CHAPTER 4

"Smarter Than You Think"

SEX, DESIRE, AND LABOR AMONG HUSTLERS

At almost noon one Sunday, I walked the seven blocks to Melba's apartment from my place. Centro Habana was bustling. I passed overcrowded apartment houses and hollowed out ruins where buildings had once stood. Trucks clattered through the uneven and dusty streets, narrowly missing old men pushing vegetable carts and singing out the names of fresh produce. Bicycle taxis blared reggaeton through jury-rigged Sony speakers and swerved to avoid a gaggle of children, who ran back and forth, using a plastic doll's head as a soccer ball. The smell of roasting coffee mixed with the salty sea air as the *vieja* on the corner stirred her black market coffee beans to sell from her kitchen window. Men sitting in doorways hissed and called out to me, the older ones offering flattery and the younger ones spitting crass sexual innuendos.

I arrived at Melba's place and knocked on the thin wooden door. "I'm in here," she shouted from her mother's living room next door. I removed the padlock and went in to find Melba under a thin floral polyester sheet, lying on the wooden bench that served as a couch, and watching *Billy Elliot,* that week's movie broadcast on state-run television. Melba, nearing thirty-five, was a corpulent and mocha-colored *mulata* with a plump face and freckles dotting her nose and cheeks. Although she occasionally took clients as a *jinetera*, Melba had established herself as an iconic figure in queer enclaves, not as a sex worker but as a go-between, or fixer, for hire. She looked exhausted. Her hair formed a messy nest on the top of her head, her mascara smeared under her eyes, and she was still wearing her

shirt from the night before. Her slurred speech made me suspect that her hangover had been exacerbated by what she called her "blood pressure medication," an enduring Valium habit.

It was rare to find Melba alone, and I asked where everyone was. Her mother, a recently converted Evangelical Christian, had gone to church for the day. Melba's best friend and roommate, Domingo—a muscular, charismatic twenty-three-year-old *pinguero* with light cocoa skin, green deep-set eyes, and chiseled features—had spent the night in jail for starting a drunken brawl on the Malecón and had gone to his girlfriend's house to sleep it off. Melba's girlfriend, Yolanda, a thin twenty-one-year-old with doe eyes and light ochre skin, went to meet a stingy Spanish client who promised to take her shopping. "And Palio?" I asked of another roommate, a twenty-year-old *pinguero* with cinnamon-colored skin and light eyes. "I had enough of him," Melba said. "No me cae bien, lo voto por la calle (I don't like him, I kicked him out). He tried to fuck Yolanda." Then, changing the subject, she said, "I love this movie. This ballerina kid is a fag, right?" "Not sure," I said, and sat down at the end of the bench.

Melba had secured her own two-room apartment a month after I'd met her. With the help of the Cuban housing authority, Melba's mother, Sandra, had traded their studio apartment for a four-room place in a tenement around the corner. Sandra, a white, round woman with short coarse hair and tiny eyes, had become deeply religious with the reintroduction of evangelical Christianity to Cuba after the communist prohibition against religion lifted in the 1990s. Sandra doted on Melba, and Melba often reminded me that she was Sandra's favorite of her three children, "despite being the darkest." Now, instead of sleeping on a mat in the living room, Melba had a chance to build her own space. Sandra had paid for a cement division, which created two tiny, independent apartments, and Melba became determined to raise money for her renovations—building a bathroom and a kitchen.[1] Sandra babied Melba, but they often fought about the endless stream of young people living at Melba's and using Sandra's bathroom to "shower, shit, and brush their teeth," as Sandra put it.

Melba's apartment, without a kitchen or bathroom, had been especially crowded that summer. In addition to housing Yolanda and Domingo, this included Palio and his boyfriend, an attractive thirty-six-year-old African American novelist from Brooklyn. Melba had approached Terrance in

Parque Central during his first trip to Cuba three years earlier and they had become friends. He was affectionate, funny, and generous with the modest pile of cash he brought to Cuba. Melba and her roommates found Terrance to be an endless source of knowledge about African American urban culture, something that they prized and appropriated to craft their own identities. In a similar vein, Terrance preferred to stay with Melba because he didn't feel as if he was in the "authentic" Havana unless he was living in the poorest conditions, even by Cuban standards. Terrance's relationships with his male lovers resembled gay Cuban men's approach to hustlers. He would normally maintain a "boyfriend" for weeks at a time, supporting him and providing clothes, food, and shelter, rather than paying cash for discrete sexual acts. Terrance told me that his next novel, a tragic love story about a Cuban hustler and an American man, would explore what happens when "we are forced to use someone that we love."

It was Terrance who invited Palio to join him at Melba's apartment. When Terrance was about to return to the States, Palio told him that his mom had cancer and that he needed to return to Holguín to see her. Terrance gave him $50 for the trip. Instead of going home, Palio spent the cash on a new pair of Nike tennis shoes and a fake gold chain. When his money ran out, he started coming by my apartment four or five times a day. After I stopped answering the door, he started dropping by in the middle of the night and ringing the bell for hours at a time. He pestered me to e-mail Terrance and ask him to send money. In a note that he wanted me to send via e-mail, he downplayed his request for money, emphasized his attachment to Terrance, and kept up the lie that he'd gone home to see his mother. Given how aggressive Palio became after Terrance left, I was not surprised that he had tried to have sex with Melba's girlfriend even while living in her apartment. Melba generally allowed people to stay with her as long as they contributed small amounts of money or food to the household, but Palio had become greedy and crossed a line. The other hustlers in Melba's social circle agreed that Palio was untrustworthy, reckless, and a thief. Palio, Melba reassured me, was definitely gone for good.

Gay men and women in Havana often questioned the motives of sex workers in queer enclaves and suggested that the commodification of sex had spawned the decline of gay gatherings. According to their accounts, sex workers were homophobic and violent and pursued "easy money."

Lamenting how social status increasingly reflected the amount of money one possessed, regardless of how the money was earned, urban gays complained about how social standing was detached from educational attainment and work. For many urban gays, sex workers embodied this casual discarding of traditional values of decency and mutual respect. But Melba's reaction to Palio shows how participants in commodified sex also lived by a moral code that, while distinct from mainstream values, often led to conflicts among friends and acquaintances. While everyone in Melba's social circle used foreigners to secure a living, how people did so and whom they crossed in the process mattered immensely within Melba's social milieu. Out of the three households that I focus on in this book, Melba's was the most dependent on foreigners' cash and commodities to stay afloat and the only household where I encountered other non-Cuban foreigners on a regular basis. Yet Melba's household challenged Cuban stereotypes about *jineteras* securing lavish lifestyles through their foreign clients and defied academic understandings of the homoerotic sex trade in Cuba. While the male sex workers that lived with her more closely adhered to forms of masculine commodified sex that researchers have reported throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, Melba's social and sexual liminality reveals unique, unexplored aspects of female sexual desire and practice. Melba maintained a long-term girlfriend and male lovers but eschewed the label of "bisexual" and instead described her sexuality as "*moderna*." She participated in queer gatherings but as a job, often describing the Malecón as "work."

In this chapter, I explore how Melba and her friends saw themselves as cleverly exploiting the economic crisis to ensure their survival and fashion fresh identities. Focusing on the relationship between their economic wants and sexual desires, I analyze how their participation in Havana's sex trade allowed Melba and her friends to challenge certain sexual, racial, and gender norms while reinforcing others. How did Melba and her friends and lovers make sense of their work, and how did sexual labor and bodily commodification influence their desires? To analyze their perspectives on intimacy, love, and sexual labor, I consider how economic restructuring had an impact on their romantic and emotional affective unions that was similar to the one that urban gays described. Hence, by illustrating the parallel experiences of urban gays and the sex workers they criticized, I hope to show how the everyday lives of Melba and her friends defy gay criticisms and to illuminate how one social

circle of sex workers made sense of their involvement in emergent erotic economies.

