexual-affective economy, existing as it does in a male-centered machista setting. It is rarely discussed, usually misogynistically dismissed as not *real* sex, and some people I met even denied that lesbian *jineteras* exist, though there is some evidence to suggest otherwise.³⁷ In the end, only two of my interviewees professed to be gay or bisexual themselves—either personally or professionally.

Furthermore, the more I learned, the more I realized that what I was studying was the production of the *jinetera* in the Cuban nationalist imaginary, as well as the violence that this archetype engenders, and this nationalist imaginary functions on a system of compulsory (but raced)

heterosexuality. To put it far too simply for the sake of argument, there are only four permissible roles within this system: the black/animalistic man, the white/masculine man, the white/virtuous woman, and the black/sensualized woman. It seemed to me, in conversation with the people I met, that the *jinetera* had a particular (restrictive, sexualized, archetypal) role written for her in this script, which was used to justify her treatment as a prostitute, whereas gay and transgender Cubans had no place in this script at all. While people who engage in same-sex love and sex in Cuba have had more than their share of discipline at the hands of state institutions, some of which will be discussed in the following chapters, it has been a somewhat different kind of discipline based on their perceived failures as masculine subjects rather than as feminine ones, like the so-called *jineteras*. It is for this reason that their engagement with foreigners is—like that of heterosexual *jineteros*—by and large not read as embedded in the same history of imperialism and *mulata* sensuality. Thus some of my observations will be relevant to the lives of these people as well, as dissident sexual subjects within a strictly gendered setting, but the full range and complexity of their experiences are beyond the scope of this project. While gay, lesbian, transgendered, and queer Cubans are a part of the world I was studying, and will appear in some of the stories that follow, I feel I would be doing them an injustice if I attempted to draw conclusions about their lives or experiences here.

Getting those fifty interviews, as I had expected, proved exceptionally difficult. Even deciding *who* I wanted to interview was not always easy. I quickly learned, as Cabezas had as well, that the “unified object of my research, the ‘sex worker,’ did not exist, was ambiguous, or at the very least was quite an unstable subject.”³⁸ Sexual-affective relations between Cubans and foreigners are ambiguous, ranging from long-term committed partnerships to fleeting encounters, none of which can be said to be purely transactional, so attempting to determine who is and who is not a *jinetera* is useless. It is the *idea* of a category of people called *jineteras*, and the presumption of who fits the bill, that matters. For that very reason, many young women who engage in sexual-affective relationships with foreign men reject the term *jinetera*, creating their own alternative names or eschewing labels altogether. This practice forms the basis for the second chapter of this book. My own understanding of what I was looking for in

an interviewee—people who call themselves *jineteras*? people who have been treated as *jineteras* by the police? people who look like *jineteras*?—never truly settled into a single profile.

More to the point, however, was the issue of trust. Few people were eager to discuss such a politically sensitive topic with a stranger, so building rapport with informants was key. Some of my successes came by chance, via conversations I was able to strike up on my own, but the vast majority were the result of a network of contacts built up over time, snowballing into ever more connections and introductions. This strategy brought me into contact with more potential informants and, in turn, provided them with the safeguard of a mutual contact who could vouch for me.

Overall, I managed far fewer interviews than I had originally hoped, and some of my interviews were stilted and uncomfortable, with many awkward silences. I very rarely had the luxury of naming the place and time of an interview. Opportunities were sometimes fleeting and appointments to meet again at a more convenient time were rarely kept, so I had interviews that happened at two o'clock in the morning, that took place inside noisy clubs and bars or on the beach; interviews where I took notes on the backs of maps and bus tickets; and even one where answers came only in the form of nods and shakes of the head. Most of my interviews were between one and three hours long, and due to concerns for my informants' safety some were not audio recorded. The accounts of my interviews in the chapters to come are therefore reconstructions rather than transcripts of every word that passed between us, and I quote them only where I managed to transcribe my informants' words precisely.

As Maria Stern and Lorraine Nencel both observe, learning to understand and interpret silences and exclusions—what was *not* said—became nearly as important as what was said.³⁹ My curiosity was usually not rewarded with straightforward answers. I learned something new from each person I met, but not in ways that could have been predicted in advance, and I often did not learn what I set out to learn. Circumstances constantly changed, and the meanings of ideas, categories, and words shifted before my eyes. A high degree of flexibility had to be built into my research, both methodologically and conceptually.