GOING TO WORK

When I met Melba, in 2003, she had recently given up braiding. The police had begun to level fines against Cuban women who gathered outside the Cathedral in Havana Vieja and offered to plait the limp, straight hair of white European and Canadian tourists. Melba did not particularly enjoy the work. Lacking a legal permit, Melba had acquired two $20 fines and one trip to city jail for her business. In addition to the legal hassles, offering braids without a cart, photos, or a styrofoam mannequin covered with a braided wig made tourists skittish. Melba would timidly ask, "Braize, *amiga,* you like the braize?" as they hurried past her. Occasionally she threatened to get a "real job," and might mention openings sweeping a factory or working the counter in a perfume store that she had heard about through a neighbor or a cousin. But the meager $10-a-month state salary kept her navigating the informal economies of queer enclaves.

When underground economies and the sex trade exploded in Havana in the 1990s, Melba had been well positioned to profit. After her younger brother was killed by a car outside the apartment, Melba left home around her fifteenth birthday and became addicted to painkillers, which she procured from the public health care system. She spent a decade on the streets before returning home to her mother's apartment, and her intimate knowledge of Havana's marginal networks meant that she could create a career brokering information and keeping secrets in a tightly controlled state environment. For example, Melba relayed messages to hustlers who had no phones, sold used goods procured from tourists, placed hustlers with gay Cubans who accepted sex for rent, and protected her peers from arrest by holding their secrets. Melba and her friends interpreted their work as *jineterismo,* a collection of activities such as selling black market goods or working as an unofficial tour guide that included sex work.[2] This adaptability embodied Nadine Fernandez's description of *jineterismo* as an attempt to integrate oneself into the global market economy at "whatever level and through whatever means" (2010: 131).

Melba also developed new skills specifically related to dealing with foreigners. Contrary to her powerful and intimidating street reputation, she acted shy, even demure, and came across as infinitely helpful in the company of foreigners. Unlike Cubans working in the tourist industry,

who were trained in the arts of hospitality, Melba had honed her unique form of "niceness" through trial and error on the street. She had had a keen intuition, lied effortlessly, and, over time, successfully refined her tourist façade. With new foreigners, she had perfected the art of making subtle, nonthreatening requests for modest gifts. Her performance often reminded me of what Zora Neale Hurston (1943) described as "the pet negro" act; Melba played down her power, her fierceness to inspire the patronage of wealthy foreigners. While Melba brokered a variety of deals and lived off networks of redistribution, Yolanda focused more decidedly on sex work. Yolanda explained that she had originally come to Havana because she could make $50 in one night and in her previous state job as an elevator operator, it would have taken her four months to earn the same pay. "It's risky," she explained, "but it's an easy way to make money. Young people work but don't see the fruits of their labor. That's why so many of us hit the street."

Among her peers, Melba acted tough and unafraid to speak her mind. Adding to her edge was her aspiration to become a rap star. After late nights of drinking, lazy conversations between Yolanda and Melba often turned to planning how to get a music video made and how to release their first album. Although Domingo only performed once, at a local community theater, Melba also described herself as the manager of Domingo's rap career. Melba brought her discerning attitude to bear on her haphazard involvement with the Cuban rap scene, and often criticized the beauty standards of the nascent industry. Melba wrote a rap that attacked the male-dominated culture in which she failed to fit. She and Yolanda often performed the song, titled "Solo Yo Confío en Mí" (I Only Trust Myself), as a kind of anthem to their defiance. "I may be a little ugly, but I'm worth something more / You think you know me, but I'm smarter than you think / I only trust myself, and no one else, I only trust myself / So get back."[3]

Since Melba and her friends prized certain elements of black American street culture, such as rap, hip-hop, and street fashion, they were all the more attracted to foreigners like Terrance and other African American tourists who could provide cultural knowledge and cachet alongside hard currency. The creative appropriation of U.S. blackness did not reflect skin color, however, as Melba and Domingo were the only ones in the household who would qualify as *mulato/a*, and even they were considered light skinned on the color spectrum.[4] Instead, the appropriation of U.S. black

Figure 4.1. Domingo and Palio wearing jerseys that Terrance brought from the United States.

urban youth culture symbolized a type of resistance to authority and linked them to transnational flows that signified status in the post-Soviet era. In her study of Cuban hip-hop, Sujatha Fernandes (2006) observes how hip-hop offered young black Cubans in slums and housing tenements a way to express their frustrations and aspirations during a moment of rising inequalities. The rise of hip-hop culture suggests how the opening to capitalist markets and foreigners following the loss of Soviet subsidies provided black Cubans, in particular, opportunities to inhabit new performative identities (Allen 2011: 40).

Melba also drew on networks of redistribution within hustling enclaves by demanding food and small payments from the rotating friends and lovers who stayed in her apartment. At any given time, between two and six people shared her bedroom, which boasted a thin mattress placed on the floor and a wire box spring covered with a sheet. Melba occasionally grew tired of sharing her tiny living quarters and demanded that Domingo move out. In particular, Domingo's girlfriends wore on her patience. "I'm not going to support (*mantener*) anyone," she said to me. "Especially Domingo's lazy girlfriends who don't do anything. They sleep at my house, eat my food. I'm not going to wash Domingo's clothes and take care of him anymore. That's their job." After suffering through another sleepless night listening to Domingo and his girlfriend having sex on the floor, she would kick him out. But, by the next month, Domingo was back sharing her box spring.

Domingo had left Holguín for Havana shortly after his eighteenth birthday and quickly discovered success in queer enclaves. He nostalgically reminisced about his first year. "I had such amazing outfits," he told me. "I was fresh meat from the provinces, so everyone wanted a piece. A hustler could dress nice and make a decent living from *multando nada más* (taking small amounts of money from tourists without having sex)." When a client wanted drinks at a club, for instance, Domingo would tell the tourist that the beer cost $3, when it was really $1, and then he would pocket the difference. The term *multa* had a particular resonance because it was most commonly used to describe the fine that sex workers paid police when they were arrested. By "fining" outsiders, hustlers taxed wealthy outsiders to support themselves. Domingo, however, identified as a *pinguero,* not a *jinetero.* Allen distinguishes between *jineteros* and *pingueros* in that *pingueros* offered sex, but *jineteros* were "unofficial market procurers" who most often did not provide sexual services, although sexual contact might occur (2011: 175).

Domingo's clients largely consisted of black clients from the United States and men from Latin America. After a couple of years in Havana, Domingo found a steady patron, a round-faced thirty-five-year-old gay white Puerto Rican man who visited twice a year. His patron had promised to take Domingo out of the country through Mexico and then smuggle him into the United States. Domingo felt that "it was only a matter of time" before he would leave Cuba. The hundred dollars he received monthly meant that Domingo didn't have to hustle, and he could spend his days lifting weights in the dusty neighborhood gym, having sex with his girlfriends, and hanging around the park. In 2004, however, his Puerto Rican *yuma* (foreigner) wasn't able to make the trip to Cuba after his mother had fallen seriously ill. The loss of physical contact, combined with new restrictions imposed by the U.S. government that mandated only relatives could receive money, meant that Domingo lost his financial support. He reluctantly returned to cruising the Malecón looking for clients.

Even as he successfully navigated a career hierarchy within Havana's queer enclaves, Domingo, like many sex workers, understood that his earnings were low within a transnational perspective. One handsome African American publisher from Chicago had paid Domingo $100 for sex. "Can you believe it?" Melba asked me. "The *yuma* told Domingo that he would have gone for $300 or $350 in the States. And here, he goes for $20,"

she said, raising her eyebrows. The knowledge that they were "cheap" by foreign standards added to sex workers' resentment and inspired a carefree attitude toward petty theft and minor cons of tourists.

For Melba and her friends, who legitimized their labor by describing it as "going to work," they insisted that there was nothing easy about the daily grind of patching together a living on the Malecón. Notably, they emphasized feelings of boredom and monotony in their descriptions—feelings often linked to a dead-end job—rather than victimization or vulnerability at the hands of foreign tourists or gay clients. Hence, sex workers identified their struggle as "hard work," on par with any form of labor. For instance, Melba often seemed annoyed with me when I asked her if she was going out to the Malecón on any particular night (a common question among urban gays). "I go every night," she said to me. "It's not social, it's work. I can't afford to miss a day, even if I get sick." Her frustration seemed to stem from my inability to recognize the differences between gays who frequented queer enclaves for social and sexual reasons, and her own financial motives. In addition to challenging gay criticism, Melba often offered me proof of her strong work ethic, presenting herself as a diligent laborer who was so dedicated that she never missed a day of work. Her description of her single-minded focus on earning a living echoed socialist rhetoric of industriousness, typically associated with the flat hierarchy of jobs under socialism. Framing her participation on the Malecón as "working" she challenged urban gays who accused them of taking the "easy way out," as if suggesting that hustling was not labor at all.

Rather than become victims to economic restructuring, Melba and her friends and lovers relied heavily on the minimal safety nets provided by the state and found ways to exploit the new black market niches that grew where state socialism collided with market capitalism. The tempered introduction of tourism allowed some Cubans to make a legitimate living, but for those without access to dollar economies it was the *coexistence* of pockets of capitalism and state centralized socialism that sustained them. For instance, the segregation of foreign tourists from Cubans created an opportunity for enterprising go-betweens to help visitors negotiate an urban landscape crisscrossed with opaque illegalities. Melba could survive within the dual system because what she managed to glean from the dollar economy held so much value in local peso economies. For instance, if Melba could earn $10 a month taking $1 for each

foreign tourist she introduced to a male hustler, she could live a standard working-class lifestyle without suffering long hours in a state job. If Cuba were to transition to a free market system, Melba and her peers would lose the social benefits that allowed them to live so modestly. Rather than advancing or promoting a capitalist, free market system, many young Cubans in black markets took advantage of the excesses that arose from the dollarization of the economy. By exploiting the fissures between systems, Melba and her peers could act as dealers, combining black market earnings with state rations to survive.

GENDER AND SEXUAL TRANSGRESSIONS: *LAS MODERNAS*

One sleepy Sunday afternoon, we sat on three lawn chairs pulled up to Melba's round wooden table in her otherwise empty apartment. Melba and Yolanda shared a cigarette as Yolanda stared at her reflection in a shard of broken mirror and applied blue eyeliner. Yolanda wore her habitual outfit—tight white jeans rolled up to the knees, a red surfer shirt, leather sandals laced up to the knee, hair gel that she swiped from my bathroom, and dark lip liner.

They told me how they'd met. During Yolanda's first trip to Havana from Sancti Spiritus, a tiny colonial town on the banks of the Yayabo River, Yolanda's boyfriend had introduced her to Melba with the hope of finding her work in the sex trade. Yolanda had never had a girlfriend and Melba, nearly ten years her senior, quickly seduced her. "She attacked me while we were sleeping," Yolanda told me, "You can imagine, she's so big—she pretty much raped me," she said, laughing. Immediately, the pair became inseparable. "We went everywhere together," Melba told me. "We slept in the same bed, showered together, spent all our time around each other. I would even go with her to turn tricks."

During the countless days that I spent with Melba and Yolanda, they each had a number of boyfriends and male lovers. They never vocalized any resentment over their relationships with men but often fought over suspicious liaisons with other women. I asked about their relationship.

"We are very *modernas*," Melba said, "Really, really modern. No one in Cuba has a relationship like ours, a modern one."

"No one in Cuba has seen anything like this," Yolanda added.

"The two relationships that I had with women before, have been like me," Melba said, interrupting Yolanda and pausing to ash her cigarette into an empty glass. "It's better because you can't marry a woman, and

sometimes you need a cock." She held her hands a foot apart as if she was measuring.

Yolanda laughed.

"It's true," Melba said.

"I know, it *is* the truth," Yolanda conceded, smiling.

"I tell Yolanda to find a cock that she likes," said Melba. "Men don't matter, women do matter, because I'm a woman and she's a woman."

"And the men don't know anything. We say that we're best friends, or sisters, or in-laws."

"And you don't get jealous when you see your girlfriend with a boyfriend?" I asked.

"No, I don't," Yolanda answered, deliberately shaking her head.

"Men don't have anything to do with it," Melba said, shrugging her shoulders.

"We're really modern, really unique."

Melba and Yolanda blurred the boundaries of sexual practice and identity by characterizing their intimate bond as outside of homo- and heterosexual binaries. Rather than refer to themselves as *bisexual*, as other Cubans might, they preferred to eschew labels and position themselves beyond the confines of conventional language, calling themselves *modernas* and cleverly manipulating gender and sexual codes. Many male sex workers also suggested that their contact with foreigners and the "gay scene" (*ambiente homoerótico*) led them to view their sexuality as more open and "modern" (Sierra Madero 2012).[5] Traditionally, many analysts might exclude Melba and Yolanda from transcultural studies of homosexuality because their relationship did not result in a homosexual or bisexual identity. Gloria Wekker (2006), however, presents a similar case in Suriname in which women maintained sexual and emotional relationships with other women, yet also frequently had male partners. Just as Melba and Yolanda articulated a critique of same-sex identities that suggested the terms available would trap them in rigid roles, Wekker discusses how the women who engaged in "*mati* work" challenged the tidy links between homoerotic practice and homosexual identity. Growing out of post-Soviet mixed market economies, new sexual and emotional intimacies subverted standard models of sexuality and reflected how affective intimacy embodied political, economic, and historical forces (Giddens 1992).

The majority of Cubans, gay and straight alike, tended to be endogamous, establishing partnerships with people who were close to their

color and ethnic identities. Yet, Melba, Domingo, and their friends contradicted this trend and engaged in erotic relationships, both short and long term, that crossed color lines more than any other household that I studied. While they did not emphasize color blindness as an aspect of their "modern" desires and practices, I interpreted their openness to interracial relationships as part of the sexual "freedom" that they described. Unlike other Cubans, they did not start conversations about sexual desire with questions about racial preferences. In a Cuban study conducted by Pablo Rodríguez Ruiz, he found that Cubans living in shantytowns outside of Havana tended to have interracial partners much more than the national average (2008: 91). The more marginal the community in Cuba, the more integrated white Cubans, and the less significant racial differences became. Melba and her friends reflected this pattern, as their marginal social class tended to minimize other racial differences that often arose within the romantic couplings of the urban gays I knew.

Sex workers described nascent queer enclaves as both important opportunities for employment and an environment that allowed for a certain amount of sexual freedom. Melba and Yolanda understood their ability to exercise sexual and emotional openness as a sign of sophistication that distinguished them from Cubans stuck in the mire of traditional relationships and gender performances. For instance, Yolanda preferred Havana to her rural hometown because she could enjoy multiple lovers while escaping the judgmental gossip of her narrow-minded neighbors and parents, who encouraged her to settle down with a husband. For many sex workers with whom I worked, sexual adventures offered relief from the widespread ennui endemic among Havana's youth. They described sex as a popular pastime, fostering a climate of permissiveness and sexual experimentation. For example, Melba and Yolanda showed me two well-organized lists of their past lovers. Yolanda's list boasted ninety-three boyfriends in five years, with many of the names highlighted in pink. "My girlfriend is a slut," Melba said wryly, handing me a plastic cup of rum. "The highlighted names are the ones that lasted," Melba said, preempting my question. Yolanda reminded her that Melba had earned forty-nine names, counting both women and men. For both Melba and Yolanda, a significant majority of their lovers had been involved in the sex trade, reflecting a general trend in which sex workers frequenting queer enclaves tended to maintain romantic relationships with fellow sex workers.

Comfort with transactional sexual relationships and flexibility around personal sexual practices was not unique to Cuba but reflected trends within the Caribbean in which women viewed sex work as a legitimate way to secure a living for their families and often rebelled against confining systems of traditional gender and sexuality (Kempadoo 1999; Brennan 2004). For Melba and Yolanda, the hint of superiority implicit within their declaration of being *modernas* reflected a confidence borne from their ties to Havana's black markets, which linked them to global flows of people, ideas, and commodities otherwise prohibited by the Cuban government.[6] The sex trade cultivated camaraderie and tolerance for sexual transgressions. For instance, Melba once described a powerful image of waiting for Yolanda under a stairwell while Yolanda had sex with a client—they had become partners in crime, and tenderness blossomed from feelings of mutual protection. Similarly, the women nurtured their intimacy by poking fun at clients, hiding their relationship from unsuspecting boyfriends, and using slang and sign language to demean foreigners in their presence.[7] Similar to Roger Lancaster's discovery that sexuality in Latin America could emerge contextually rather than as an essential nature, sex workers often described their desires as something that had emerged *between* them in the context of the sex trade, not as a matter of essential identity *within* them (1992: 270).