This need for flexibility forced me to rebel against the very concept of methodology. My background was in international politics, a discipline

more or less closed to nontraditional methods drawn from anthropology or cultural studies. What I had been taught of methodology relied heavily on notions of objectivity, neutrality, and, quite frankly, the ability to predict—and to control—what will happen in the field. I contend that these are impossible (and not necessarily desirable) ideals in the context of an ethnographic, feminist project dealing with marginalized people across lines of race, gender, class, and culture.⁴⁰ The experience of ethnographic fieldwork often left me feeling that I was the last person with any sway over the outcome of my work, as I was totally dependent on others who had no obligation to help me. What is more, the differences between me, a white, middle-class, English- and French-speaking young Canadian woman, and my informants, who were mostly young black and mixed-race women who had grown up in Cuba under very different socioeconomic conditions, were significant and certainly influenced our perceptions of one another. We were often close to the same age, but otherwise we looked at one another across a gulf of experience with few commonalities.

These realities of research led me to reassess my ethical relationship to the subjects of my research and standard “ethics board” ethics. I have no doubt as to the ethical integrity of my project, but the practicalities of fieldwork meant that I had to focus on upholding the spirit rather than the letter of ethical regulations, usually in the interest of protecting my informants’ anonymity and personal safety. Alan Feldman argues, “In a culture of political surveillance, participant observation is at best an absurdity and at the least a form of complicity with those outsiders who surveil.”⁴¹ I could not make use of consent forms in my research, since committing my informants’ names to paper would endanger their safety, not to mention likely cause me to lose the interview; however, I had detailed conversations with each one about how I planned to use the interviews and in what forums my work was likely to appear.

To mitigate the risk of police harassment, arrest, and even violence that my informants faced, I did whatever was necessary to make them feel safe and secure speaking to me. I kept absolutely no written record of their real names, became proficient in concealing my documents and files, and did everything I could to keep myself and my interactions with informants off the radar of the police and other state institutions. I also learned strategies for avoiding the gaze of the police while moving through public spaces.

This was another instance where planning and control on my part were often impossible: my informants were much better versed in the methods of Cuban state security, and often I had little choice but to follow their lead in exchange for a “privileged peek backstage” at their lives and worlds.⁴²

As important as ethics board ethics was a personal ethics of research. There is a power relationship inherent in interviewing, and particularly in interviewing vulnerable individuals, with one party demanding and the other providing information. This almost unavoidably extractive and “colonial” relationship behooves the ethnographer to be mindful about taking a reflective and self-critical approach to interviewing.⁴³ It is not enough, as Daphne Patai argues, to assume that a feminist or antiracist standpoint will act as a safeguard against exploiting others: it is a “messy business” from beginning to end.⁴⁴ To mitigate these problems as much as possible, I worked with my informants to make our experiences reciprocal and conversational. Many interviewees asked me questions, which I always answered, and these often turned out to be as interesting as the questions I asked them. In James Clifford’s words, each of us was (and is) a “speaking [subject], who sees as well as is seen, who evades, argues, probes back.”⁴⁵ An awareness of the intersubjectivity and impact of race, gender, class, and cultural difference cannot, Nencel notes, “erase the divide” between researcher and researched, but it can help mediate and flag these problems, creating a space for respect, trust, and even humor.⁴⁶ In pursuit of a more honest and accurate representation of the field experience, conscious engagement with these issues can only help, even if it can never fully solve them.

Even so, there were moments during my time in Cuba in which I felt some unease with my role or my choices in the field. At times, I was forced to conceal parts of my project from the authorities, to choose my words carefully around neighbors and university staff, or to adapt myself to the expectations of my friends and informants. Vincent Crapanzano discusses the role of researcher as “trickster,” where one does not necessarily misrepresent oneself or conceal information but rather molds oneself to suit the needs of the research.⁴⁷ I struggled with finding myself occasionally not liking some of my informants, feeling obliged to feign agreement with them, and having to associate with people who treated me poorly or did not respect my boundaries. The researcher in me was in conflict with my

various other identities and personae, which do not disappear in the field.⁴⁸ I often felt pressure to behave as my Cuban contacts believed I should, whether that meant tolerating sexual propositions from certain contacts with a smile or carrying on drinking when I did not want to do so, because stopping would have seemed rude or out of place. Frankly, I cannot count the number of shots of rum that I poured into the sea when no one was looking.