The women's romantic attachments made sense within the context of a homoerotic sex industry, which had spawned a social world built on nonconforming gender and sexual performativity. Yet the sexual and emotional bonds between people making a living from the sex trade also led to jealousy, as financial support intersected with emotional attachments. As anthropologist Gisela Fosado (2004) observed in her research with Cuban *pingueros, la mecánica* (the hustle) and the professional performances of hustlers bled outside of their work as they started to see their own relationships with lovers and friends as motivated by self-interest. While most female sex workers in Havana did not maintain pimps, some in Havana's queer enclaves had longer-term relationships with more masculine female partners who expected to split their earnings. At times, the relationship between Melba and Yolanda seemed to fit this mold. For example, if Yolanda bought new earrings or a skirt, Melba would demand to know how much it all cost, with the tacit accusation that their money should be shared. Although she tolerated Melba's nagging, Yolanda often lied about her earnings in order to appease Melba.

Gender and sexual nonconformity with its potential for rebelliousness should not be conflated with an unfettered freedom or political resistance. For example, Yolanda often told me how, every six months, she alternated between dressing as a man and a woman. Her conscious gender performance revealed how both masculine and feminine personas were forms of drag (Butler 1990, 1993). Nevertheless, she could not always command her gender performances. One evening, Yolanda had donned a masculine aesthetic to attend a lesbian party, but when the police shut down the party, she decided to go to the Malecón to look for foreign clients. She had to rearrange her outfit on the spot—shortening her shorts, tying her men's T-shirt into a tight half-shirt, removing her baseball cap, and applying makeup—in order to attract male tourists. Moreover, Yolanda preferred Havana to her small town, but Yolanda's father, a prominent judge, once came to Havana looking for her. Scared that she would be in trouble with the law, Yolanda returned to her hometown for a year to "attend church, gossip, watch soap operas, go to CDR (Committee for the Defense of the Revolution) meetings, clean house, and have boyfriends." In other words, there were concrete limits to the extent to which Yolanda could undermine or escape patriarchal control by experimenting with various gendered identities and refusing the values of her parents.

At the same time that Melba and Yolanda challenged sexual categories and racial norms, however, they reinforced gendered standards. Melba and Yolanda described women with short hair and men's clothing as too *fuerte* (strong), and I suspected this had something to do with their rejection of a homosexual identity. They found many foreign lesbians unattractive because they were too *macho*. Similarly, if a male lover was too passive sexually, Melba would describe him as "a woman in bed," which was not a compliment. Likewise, when a male lover stood up Yolanda for his foreign male client, she angrily declared that her new boyfriend was a "fag." Hence, while their erotic desires and practices challenged many mainstream norms, Melba and Yolanda expected a certain degree of gender conformity and found deviations from these norms repellent. Their seeming flexibility actually harbored definitive notions about gender and sexual conformity.

Melba and Yolanda challenged certain traditional gender roles by fostering homoerotic relationships, engaging in transactional sex, enjoying multiple partners, and questioning dominant standards of beauty and

femininity. Yet, at times, they conformed to feminine gender roles by acting as good daughters and caretakers to male friends and lovers. Likewise, in order to attract foreign clients they had to dress in more revealing, feminine attire and complained that certain lesbians were too *fuerte* or butch. While they bantered about sex with foreigners, often making fun of clients, their involvement in commodified sex and homoerotic relationships challenged their ability to fulfill their designated roles as women. In contrast, male sex workers could reinforce their masculinity and sexual prowess through their involvement in the sex trade, as the *pinguero* represented mastery over one's body and control over the male client. Women still described themselves as daughters and mothers, whereas men emphasized their role as workers and providers. Melba and Yolanda hid their romantic attachment in a way that unwittingly reified heterosexuality, just as male sex workers often reinforced traditional heterosexual masculinity to counteract their constant presence in Havana's queer enclaves and relationships with foreign men.

HYPERMASCULINITY AND POWER

Keeping with our routine, I walked with Domingo down the dim streets of Centro Habana, past the stench of steaming garbage heaps, to the back of the capitol building, where we waited to catch the bus to Vedado's tourist district. In line, he greeted everyone and caught up on gossip, "Giovanni's not coming?" "He'll meet us there," "Where's Yolanda?" "Already found a *yuma* (foreigner)," "Have you seen the twins?" "They haven't been out all week." Normally, Domingo sported an urban, hip-hop aesthetic—chains, visors, Yankee jerseys, Adidas wear—but that night, he had donned the clothes of his last client, a forty-two-year-old Afro-Canadian filmmaker. Relishing his high-fashion, bad-boy look, Domingo had freed his thick hair from orderly cornrows into a bun at the nape of his neck. His baggy tracksuit had been replaced with a fitted Armani T-shirt and dark washed Tommy Hilfiger jeans, which hung low to expose Calvin Klein briefs. A chain hung from his pocket, and he wore brand-new burnt rust Timberlands. His outfit possessed the sheen of foreign exclusivity, since none of the items were available for purchase on the island.

Domingo fidgeted with an ivory-handled knife and told me that he had just finished watching a pirated copy of *Finding Nemo*. He concluded that the film would never measure up to *Shrek*, which he had seen "at least forty-two times." As always, with the mention of *Shrek,* Domingo began

to reenact his favorite scenes until he doubled over laughing. Domingo's *Shrek* performance bled into a discussion of his favorite Hollywood movie stars. "The top three are Antonio Banderas, Tom Cruise, and Brad Pitt," he said, adding that Denzel Washington was "*el maximo* (the best) and *que bonito*" (how handsome). "You like him?" I teased. "Come on, you know I don't like men," he assured me and went on to describe Antonio Banderas in different roles. "Remember when he played a fag, and there was one when he wore a mariachi outfit. I loved *The Godfather*, the first one was amazing, and *Gangs of New York*, I loved the butcher, and *Training Day*, and Cuban movies," he added. "Like *Fresa y Chocolate* was incredible."

Finally when the bus pulled to the curb, everyone cut in line, rushing to board. A few people inevitably slid by without paying, but by the time the fare collector noticed, they were sprawled in the back seat, laughing and smoking cigarettes. I hadn't yet perfected my technique of pushing through the raucous crowd, so Domingo always saved me a seat, defending it by yelling and waving his arms. The bus made its rounds through Centro Habana, collecting young sex workers wearing inventive variations of Havana's latest trends—pleather jackets, baggy jeans, thigh high boots, sheer tank tops. People would shout to one another from the front to the back of the bus, ashing their cigarettes on the floor and passing shared aluminum cans of Crystal beer. Three hustlers with gel-drenched hair and wrinkled button-down shirts beat a rhythm on the ceiling of the bus. Starting a sing-along with revised lyrics to "Under the Sea" from the Little Mermaid, the hustlers initiated a call and response with the passengers: "Under the sea, way under the sea. A *jinetero* under the sea, a *pinguero* from the Oriente under the sea, he came to find a *yuma* under the sea." The handful of passengers who were not part of the nightly migration to Vedado pretended to ignore the ruckus as mothers pulled their babies closer and men checked their watches.

His nightly bus ride to Vedado signaled Domingo's place as one of the Malecón's more successful hustlers. More than his rugged handsome exterior, what made Domingo irresistible to both foreign tourists and gay Cuban men—who often lent him money without receiving sex or the hope of a payback—was his ability to embody a bad-boy irreverence that bordered on violence, while holding onto a tender, honest vulnerability. The contrast of prowess and gentleness combined with an uncanny ability to read people and an unabashed command over his sexuality fostered an endearing charm. The type of black masculine fashioning that Domingo

embraced was unique to young Cubans seeking to project a sense of defiance, which challenged the respectable masculinity promoted by older generations of black Cuban men (Allen 2011: 117).[8]

The womanizing bravado that many *pingueros* projected often differed slightly from their actual lives. For instance, despite being notoriously flirtatious, over the course of a year, Domingo maintained intensive long-term ties with two different women and rarely, if ever, strayed from those relationships. Domingo appeared loyal, even in his infidelities. His primary girlfriend of four years was a white, delicate, twenty-year-old deaf woman known as *la Muda* (the deaf woman). Although Muda also had sex with tourists for money, she did not frequent the rougher hustling areas with Domingo, and he continually tried to convince her to stop working in the sex trade altogether. He had been living in her apartment for six months with his pit bull when Muda's mother kicked him out for having another girlfriend. She forbade Muda from seeing Domingo. She felt Domingo took advantage of Muda and explained that he lacked respect for her and for her daughter. "He called me a *puta* (whore) and a *pinga* (dick) to my face. After I sell clothes so he can have food, and I clean and cook for him. He never brings home money or food, and he disrespects my daughter in the street. So, that's it, I threw him out!"

At that point Domingo moved in with his other girlfriend, nicknamed *la Negra* (the black woman), a tall, striking, dark-skinned twenty-one-year-old who worked the Malecón alongside Domingo. She and Domingo were notorious for their public fights and zealous sex life. The relationship was volatile, especially because Negra knew that Domingo had another girlfriend and would occasionally lash out to assert her independence. One Saturday night, after spending all day having sex and fighting with Negra, Domingo took Muda out on a date to the Bim Bom ice cream parlor. He broke away from Muda to come talk to me. "If you see Negra, can you tell her I love her?" he asked me, anticipating a fight. "I hate him, but he's in my heart," Negra said, putting her hand over her chest when I delivered the message. Domingo's double standard for his two girlfriends, the white "virgin" and the black "whore," seemed almost too predictable. Unlike his protective stance toward Muda, which was intensified by her disability, he encouraged Negra's hustling and even reaped the benefits. When they had been together for three months, Domingo was arrested for fighting. The judge ordered him to pay a fine, and Negra had sex with a tourist to pay his bail.

The fears of some urban gay men and women who accused *pingueros* of bringing violence to gay enclaves were reflected in Domingo's penchant for fighting. On occasion, masculine performativity among *pingueros* resulted in violence against women and effeminate gay men. For instance, Domingo was once arrested for punching a gay man in the nose because the man had stared at Domingo's crotch while he urinated off the Malecón. Barefaced sexual innuendos were typical in queer enclaves, and many bystanders felt Domingo had overreacted. A certain degree of homophobic impulse was expected, but he had crossed the line. As one older gay Cuban friend of Domingo's described, "Domingo is the most genuine man. He would do anything for any of us, including you, but he has a rage inside of him that scares me."

While certain aspects of their homoerotic performances threatened traditional standards of respectable masculinity, young *pingueros* reinforced traditional masculine roles by emphasizing their status as fathers and providers—often explaining how their work with gay men offered a means to support their wives and children in the provinces. Jorge, a nineteen-year-old *pinguero* who lived with Melba for four months, had three young children by three different women, one of whom was expecting another child. We sat together on the Malecón as he strategized how he might sell clothes from his last client to buy the bus ticket home for the birth. "I have three kids and another on the way," he told me, "What am I expected to do? If I can just earn enough cash, just a couple more clients, that money stretches so far in *el campo*. I already bought a few things for the new baby and a nightgown for his mom. With $40 more, I'll be set for months." Jorge was now experiencing the consequences of his womanizing, and he talked about his work with gay clients as a viable strategy to fulfill his duties as a father. Rather than seeking to experiment sexually while obscuring homoerotic identity, same-sex sex work offered a means to solidify his role as the traditional masculine provider.

To highlight their heteromasculinity, many *pingueros* with whom I spoke characterized themselves as womanizers, emphasizing hypersexual drives. The lengths to which *pingueros* went to display a hypermasculine, at times homophobic, heterosexuality suggested anxieties around their presence in queer enclaves. *Choteo,* informal teasing and jokes in the form of stories, provided a powerful way to manage the anxiety produced by participating in homoerotic relationships. One joke in particular portrayed circumstances in which necessity gave way to same-sex encounters:

> A guy walks into his house and finds his wife cheating on him with another man. He takes a machete and goes into the bedroom and tells the guy to get off his wife and get onto his knees. The husband demands that the guy unzip the husband's pants and take out his dick. "No, no, I'm a man, what the hell are you talking about? Come on!" But the husband puts the machete to the guy's throat so he does it. "Now suck it," says the husband. "What are you talking about, I'm a man," responds the guy, but he does it. After the husband comes he says, "Now if you tell anyone that I'm a *cabrón* (bastard), I'll tell them you're a *maricón* (fag)."

The husband uses sexual acts with another man to reaffirm his threatened masculinity. It is important because both men are "forced" into same-sex practices despite their secured heterosexuality through the desire for the wife, thus highlighting how survival can justify same-sex practices. The story also relies on homophobia as a way to secure masculine status, because the husband threatens to tell the world that his wife's lover is a fag because the lover was the receptive partner. The husband's masculinity would not be threatened because he was the active partner, and thus he can engage in homophobic discourses as a means to secure his masculine privilege.

Like Domingo, many male sex workers did not want to sacrifice their heteromasculinist privilege and maintaining the image of an *activo* could prevent people from accusing them of homosexuality. Keeping with cultural tropes, a man who anally penetrates another man is not considered homosexual, but rather in various local idioms across Latin America, he is considered a "man" (Kulick 1997a: 574). Indeed, scholars who have studied the masculinities of male sex workers in Cuba have often noted similar recourse to masculine posturing among *pingueros* (Allen 2007, 2011; Cabezas 2009; Fosado 2005; Hodge 2001; Sierra Madero 2013). Yet analysts have also shown that the sexual subjectivities of young men engaging in homoerotic sex work were both more complex and diverse than these categories might allow. *Pingueros*' appeals to hypermasculinity, as Allen points out, offered more of a rhetorical performance than a social fact or experience (2011: 126). In other words, an *activo* position delineated a persona more than an actual sexual practice. In a similar vein, Sierra draws on interviews with *pingueros* to suggest that the experience of homoerotic sexual labor often held the potential to challenge tradi-

tional stereotypes about rigidly defined sexual roles for male sex workers (Sierra Madero 2013: 182).

Domingo's self-representations as virile and hypersexual also exaggerated a common, mainstream cultural trope that linked sexual prowess to national pride.[9] In a study of Cuban nationalism, David Forrest (1999) points out that Cubans prided themselves on their mythical sexual prowess. Similarly, an unpublished study at the University of Havana on sexual self-perceptions found that Cubans believed themselves to be "the hottest (*más caliente*) sexually in the world," and enjoyed their international fame for being sexually "uninhibited" (1997: 88).[10] Likewise, Cuban jokes often referred to uncontrollable sexual appetites and commented on how Cubans would pursue sexual satisfaction even to the point of transgressing their sexual identities. Cubans might have boasted of their sexual prowess, but this did not predict how people actually acted in their sexual relationships. Instead, sexuality had become a powerful idiom of self-expression that reflected a colonial history in which sexual stereotypes demoralized Cubans, and were reclaimed and appropriated in creative ways.[11] In a more recent example, the Cuban tourist industry has utilized the transnational circulation of stereotypical depictions of Cuba as sexually *caliente* to inspire visitors.[12]

COMMODITIES, CONSUMPTION, AND LABOR

Critics of the sex trade fixated on the material aspirations of sex workers, often emphasizing how commodity desires chafed against socialist ideals. Accusations from urban gays that hustlers caved to materialism and sought "easy money" resonated with wider public discourse. In a series for a Cuban newspaper, journalist Miriam Elizalde (1999) conducted interviews with female sex workers and offered the standard conclusion that poverty was not their motivation, but rather *jineteras* sought to support their consumeristic lifestyles. Similarly, Cuban scholars Celia Sarduy Sánchez and Ada C. Alfonso described a moral crisis that encouraged a philosophy of consumerism "without worrying about the methods of acquiring the goods" (2000: 65).[13] Yet rather than deny how consumptive desires inspired forays into sexual labor, many *pingueros* readily acknowledged that they journeyed to the capital to earn enough hard currency to buy designer tennis shoes or clothes and then planned on returning home. These motives, however, cannot be reduced to superficial materialism.[14]

Critics accurately represented the commodity desires of young sex workers but underestimated the importance of consumer goods in defining one's status in the post-Soviet urban landscape. The desire among young Cubans to consume and fashion their identities, as Jafari Allen aptly observes, offered critical forms of personhood in a situation where people all suffer from poverty and, therefore, what one "*has on* and how one looks" determines social class (2011: 165, 38). Imported shoes, clothing, jewelry, and accessories signaled a type of agency on the part of the consumer that transformed things into symbols of status and access. More specifically, homoerotic sex workers described commodity culture as intrinsic to maintaining heteromasculine status, linking their consumer drives to their ability to attract women. For example, Mateo, an eighteen-year-old *pinguero* from Bayamo, told me that women in Havana were increasingly materialistic. "You can start talking," he said, "and they might even think that you're attractive, but if you can't invite them to a beer, or on a date, forget about it. You have to have something to offer." He argued that Cubans in Havana were obsessed with brand name clothing, but he felt differently. "I don't really care about the clothing so much," he said. "If it's this brand or that brand I'll put on any shirt."