This uneasiness made me consider the role that I played for my Cuban informants. I often felt cast in a role, as Patai did, but that role changed from time to time.⁴⁹ Some of the young people I met forbade me to use their experiences in my writing but still insisted on sharing them with me, while others implored me to write about them. I was at times a friend, a potential benefactor, a naive outsider, a confidante. As a yuma and, in the eyes of most Cubans, a perpetual tourist, I felt forever on the outside—which may have had its advantages at times⁵⁰—and my topic of research marked me out for many as at best peculiar and at worst a “moral transgressor and thus *una mala mujer* [a bad woman].”⁵¹ More than once, I heard reports that male contacts of mine claimed to have slept with me. I found this kind of macho *guapería* distressing in the moment, but with time it became just one part of a landscape of emotions and tensions that simultaneously troubled and constituted my experience of ethnography.

WRITING PROSTITUTE/*JINETERA* LIVES

Maria Stern refers to her interviewees as coauthors of her text, since she consulted them on multiple occasions and got their feedback on the narrative produced by their conversations.⁵² This is another area where my research has had to diverge from such an ideal scenario, for both ethical and logistical reasons. Though we spoke for hours on end, many of my informants preferred never to see me again after our interviews, for their own safety and peace of mind. They often had no telephone in their homes, much less access to cell phones or email, so contacting many of them for a second meeting or to send them any of my writing has not been possible. While I maintain contact with some informants, others have more or less slipped into the ether by their own design. The dangers of

interpreting and appropriating their lives and experiences are thus very real here. As the orchestrator and manager of the narratives produced by the conversations I had with young Cubans, I felt keenly aware of my precarious ethical position toward the people I met and the stories they entrusted to me. Stéphanie Wahab expresses something similar: “I was acutely aware of what felt like a colonial position I was taking, if nothing else, by virtue of managing their/our words and stories. Furthermore, I dreaded the sensationalising process that occurs once knowledge and experience are uttered and recorded. We were already swimming in sensationalism and sexiness given the topic we were exploring.”⁵³

The role of the author in ethnographic accounts is one of “both getting out of the way and getting in the way”⁵⁴—far from invisible or neutral (nor should it be), and not always even helpful to the unfolding of the text. But, as Clifford notes, life stories are contingent and allegorical: it is the telling, as my informants told them to me and as I have retold them here, that is the most important.⁵⁵ “Ethnographic truths,” continues Clifford, “are thus inherently *partial*—committed and incomplete.”⁵⁶ I do not feel that this text has been of my own making, and I hope that is because my informants’ lives have been fairly represented and their voices are here with my own in these pages.

To best portray this experience of ethnography and this commitment to ethical representation, I have written this book loosely chronologically, according to the phases through which my research progressed. I feel that a narrative, chronological structure can provide the most genuine rendering of the Cuban setting and my time there. Ethnographic fieldwork is a process of learning how to do this kind of research: which questions to ask (and which not to ask), how to get interviews, how to understand these people and this scenario. In this way, I can be honest about how fuzzy the line between work and life really was, how personal some of my field experiences were, how my position had an impact on my work, how what I learned at each stage affected what happened later. In short, I do not have to pretend that I knew things at certain stages that I simply did not know yet.

Thus the book begins with an exploration of Cuban identity and the figure of the mulata, both as an emblem for and a specter that haunts Cuban nationalism. Evolving ideas of gender roles, women’s sexuality, race, and prostitution are juxtaposed to the dominant narrative of Cuban

history. I have attempted to defuse the usual focus on nation-building moments (colonial conquest, wars of independence, and the 1959 Revolution) by drawing attention to the ongoing processes of subject formation that founds Cuba as a nation and Cubans as raced, gendered, sexualized individuals. Cuba's distinct relationship to foreigners and "the foreign" comes through clearly, particularly in the context of the rise of *jineterismo*, as young women who engage in sex with foreigners are persecuted in the present day.

The second chapter commences the account of my fieldwork. These were my first interviews, the ones that were the most straightforward to obtain and that turned out to be, for the most part, the longest and most detailed, with people who felt most confident and comfortable speaking to me. We talked about their self-perceptions and their feelings about relationships, race, and labels like "jinetera"—what they mean, and also what they do. These conversations help to destabilize *jineterismo*-as-sexual-practice (and the *jinetera*) as discursive constructs, and allowed me to delve into practices of categorization and gendered and raced social expectations and their effects on young Cuban women of color.

From there, as my network of contacts grew, I spoke with people who had personal experience of the police practices and other forms of violence that have become standard parts of the world of *jineterismo*. These opportunities were often fleeting or incomplete, as many of these people feared retribution from any number of sources—state security, individual police officers, employers, or their own partners and families—if they were caught speaking to me. These encounters, along with my observations of policing and other direct forms of repression, form the basis of my third chapter, which deals with everyday practices of repression and resistance. I discuss the violence that acts in, through, and above the law as a conditioning factor in the lives of many young Cubans and the various ways these same people have found of averting and co-opting the gaze of the police through micro-practices of resistance.