In order to "be a man"—attract the attention of women in Havana and compete with other Cuban men—Mateo, like many of my respondents, felt forced into nascent dollar economies. The transition to a post-Soviet service economy, in particular the rise of tourism and the introduction of black market consumerism, fostered new standards of manhood among urban youth. As Kevin Floyd (2009) highlights, certain types of masculine performance correspond to moments of economic development. As the market necessitates new forms of labor, production, and consumption, gender and sexual performativity change in relation to these shifts. Whereas manhood was once defined by sacrifice in fields of battle and sugarcane, after the 1990s, urban youth fashioned masculinity through modes of individual dress and style.

Finding and consuming the right fashion to craft a personal aura of flash and power in an environment largely devoid of advertising, fashion magazines, malls, and consumer culture took great dedication. Through inquisitive inspection of foreigners and the advice of diasporic family visiting from abroad, young urban Cubans could piece together the symbolism of certain items.[15] Many in Melba's social circle were fixated with

Figure 4.2. A *pinguero* window shops in the lobby of the Hotel Habana Libre.

la marca, or the brands, of all the items I wore and carried to Cuba. "Is this," people often asked, "a good *marca*?" One of Melba's lovers sported an Adidas tattoo, another asked if I could bring Dolce and Gabbana sunglasses back from the United States. Because consumer culture was largely underground and ad hoc, brands were easily misrecognized and appropriated in unexpected ways.[16] Occasionally, cheap brands gained an air of exclusivity. Melba, for instance, was obsessed with Pantene hair products, considered high end in Cuba, and requested jumbo containers of shampoo and conditioner on each of my return trips to Havana. In an attempt to become fluent in the symbolic meaning of objects, their multiple meanings emerged in a way that reflected Marx's (1978) understanding of the enigmatic aura of commodities.[17]

For Melba and members of her household, consuming certain brands associated with the black diaspora and African American urban culture was especially important. Scholars of Latin America and the Caribbean have discovered similar trends in other contexts in which signs and commodities associated with U.S. blackness have served as cultural resources to craft specific forms of personhood and politics (Anderson 2005, 2009; Brown 1998; Fernandes 2003; Sansone 2003; Thomas 2004). Rather than assume that capitalist consumption oppresses those invested in brand names, Deborah Thomas found that young Jamaican men often used consumption to empower, through a type of "radical consumerism," a creative and potentially liberatory process in which they appropriate U.S. black ur-

ban culture to resist "middle-class models of progress" (2004: 250). Mark Anderson (2005, 2009) similarly found that Garifuna men in Honduras utilized commodities associated with Black Americans to construct an emergent "black" identity that projected power and resistance.[18] In Cuba, the appropriation of U.S. street culture and commodities similarly indicated a desire to question state and social standards of respectability.

While consumer drives inspired some sex workers, hustlers also detailed the impossible realities of post-Soviet poverty as motivating their experience in the sex trade. Many from rural provinces often justified their decision to pursue sex work by relaying stories about the profound impact of the economic crisis on rural life. Domingo and his best friend Esteban, a twenty-one-year-old with cream colored skin and black curly hair, lounged on Melba's box spring and, after smoking a thin joint, laughed over stories about the Special Period. "I came to Havana from the Oriente provinces when I was sixteen," Esteban explained, "I didn't know anyone. I ended up driving a bicycle-taxi for four months. A guy picked me up, a *yuma*, and offered me money to sleep with him. I freaked out, punched him and called him a fag." Esteban laughed as he told the story, "Can you imagine?" he asked shaking his head at his naïveté. "Then, every time a guy would look at me, I would tell him off." "What changed your mind?" I asked. "Hunger," he replied, smiling. "Hunger gave me a new perspective, so I went back and said I was ready and that was it." Domingo chimed in with stories about the Special Period. "There was *nada*, *nada*, *nada*," he said. "Like this," he said holding up his pinky finger to mean that he was just skin and bones.

> After the Soviet Bloc fell prices went sky high. There was never electricity. Everyone wore plastic shoes that gave them blisters, but it didn't matter, they only had that one pair. When things started to get better, we threw them to the dogs to chew on, that's how useless they were. Then people left. So many people died. Body parts would wash up on the Malecón. We were twelve and thirteen and hungry, when everyone started trying to leave.

Not only did the Special Period bring about widespread poverty, but hustlers expressed a crisis within traditional socialist value systems as well. Domingo explained that when Cubans fled the island in the 1980s during the Mariel exodus, in which the Cuban government opened the port at Mariel to allow the "scum" of Cuban society to leave for the United States,

"Their neighbors threw eggs at them and called them *gusanos* (worms). In the nineties, the Marielitos came back to the island to vacation and their starving neighbors begged to eat the eggs they brought from the U.S."

Rather than become prey to the nascent capitalist system and the dollarization of the economy, which funneled currency to tourist zones and away from the provinces, young hustlers accustomed to egalitarian policies would master the new system. My neighbor in Havana, Digna, a fifty-nine-year-old poet and fervent supporter of Fidel Castro, recast sex workers as using illicit methods to uphold ingrained ideas about equality:

> These kids grew up in a society where everyone was equal. . . . If a person in the city received ten yards of cloth, everyone in the country received ten yards of cloth. If someone in the provinces got a pound of rice, we all got a pound of rice. Then, in the 1990s, tourists started coming to Havana. You bring your tennis shoes and fancy bags [she points to my backpack] and the kids see this and want the same things, they expect the same things. They have never known a world in which some people had things that others could not. So, they do whatever it takes to even the score. These are generations that have no concept of inequity; they cannot accept it.

Digna suggested how histories of socialist equity could lead young people to "even the score." Whereas urban gays criticized *pingueros'* use of *matando la jugada* ["killing the game"] to describe sex work, claiming that gay clients were "the game," an alternative reading highlights how "the game" itself could also be the new neoliberal inroads into Cuban society.[19] Within the mixed market economy, the phallus could represent the *pingueros'* tool to transform inequality into an act of control.[20] Likewise, Melba and her friends, like most hustlers, referred to their work as *luchando* (struggling or fighting). Hustlers cruising the Malecón for tourists often addressed one another by saying, "What's happening?" and responding, "*Aquí en la lucha*," or "Here in the struggle." In Cuba, *la lucha* historically meant the ongoing battle to achieve the goals of revolutionary society (Roland 2011). Tying hustling to Cuban revolutionary survival, Melba and her friends appropriated and deployed socialist rhetoric both with and against the new mixed market economy.[21]

A central aspect of the work Domingo and his friends performed was coming to understand their own bodily performances and affective labor

as potential commodities. Separating one's self from one's body marked the body as an item with a market value, distinct from the person. Every commodity system, as Igor Kopytoff (1986) suggests, represents a moral economy because commoditization is a cultural process through which a commodity is recognized as a marketable object. The body can at times become a commodity, and at others go through a process of "singularization," in which it is no longer socially acceptable for bodies to be commodified. Commodity desire supplanted sexual desire in a way that guaranteed virile sexual performance, as the body became at once an item on the market and a vehicle to extract cash and commodities circulating in black markets.

Many male sex workers explained that their bodies responded to the fantasy of cash. They told me that they focused on the money to maintain an erection. Domingo would often simulate taking a tourist from behind, and pretending that his arm was a swelling erection, he would strain out the words, "Ten dollars, twenty, thirty, forty!" as he shot his fist into the air. Young urban men and women increasingly found commodity drives and sexual desires becoming isomorphic, as is often the case under capitalism (Parker and Gagnon 1995: 13).[22] The post-Soviet cultural context at once enabled hustlers and *jineteras* to commodify their bodies while many Cubans denounced the process, suggesting how multiple moral economies can coexist and compete.

Crafting selfhood from brand names and imported goods shaped how *pingueros* honed their bodies as commodities in the post-Soviet economy. Even as sex workers utilized sexual labor to "even the score" or "kill the game," they engaged in a hierarchy that marked only some bodies as exclusive. Their sexual labor circulated in the same black markets as the clothing, shoes, and jewelry that they sought. In the absence of strip clubs, a red light district, or brothels, all sex workers worked on the "street" to one extent or another. Yet a racial topography informed the status of certain zones where hustlers worked. The hustlers in the whiter, middle-class tourist district of Vedado launched their careers in front of the Payret movie theater in the working class, predominantly black and brown neighborhood of Centro Habana. New arrivals would stand awkwardly in front of the theater, wearing worn-out T-shirts and ill-fitting jeans that still held the earthy smell of the provinces. They spoke to one another in thick country accents and wore tennis shoes without socks, an unavoidable habit that led to a putrid stench in a matter of days. They

would stand with their hands in their pockets, asking for cigarettes, practicing English phrases such as "Would you like to make love to me?" and "Excuse me sir, where are you going, may I help you?" Eventually the most attractive and charismatic young migrants would make enough money to purchase a new trendier image—tight jeans that flared at the bottom, a fitted lycra top, and designer tennis shoes—so they could take the 11:30 PM bus to Vedado, where they expected to find a higher-paying clientele.

Critics of the sex trade often overestimated the extent to which young people like Domingo could gain class mobility through their success within Havana's sex trade. Many suggested that male and female sex workers were living the *hi-life* through their access to hard currency without toiling away at low-paying jobs. While it is possible that some sex workers benefited financially, those in Melba's social circle barely secured a lifestyle equal to Cubans who received modest remittances from family abroad or earned tips in the tourist industry. If anything, incursions into transactional sex counteracted the severe financial losses that younger generations had experienced since the post-Soviet crisis and allowed them to rectify growing inequalities of wealth. Similarly, consumption played a significant role as commodities enabled young people to fashion new forms of personhood and masculinity. Yet, sex workers' embrace of commodity culture as a means to "kill the game" also meant the commodification of their bodies in ways that perpetuated new hierarchies between them.

DANGER AND THE STATE

The power went out again. No lights, no fans, no air conditioning. We left Melba's apartment and maneuvered down the dark stairwell. As had been our routine for months, we headed to the Malecón. Melba had swept her freshly straightened hair into two side ponytails and was wearing a low-cut spandex dress from a gay male Aruban flight attendant. She wore a pair of army pants from Terrance under the dress, and a new pair of Nike trainers that I had requested from a Canadian lesbian couple. "I look like a rapper, right?" she asked me, proud of her inventiveness.

Melba used the diffuse yellow light from the street lamp to read our horoscopes from a tattered pamphlet a Mexican tourist had given her. As Melba started to read, Yolanda sauntered over, complaining about a cheap Italian who tried to pay $5 for sex. Melba shook her head, and Yolanda lit a cigarette. Suddenly, Melba seemed agitated, raising her

voice to tell Yolanda about something that had happened. I could barely make out what she was saying. "Two men from the government came to my house . . . *pinga* . . . who the fuck had given them my new address . . . Domingo only stayed with me three weeks . . . never again," she told her. "It isn't over?" Yolanda asked, looking at the sea. "No, not yet," Melba said.

I waited for Melba to calm down. "Don't you know about the girl who was cut up into little pieces?" Melba asked me impatiently, taking a drag off Yolanda's cigarette. "A couple of years ago, she hung out with us (*andaba con nosotros*). So when she came up, chopped into little pieces and thrown around Havana, Domingo and I went to prison for her murder. She was *jovencita*—seventeen years old."

"Domingo's girlfriend?" I asked, remembering that he had told me about his girlfriend being murdered the first week we had met. I never knew that he and Melba had been accused of killing her.

"Yeah, you remember now. Two months and four days I was in for. I lost seventeen pounds. I can't take that place. It makes me crazy." Just being associated with the girl had been enough to send Domingo and Melba to prison, even though they weren't found guilty of the actual crime.

"But why were they at your house?" I asked.

"The case is still open, they never figured it out. I already served time because I was the last one with her. It was raining, we were at the Yara and it was full of people. I saw her from a distance and told her to come over to me. She said she'd be right back. I told her to come over again; she said that she would come in a little while. I waited; she never came back. I checked at her house, but she wasn't there. Why wasn't I worried?" Melba asked, repeating the question that everyone had burned into her. "I don't worry about anyone but myself. You see me with Yolanda. She goes off, and I don't follow her; she doesn't tell me everything that is going on. I thought the girl had gone with a *yuma*, but I didn't know who she was seeing."

"The girl worked the streets?" I asked.

Melba nodded her head and averted her eyes, "But how was I supposed to know what was happening?" she defended herself against an invisible accuser.

"They never found the murderer?" I asked, wanting Melba to be innocent. Her story sounded so rehearsed that it made me think of all the times she had repeated it for the police, strangers, friends on the hustling

scene, and to herself. It came across as a lie, but her story could have simply grown stale from repetition. I wondered if Domingo had been with the girl the night she disappeared but didn't want to risk sounding accusatory.

"It was *profesional*," she said. "The perfect crime, they never figured it out."

"It was a *yuma*," Yolanda said. "Whoever did it, did it fast, and left the country, that's all there is to it."

"I didn't kill anyone," Melba said, looking away from me, balling up the clear plastic wrapper to her cigarette pack and stuffing it between the gaps in her teeth, pressing it into her gums. She threw the wrapper onto the street and lit a cigarette from a new pack. If they arrested her again the day before her birthday she was going to kill someone, she added without a hint of irony.[23]

The most important marker that distinguished Melba's social network from the urban gay households, which also suffered from poverty, was dependence on and vulnerability to the state. Guilty by association, young Cubans involved in the sex trade would eventually be caught in the wrong place at the wrong time—arrest seemed an inevitable consequence. Melba's story of serving time for the murder of the young *jinetera* she knew offered an extreme case, because violent crime was unusual, but the general trend of detention and criminality held true for much lesser acts. Participation in black market economies related to sex tourism frequently resulted in arrest, detention, and deportation back to the provinces. Darker-skinned Cubans were more likely to be assumed criminals, and therefore harassed by police and asked for their identification cards more frequently. Yet, in Melba's social circle, everyone lacking a Havana-based address was detained at one point or another regardless of skin color. The majority of the sex workers in queer enclaves with whom I worked had been detained for illegalities related to the sex trade, including migration from the provinces, theft, and minor assault. Most often they were detained under the law of "social dangerousness" (*un estado peligroso*), or crimes against "the norms of the socialist morality" (Ley no. 62, Código Penal). Sentences ranged from one night in Havana's city jail to one year at a "reeducation camp." Whereas gay Cubans were *mistakenly* detained in round-ups of sex workers in queer enclaves, Melba and her peers constantly negotiated detentions as part of daily life as the government sought to control the influx of foreigners and the rise of illicit markets related to sex tourism.

Police had established a consistent presence in queer enclaves, often moving the crowd from one place to another or demanding to see identification cards to verify that no one was staying in Havana without the proper permits. In the most common interaction, police would detain sex workers for a few hours and then release them after they paid a fine. Rather than arrest someone for sex work, police would detain anyone without a Havana-based address. Esteban explained the *multa* system:

> There are different fines for different things, but being illegal is a 300 peso fine. If you don't pay after two weeks, it goes to 600, then 900; then they arrest you. After you get a fine, you can't get another fine for three more days. So you have three days in Havana before you have to leave.

For instance, one Friday night, Esteban and I were walking toward the Yara when an officer asked for Esteban's identification. As the officer called in his information, Esteban spoke to me in quick hushed tones. "*Mira*, tell the officer that you're my girlfriend. You came from the United States to see me. You called me a week ago and asked me to meet you. We met three years ago, and we're getting married. Got it?" he asked. The police officer told Esteban that he was taking him in for *molestando un turista* (bothering a tourist). I explained that we had been together for years with plans to marry, and the officer told me that I could pick up Esteban at the police station later that night. "Come to the station," Esteban said. "If they see you there they have to let me out because you're a foreigner," as he ducked into the tiny Lada police car. But, at the station, the officers refused to let me in the door. I waited with Domingo outside in the parking lot. Four hours later, Esteban emerged from the station with a 300-peso fine and cursing the police. "In my own country, they say I'm illegal. How can that be?" he waved his hands. "A Mexican can come here on vacation, but me, a Cuban, can't come to Havana?!" He took off his Adidas tennis shoes, a gift from a client but a size too small, and walked in his socks to the nearest major street.