The concluding stage of my fieldwork is covered in the fourth chapter, which includes interviews conducted with representatives of some of Cuba's mass organizations that have been central to the state's response to *jineterismo*. Through these conversations, as well as the resources from their archives, I attempt to piece together a picture of the state-centered

discourse of prostitution that informs the legal and supposedly rehabilitative measures taken against young women perceived as *jineteras*. Amid the policy documents, congress minutes, studies, and interviews there emerges an ideal of socialist womanhood—a New Woman to accompany Ché Guevara’s New Man—and, along with it, a notion of idealized, revolutionary love.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, I endeavor to bring together all of these strands of thought—the (re)production of women of color as sexual/political subjects, their perceived availability for intervention by a variety of forces, their constitution as failed subjects of revolutionary womanhood and love—to formulate an understanding of *jineterismo*-as-sexual-practice as a form of resistance to a power that seeks to forge a productive, ideologically engaged citizenry. The young women I interviewed in my investigation of Cuba’s sexual-affective economy are actively pursuing a life completely at odds with the norms and mores of the socialist world in which they were raised. I argue that this phenomenon, which defies notions of virtuous sexuality, healthy relationships, and moral conduct put forward for women by the socialist value set, constitutes a form of aesthetic self-creation, which in itself is a potent form of resistance to subjectifying power. This resistance as a sexual and bodily practice is what renders the Cuban case relevant to a broader understanding of oppression and marginality.

Throughout this project, I have developed my interviews in a conversational, almost novelistic style. This approach to writing ethnography is, I believe, not just a stylistic choice, but an ethical and a political one. I hope that bringing out the histories and personalities in my work will result in a more genuine representation of my interviewees’ lives and the politics of their stories. I want my informants to live within the text as true-to-life, complex characters, as they are in real life. I have written their stories *as* stories to foreground their personalities and their lived experiences of the discourses, practices, and systems that I discuss. These vignettes are “fictions”⁵⁷—not in the sense of being untrue but in that they highlight the constructedness of all life stories, which are more than simple chronologies. They represent each individual’s articulation of self. Or, as Stern puts it: “A focus on the discursive, constructed character of stories, or lives, does not deny that people *really* live, experience threat and harm, or

safety and wellbeing, to disclaim that this were so would be silly. We act, experience and live, but the *meaning* we give to our actions is continually constructed within a web of different discourses. Similarly, we as subjects are continually reconstructed or reinscribed through narrative and representation.”⁵⁸

Throughout the process of writing, I have often wondered to myself if my informants would recognize themselves in what I have written, if they would be satisfied with it, if they knew that every word—the conflicts, the dismissals and misunderstandings, the silences—would be noted and possibly included in my account.⁵⁹ For the most part, I cannot approach these people to ask their opinions on what I have written, but I hope that in continually asking myself these questions, I can go some distance toward challenging and destabilizing the problem of representation.

This project is meant to trouble disciplinary norms. It does not map easily onto the structures and formats to which we are accustomed when we talk about international politics. It is not, to borrow Patti Lather’s words, a “comfort text.”⁶⁰ I have tried to work from the ground up, starting with the stories told to me by the so-called *jineteras* themselves and building a theoretically informed analysis on that foundation. My intention is not to speak *for* these people, or to simply *apply* theoretical insights, but rather to “weave the insights gained from [theory] through my discussion.”⁶¹ I hope that these stories will help illuminate the ways in which sexuality and sexual subjects are produced in interaction with normative ideals in the Cuban setting and thus the effects that this regime of repression directed at *jineterismo*, and the practices of resistance to it, have had on sexual subjectivity.

The accepted discourse of prostitution is one that creates a category of people as available for intervention, rehabilitation, and practices of violence. It erases the desire and consent of individual women, reducing their motivations to the transactional. By denying any motivation other than selfishness, it also erases those women who are genuinely coerced into sex with tourists by their partners or other intermediaries. The young Cubans I met in my exploration of the sexual-affective economy describe another world where love and money are not mutually exclusive, and where morality and sexuality do not exist in separate spheres. In a system that so explicitly demands all that each has to give, carefully crafting political

subjects in the likeness of imagined socialist heroes and in the face of severe austerity, these individuals are finding ways to carve out spaces for themselves—spaces that allow them some measure of freedom, however incomplete, where they can live according to their own priorities and images of the good life.