Urban gays described emotional, psychological, and occasionally physical risks that relationships with sex workers presented. In contrast, economically motivated participants weighed the benefits of financial gain against the threat of arrest. Police cited Yolanda twice for being in Havana illegally, and after she stole a piece of chicken from a tourist's plate in Chinatown, they arrested her and sentenced her to a mandatory reeducation

camp in the provinces for one year. Similarly, Domingo was eventually arrested for "social dangerousness" after he assaulted a young hustler and, after numerous smaller detentions, was sentenced to nine months.

As much as Melba navigated police harassment and detentions, her vulnerability to poverty intensified her reliance on government subsidies in a way that fortified her faith in the Cuban government. Like Melba, many poorer Cubans chafed at the new class divisions that emerged in post-Soviet society, but their participation in black markets did not predetermine political opinions about the Cuban state. Poor by the strictest official Cuban government standards, Melba relied heavily on diminishing state rations. She often defended the Cuban government and worried about her future should the socialist government fall. When she did blame the government for her daily frustrations, Melba fingered the men surrounding Fidel Castro for "lying to him about the realities of life." She believed that if President Castro knew what was really happening he would make things better. "He is a brilliant man," Melba often told me, "But he is only one man, the people under him don't know what they're doing, and that's what messes the country up. There is no middle class, only two classes in Cuba." While the most marginal communities suffered the greatest impact of economic crisis, they also became the most reliant on socialist safety nets such as food rations, health care, and government housing. Their vulnerability to abject poverty raised their stakes in the success and maintenance of government programs. Melba came to imagine the state as an overly restrictive paternal force that both protected her from destitution and forbade her from accessing hard currency in ways that forced her to be brave, clever, and creative.

PARTING WAYS

Many sex workers took a defensive stance against foreigners—an approach that was fundamental to their success but made it more difficult to feel confident that I had ever completely gained their trust. For instance, when Yolanda arrived unannounced from her hometown in the provinces just weeks after I had met Melba, she refused to talk to me. She simply referred to me as "the *yuma*." When forced to make conversation, she stuck to the classic hustler script—asking where I was from (California), how long I'd been in Cuba (three months), if I liked it (yes), and if I'd slept with anyone (no). By her third week in Havana, perhaps realizing that I was going to be a more long-term problem, she warmed

up to me. But I could never shake that initial feeling of distance. I learned the most common tricks that *jineteros* played on foreigners but never felt like an insider—I was always part friend, part mark. One time, Melba and Yolanda recounted a story about a Mexican-American anthropologist whom they had told that they were sisters. They told me the story to inspire confidence, hoping that I might feel welcomed into a private inner circle. Instead, I felt just as naïve and out of place as the anthropologist, who most likely went home to write a chapter about "sisters in the sex trade." I wondered how much Melba and Yolanda were acting to inspire my generosity as a long-term patron—a role that I actually embraced because it assuaged some of my guilt about mining their personal lives for academic research. I often found the open-handed way that they used me for money, connections to other foreigners, and commodities somewhat comforting.

As much as I sympathized with their difficult economic situations and criticized the ways that she and her peers had been criminalized, the possibilities of theft and violence impacted my ability to remain in Melba's social network. Although the infractions were minuscule compared to the guns and drug trade that comprised typical street violence in comparable poor communities in the United States, the possibility of becoming a target for Melba or her friends kept me on guard. Not to say that my friendships with urban gays were immune from economic motivations—my privilege made me an attractive friend and contact—but urban gays did not ask for money on a regular basis and, despite my best efforts, often gave more than they received.

Rumors and accusations from Melba's acquaintances heightened my concerns. For instance, one afternoon Melba's friend Silvio dropped by my apartment. Brushing his shoulder-length, black curly hair away from his face, he pulled out a CD of Cuban love songs that he had brought me as a gift. I waited for him to ask for money, but instead, he warned me to be careful of Melba.

"I don't know if you've heard, but she killed someone and is under police investigation for it. Only she knows what really happened, but she is supposed to maintain contact with the police and hasn't done so for two months." He told me that she might set me up, because one time she had arranged for him to get robbed. "She doesn't do it," he told me, "but she sends people to do it. She might even be with you so it looks like she's not involved. You shouldn't go anywhere alone, and be careful with your

camera, because she could send someone to steal it if she knows you're going to be at this spot at this time, like waiting for the bus with the camera."

He left after inviting me to a more "upscale" place than the Malecón to hang out. My first instinct was to distrust this man, whom I had only met a few times, and although he seemed much more self-sufficient than the hustlers I knew, it was clear that he wanted something from me. There was always competition for foreigners, but this seemed extreme. Even though I didn't trust Silvio, I became more suspicious. I told Melba that he had visited me without her, and that I thought it was strange, but I never told her what he had said. I became paranoid and began to wonder if she had sent him to test me. A few nights after his visit, I began having a recurring nightmare that Melba was feeding me dinner, and I realized that she had set me up. In the dream, she was keeping me in the restaurant so that I would be killed. The dream always ended the same way—I realized the danger, started running, and she came after me.

The unspoken tensions I felt with Melba climaxed of their own volition. It was a calm Tuesday night on the Malecón when Melba ran up to me with wide, blood-shot eyes from drinking. I went to kiss her cheek, and she held me back with a strong hand. "You betrayed me," she shouted pointing a stubby index finger at my face, "You're a *traicionera* (backstabber), I should have known." Stunned and embarrassed, I walked away with Melba's shouts trailing off behind me. Silvio's visit could have sparked the confrontation, but the conflict also arose after I had spent a week with a group of wealthy gay tourists from Los Angeles. From Melba's perspective, I had shifted my affinities on the Malecón and excluded her, abandoning my usual role as a go-between for her and foreign patrons. Foreigners who knew Melba assured me that her anger was routine.[24] Many of my gay Cuban friends interpreted Melba's behavior as a result of jealousy and frustrated romantic desires. "It's obvious," one lesbian friend explained, "that she was in love with you. She understood you would never be with her, but when you stopped paying attention to her, she felt betrayed."

For me, our falling-out suggested how resentments and failures to maintain intimacy play a critical role in the construction of ethnographic knowledge.[25] Although my conflict with Melba seemed to resolve itself—we never spoke of it again and months later I would return to her house for brief visits—our friendship never returned to the initial intimacy that I had enjoyed those first few months. I often thought about her

accusations of "betrayal" as an attack on the two-faced nature of ethnographic fieldwork, what Zora Neale Hurston described as "the spyglass of Anthropology" (Hurston 1990: 1), which enables us to observe but also implicates us in acts of surveillance. I took comfort in Aihwa Ong's notion, however, that anthropologists can also betray their collaborators if we refuse to represent their voices, which often "insist on being heard" (1995: 354).[26] Most important, my own inability to maintain the same level of integration with Melba that I created with urban gay households suggested that my movements and relationships, and hence perspective, were subject to very real social boundaries. Rather than signifying failure, my tension with Melba taught me an invaluable lesson about my own place in the emergent social hierarchies cutting through Havana's contemporary queer enclaves.

While my insight into the lives of Melba and her friends might have been partial, from my perspective it seemed that she and her peers did not see their behavior as morally corrupt, which reflected trends among *jineteras*.[27] Undeterred by accusations that they were "low-class" or "marginal," many young people working in Havana's queer enclaves cast themselves as smarter than the rest for taking advantage of new prospects while creating solidarity with others in similar situations. Hence, instead of narrating their life stories as victims of poverty, they alluded to the structural disadvantages that shaped their lives while honoring the ways in which they creatively navigated the changing social-sexual landscape of post-Soviet Havana.[28] They challenged some entrenched values but held tight to traditional beliefs about gender and hard work. Melba and her friends survived by using informal systems of redistribution—customary Caribbean values of sharing intensified by years of socialism—but these ideals chafed against enduring poverty. From Melba's perspective, the measured introduction of foreign capitalists and dual economies had split Cuba into two classes—rich and poor.